Informal learning at the workplace: structures within the apparently unstructured

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Introduction
In the last decades, the ways in which education and learning processes of adults have been researched have changed. For a long time there has been the idea that learning takes place formally, within fixed locations and predefined time spaces. The idea has been that adult learning just happens if there is the presence of a teacher. Through more subject-oriented concepts of learning, the focus was also put on diverse adult learning offerings and possibilities. Learning also happens outside educational settings. Thereby the term ‘informal learning’ appeared.

Informal learning is a phenomenon which has been almost ignored for a long time by German research in adult education even though research and policy from international organisations as the UNESCO or the European Union made informal learning presentable. It is very common to make reference to the Faure-Report (1972) which estimated that around 70% of human learning happens as informal learning. More pressure to discuss informal learning and its significance was highlighted by the documents within the educational policy sector of the European Union. The European Union already stressed in 1995 the importance of informal learning in its White Paper on ‘Teaching and Learning. Towards the Learning Society’. This stress is continued in the following documents, e.g. the ‘Memorandum on Lifelong Learning’ (European Commission 2000). By the assumption that informal learning just happens in everyday life, the documents formulate the idea to use informal learning as resource for the economic (and social) development within the EU. Strategies for the recognition and accreditation of informal learning were formulated. These activities should lead to certification and thereby to an economic utilisation.

In these documents little attention is paid to the differences between informal learning amongst different groups in Europe. Questions concerning cultural or national differences in education are usually focusing on differences in educational (school) systems. Survey studies in the last decade show that there are links between formal and informal learning: privileged groups in formal education are also privileged in using informal learning (Schiersmann 2006). For that reason it makes sense to look at cultural differences of informal learning between diverse groups in different contexts.

The paper refutes the assumption that informal learning ‘just happens’ in a chaotic and unstructured way. It is based on an intercultural comparative study.
In this paper, firstly the German discourse on informal learning is analysed. Thereby the ‘negative-discourse’ of informal learning will be shown. Then, the research design will be described. Afterwards, based on the comparison of ways of learning, differences of informal learning between the researched companies in Germany, Great Britain and Spain will be discussed. At the end, links between structures of informal learning and some aspects of educational philosophies of research contexts will be presented.

**Informal learning in German literature**

One of the earliest papers which focuses on informal learning in the German educational sciences is one by Schöpfthaler (1981). In this paper, informal learning gets the character of a residual category: informal learning was used for learning which takes place outside an educational institution, in all ‘remaining learning locations’\(^1\). In the 1990s, Dohmen (1999, p 25) defines informal learning as ‘not planned and not institutionalized learning within all aspects of life’ and as ‘natural type of human learning’\(^2\). As the main characteristics of informal learning, he formulates ‘immediately in everyday life’, ‘determined by a reason – incidental – sporadically’ as well as ‘holistic – problem oriented’\(^3\). Similar characteristics can also be found in publications of other German authors (Dehnbostel 2002, Frank 2003, Arnswald et al 2004).


Laur-Ernst (1999, p 75) differentiates between formal and informal learning on the basis of who is taking the initiative: ‘institutional learning offers’ by which the initiative is taken by an (educational) institution she calls formal learning. ‘Individual learning on demand’\(^4\) by which the initiative is taken by the learning subject she calls informal learning. Following this understanding, learning on demand can also happen in formal learning settings.

From a research perspective, Knoll (2000) points out that informal learning is mainly described in a deficit modus, e.g. with adjectives as unplanned, unorganised or unconscious. Because of this, the terminological basis for the empirical research of informal learning is missing. Furthermore, a deficit understanding of informal learning limits the possibilities for the awareness of informal learning. Informal learning which happens within organized or institutionalized education will be excluded by the empirical research (see also Dugid, Slade & Schugurensky 2006; Aberton 2008).

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\(^1\) ‘restlichen Lernorten’ (Schöpfthaler 1981, p 97)

\(^2\) ‘nicht planmäßig organisiertes und nicht institutionalisiertes Lernen im Lebensvollzug’, ‘natürliches Grundform menschlichen Lebens’ (Dohmen 1999, p 25)


\(^4\) ‘institutionalisierter Angebotslernen’, ‘individuelles Nachfragelernen’ (Laur-Ernst 1999, p 75)
Similar to the British context (Marsick & Watkins 2001), other authors in Germany also focus more on the context of informal learning. Straka (2000; 2001, p 56) has written about 'learning in informal environmental conditions'. By this it is possible to talk about learning in informal learning context. This leads to the contexts of learning, which is a basis of the term.

This contextual understanding of informal learning represents the basis of several current studies of informal learning. Survey studies are typically asking for the contexts in which informal learning takes place or the resources which are used for informal learning. Schiersmann (2006) has asked in her survey study for 'work-based learning', 'learning in community and private contexts' and 'learning by media'. Kuwan/Schmidt/Tippelt (2009) researching informal learning of elderly people and asking for 'reading activities', 'computer and internet using', 'TV, radio and video using', 'family, friends and colleagues', 'museums' as well as 'libraries and learning centres'.

In most of these studies it seems that informal learning 'just happens' in a chaotic and unstructured way if there are enough opportunities and possibilities offered by the context. Additionally, the question if informal learning happens or not seems to have a subjective dimension. Based on this situation, I am asking: are there any cultural structures within informal learning? Does the context give a structure for this apparently unstructured way of learning?

The definition of the European Union has been the basis for the research:

Informal learning is a natural accompaniment to everyday life. Unlike formal and nonformal learning, informal learning is not necessarily intentional learning, and so may well not be recognised even by individuals themselves as contributing to their knowledge and skills. (European Commission 2000, p 8)

The research has been designed as an interview study. Because of that only the informal learning experiences, which the interviewees could articulate were focused on in the study.

**Research Design**

To follow this question, the term informal learning was operationalised by identifying positive characteristics of informal learning. Therefore the study asked for the following aspects:

- Learning subjects: which subjects and topics do people learn by informal learning?
- Learning motives: what motivates people for informal learning? Which situations cause people to participate in informal learning?
- Ways of learning: how do people learn by informal learning? Which ways and form of acquirement do they use?
- Resources: which media, persons, structures and temporal resources do people see as helpful for their informal learning?
- Informal learning control: how is informal learning assessed? Is there any kind of control over the results of informal learning processes?
To find out cultural differences of informal learning, an intercultural comparative study has been designed. The informal learning of managers in three companies in Germany, Great Britain and Spain was researched (Egetenmeyer 2008). For this in 2005 19 semi-structured (ethno methodological) interviews in three similar firms in German and English have been carried out. The interviewees were managers and persons who were responsible for Human Resource Management (in the following called Human Resource Managers). The firms’ learning cultures were researched through the description of the subjective learning behaviours of the managers on the one side, and the strategies of the Human Resource Managers on the other side. In each firm four managers and two to three Human Resource Managers have been interviewed.

In the comparative content analysis of all interviews, the difference in informal learning between the three learning cultures has been analysed. This analysis has shown similarities between the instances of informal learning within each firm as well as common differences between these three firms. These were shown in the learning objects of informal learning, the motives for informal learning, the informal learning ways, the resources for informal learning and control of informal learning.

Within the limited space of this paper, the comparison of ways of learning the differences between the three researched companies will focus on the following. The study is done by a single-researcher from Germany and therefore the analysis is seen from a German perspective. Furthermore, the study focuses on managers. So it is helpful to keep that in mind in the analysis as the focus is put on a specific group of ‘informal learners’.

**Informal learning ways in a German, a British and a Spanish firm**

*Learning approaches in the context of the German Firm*

The described learning ways in the German firm are marked through the ambition of learning to gain knowledge. This means that cognitive learning ways play a special role, e.g. observing or reflecting. The German interviewees try to win new knowledge in special fields through these learning approaches. Thereby, the learning approaches of the German interviewees are embedded in a principally positive valuing of situations which offer learning possibilities. Through this, unsuccessful working experiences are valued as positive concerning their learning impacts. This attitude can be summarized as: ‘the working result is bad, but I have learned a lot for any possible future situation. So all in all it was a good situation to win these experiences.’

The German interviewees assess analytical elements within their learning ways as very important. Noticeable is the focusing of the German interviewees to win several perspectives through different learning ways, which leads towards the gathering of knowledge. One example is creating a situation in which people with different professional and occupational backgrounds come together. This situation is used by the interviewee as a personal learning possibility:
because there are always the best minds on the table, to work best on a problem. People for themselves, for their own growing are benefiting from it. Because they can widen their horizon... (D7-FK, 25)

Altogether it could be observed that there are heuristic learning approaches within the German firm: the learners try to exploit all possible situations which offer learning potential. Thereby the German interviewees are oriented towards learning options they can use.

*Learning approaches in the context of the British Firm*

The learning ways of the British interviewees point towards a goal orientation. The interviewees describe self-directed learning ways which they use systematically to reach formulated goals. Learning approaches are integrated into tasks which serve to fulfill tasks correctly. Also social learning approaches are used for finding solutions to reach a specific goal. The goal-oriented character of the learning ways of the British interviewees can also be shown by how they learn through mistakes: they describe mistakes as a motive to break new ground. Furthermore, the British interviewees describe their orientation towards positive examples which they try to emulate.

Two examples from two interview passages will demonstrate this:

> Sometimes you have to fall over to know and to get back up to know which is the right way. (GB3-FK, 43)

> I guess the process is probably failure to get the correct results first time ... (GB4-FK, 43)

*Learning approaches in the context of the Spanish Firm*

The learning approaches which were shown by the Spanish interviewees point towards an adaption orientation. They describe how they read provided information for selling the firm’s products. They try to listen actively to their customers to meet their expectations. The Spanish interviewees described learning approaches integrated into tasks in the context of requirements which they try to meet.

> In general, every time that you have to negotiate, I think it’s good for yourself, because you learn new things. And here I have to negotiate with my boss. (ES3-FK, 21)

Also the described reflections of the Spanish interviewees are focused on how they can act adequately.

> We are five persons on this committee (...) It is like a little team to improve the decisions that somebody will have to take in the company. We do not directly decide what to do. We just talk about what is going on in the

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5. *weil immer die besten Köpfe am Tisch sind, um eine jeweilige Problemstellung dann optimal zu lösen. Die Leute selbst, für sich selber, für das eigene Wachsen, haben auch was davon, weil sie einfach den Horizont erweitern...’*(D7-FK, 25)
company and if there is any special problem, what solutions we can do or take. (ES4-FK, 41)

It is noticeable that the Spanish interviewees have not mentioned learning through mistakes. But furthermore, they point to learning through personal relationships which support their own learning processes.

**Comparison**

Exemplarily the characteristics of learning approaches in the three groups can be shown in learning approaches integrated into tasks: the German interviewees have described challenging tasks as a learning approach and their focus towards the personal acquisition of new knowledge. The British interviewees have described new tasks as learning approaches and their focus to reach the goal of the firm. The Spanish interviewees have described regular tasks as learning approaches and thereby adaptation to a given situation.

The following figure maps out the structures of the learning approaches of the interviews.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>German Firm</th>
<th>British Firm</th>
<th>Spanish Firm</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>manner</strong></td>
<td>heuristic</td>
<td>systematic</td>
<td>demand-leded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>activity</strong></td>
<td>cognitive working on themes</td>
<td>action-orientation/acquisition of experiences</td>
<td>accomplishment of professional demands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>goal</strong></td>
<td>cognition/knowledge</td>
<td>correctly exercise of tasks</td>
<td>adaption to situations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>intention</strong></td>
<td>change of perspective</td>
<td>goal-reaching</td>
<td>creation of relationships</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Source: according to Egetenmeyer (2008, p. 203)

While the learning approaches of the German interviewees are marked through a heuristic manner, the British show a more systematic manner. In the Spanish firm you can find more demand-leded learning approaches.

These differences can be exemplarily shown by the way the interviewees described their reading activities. The Germans are heuristically looking for information. Reference points are information which is accessible for the interviewees. They describe a cognitive examination. Integration into practice just follows after the cognitive activity. Goals of learning processes are in a first step mostly cognitions which can be reached by changes of perspectives.
In the British firm, a goal oriented and systematic research for information is described. The research is led by concrete questions which are oriented on the practice of a specific task within the firm. The solution of problems is described as intention of the learning process.

In the Spanish firm, learning ways for the accomplishment of demands in the firm’s context are described. The adaption of the situation of the firm as well as the accomplishment of the firm’s requirements can be understood as a goal of the learning process. Intention of the learning processes is the creation of harmonic relationships between the colleagues.

**Cultural implications within informal learning**
Although the results of the study are deeply integrated into the situation into the three firms, it is noticeable that there can be signs which show the closeness of these three ways of learning to the educational traditions and cultures of the countries:

The characteristics of informal learning in the German firm show references to the German educational philosophy. This understanding is shaped by a subjective oriented educational philosophy of an all-round educated human being. Everybody should have principally access to education anytime and anyhow. By this, the German interviewees point to the importance of enabling learning and freedom within their learning processes. Furthermore, cognition plays an important role. This shows the closeness to a German educational philosophy according to Humboldt.

You can also find indications in the British characteristics: the closeness to a goal orientation, systematic and functional ways of informal learning. This understanding can be valued as indication for an educational system which is more oriented towards goals and examinations. This shows the closeness to the British education systems which is more oriented towards goals and benchmarking. A good examination can be seen as kind of goal reaching which serves the function.

Hints directed towards the Spanish educational system can also be shown within the Spanish characteristics: adult education in Spanish has risen for creating access for workers and migrants. The focus is put on the idea of integration. You can also find this integration approach within the Spanish interviews of the study.

**Conclusion and open questions**
The study offers the opportunity to argue that there is an inherent structure or that there are hidden rules within informal learning of single subjects. It shows that informal learning differentiates between companies in different European countries and it also shows a close connection with the educational philosophies of the countries. So the results give reason to ask, if it is really the same, if we talk about informal learning in different contexts. What consequences would it have at an international level, if we talk about strategies and targets which affect informal learning, e.g. recognition or accreditation of informal learning? What would do these results mean for a fair formulation of European benchmarks or surveys which focus on informal learning?
References

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