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Episode 9

Learning Outside the Classroom: Informal Learning in the Modern Workplace

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Corey Tatal: Welcome to the Work Science Center Podcast, brought to you by the Work Science Center of the Georgia Institute of Technology. You can find out more about the Work Science Center at our website www.WorkScienceCenter.GATech.edu. I'm Corey Tatal, and I will be your host for this episode. Today, I speak with Dr. Chris Cerasoli about informal learning at work and its importance in the modern day work context. Chris is currently a Senior Talent Analytics Consultant at UnitedHealth Group and has previously worked as a consultant at the Group for Organizational Effectiveness as well as as an adjunct professor at the University of Hartford and at the University of Albany.

Hi, Chris. Thanks so much for taking the time to join me today.

Christopher Cerasoli: Hey. It is great to be here.

CT: So to start off, would you mind telling me and our listeners a little about your background and just how you became interested in informal learning?

CC: Absolutely, I'd be happy to. And just a quick note before I share a little bit about myself. A lot of the inspiration for this work and the work itself has been a big partnership. So, I would kind of be remiss if I didn't acknowledge some of the great work that I've done with other colleagues, from collaborators with the University of Connecticut, from the Group for Organizational Effectiveness, the Transition to Veteran Department, and a few others. So I want to say that a lot of the work that I've done has been very much a team effort. So, just wanted to note that there.

I am currently an Analytics Consultant, as you noted before, with a large organization as an internal partner, but this interest has been a part of my career for close to a decade now. I would say it really became something that fascinated me when I realized it was something we were all doing. It was something that organizations didn't know they needed, but something like north of 70% of the learning that takes place in organizations doesn't happen in classrooms. That sent my antennae up and made me realize that is something we want to dive a little deeper into.

CT: Before we dig too deeply into the topic I know a lot of people really struggle with what exactly falls into the bucket of informal learning and what doesn't. So could you share with me how you would define informal learning and how maybe you distinguish it from other types of learning?

CC: I can, perhaps, first start with what I think the definition is. Something that I have spent a little time working with my collaborators to pin down a little bit more formally, and then maybe dive into why that definition kind of came up over time. One thing that I really tend to focus on is not the learning itself, but the behaviors. Maybe I can tell you a little bit more about that a little bit later. I think about informal learning behaviors, so things that we can observe, are those things that are not curricular. They are activities that are pursued in pursuit of knowledge that take place outside of the classroom. So formally does learning courses. They are predominantly self-directed learning behaviors. So they are things that individuals are intentionally doing. They are based in the field so they occur on the job, in the context. And they are not really based around a particular syllabus or a program of research or something that somebody else has



dictated. That's sort of the more formal definition. There are a couple of pieces that that would impact and why. Really what informal learning is, is it's a way to think about how we go about learning. It is a continuum, not a dichotomy, between formal learning and informal learning. There are things that you can think of such as action adventure learning, or debriefing, or explorative learning, or rehearsing, planning, lots of different things we think of that fall into the learning sphere, mentoring, coaching, lots of different things. None of them are purely formal or purely informal. Instead, we think about them along the lines of a continuum. Another thing that is really key to informal learning is the context, as I suggested in the definition before, they take place outside the classroom. People that learn informally are out in the field, asking questions, thinking about things differently trying to take the initiative for their own learning. So they take place not in a particular context, like for example a training or orientation or even a typical traditional lecture-based. But, they occur without boundaries outside in the field somewhere. And, to a big degree, also, they depend on intentionality. So, while it might be an informal way to learn when a child puts their hand on a hot stove burner, that's not the kind of thing we're thinking of when we think of informal learning. That's incidental learning. It happens without being in a classroom, but it doesn't have any intentionality to it. The things that really organizations care about informal learning are those conscious actions that individuals, employees, would take to improve their knowledge or to gain knowledge for something for a particular purpose.

CT: There is a lot there. I think it is a little different than maybe from sometimes what you read about in the literature in regards to informal learning or even how some people talk about it out in the field just because it is so much narrower, and focused, and specific. So, I'm curious, when you were developing that definition or way of looking at it, adding that behavioral intentionality piece to it, what was your inspiration for making such a focused definition like that?

CC: That's a good question. I think it was, I would like to say that I, we the people I collaborated with, kind of sat bolt upright, came up with this great idea, but a lot of it was inspired by observations over time. So one thing I suggested earlier, for example, is that somewhere north of 70% of where organizations say their employees are getting their learning, is not in formal trainings. And so, this was based on a survey done 22 years ago of a number of organizations asking them where that happens. This observation led myself and others to think well what really is it that's taking place? What do we really mean when we about informal learning and training? We think about those sorts of things that really just take place outside the classroom. Another observation that inspired this is that people have used the word informal learning for years. It goes back in the literature at least 30 years. But they've never meant the same thing about it. Or no two research studies or individuals seem to think about it in quite the same way. And so, when myself, as someone who does a decent amount of research, sees a lot of disagreement, that looks like a place where it is ripe to rally up the horses, get everyone together, and figure out what actually falls in and what doesn't. And the behavioral versus the cognitive component, so, the behaviors versus the learning itself, was a key insight to helping to tie together a lot of literatures and to think about how to move forward practically.



CT: Okay. We talked a little bit about this at SIOP about how when you take a look at the literature for informal learning, the literature sometimes seems all over the place and completely different. I think you just touched on that. So given those differences, what advice would you give to researchers or organizations going forward about how they can integrate their research across those different segments and maybe come to a better understanding of how people learn?

CC: That is a great question, Corey. I think for researchers it is getting actually back into the literature. My colleagues and I coauthored a meta-analysis, and that's probably what you are referring to and what I mentioned at SIOP recently, coauthored a meta-analysis that was probably one of the most challenging ones that I've ever done because all of the literature came from such a broad range of disciplines: education, healthcare, organizational research, and just so many that were far beyond, that there has been research going on but most of the researchers have proceeded ignorant of each other, and so one of the things, or I should say unaware, would be a better way to put it. One of the things that we did was scour the literature from top to bottom to pull those together, to create a unitary concept and framework to think about it.

My first suggestion to researchers would be start with where we did. Don't reinvent the wheel, because it took a lot of time and a lot of work to do that. I would suggest to start with there. But then once you have an idea for the framework and how to think about it, you have to get out of the lab. It's almost impossible to operationalize and measure and think about informal learning in the lab. It has to be within organizations. The challenging part is it is something that is supposed to occur organically, so surveys and observation are probably the best way that honestly we really know to get at it right now. Observation on the behalf of researchers, but more likely as rated by employee managers, right? Or the opposite could be said, direct reports could potentially also rate their supervisors.

So, I guess if I think what are the implications for organizations, how do they move an informal learning agenda forward, they have to start with the culture. It sounds a little cliché to say, but the reason that I say that is, one of the strongest drivers of whether or not informal learning behaviors take place in the first place is that interpersonal formal and informal support. So individual employees are the ones who are going to be engaging those behaviors. They have to feel it is part and parcel with their job. They have to feel it is a value that permeates the organization. That it is an expectation. So that is a critical part of it. That starts at the top down. So, for example, a former sales prospect of mine was the CLO at AIG and he is regularly crafting and creating posts all over social media about very interesting topics related to learning and thinking. He also was very clear to use just the general idea that "I don't know" quite a bit. That sets up an expectation for the folks who are outside the organization that, "It's okay to explore things. It's okay to look at things and say I don't know this or I don't know that."

CT: That's really interesting. I think you have kind of a unique perspective and I think you just displayed that by starting with a conversation of the literature and then talking about what's really being done out in corporations and in organizations. So you have both of those perspectives. When you move from the literature and you talk to people in organizations about the importance of this informal learning, is that something that they're usually pretty receptive



to? Or is that something that, do you get any pushback, that people really want to focus in on formal training programs? Or how does that look out in the organizations?

CC: That's where the rubber meets the road a lot of times. It is easy for us to believe that if you put the research out there, it's going to support some action in the business. While it is a critical piece, it's not all of it by a long shot. And so, just like anything else, you have to build a business case for it. There has to be a case in terms of dollars and cents, or heads, or the vision of the organization, or all of those business metrics and KPIs you can really think about. So when you talk about folks doing that, there's a certain way that they're used to hearing that. Decision makers are used to hearing about a discrete initiative. This is what we want to do. This is what it will cost. This is what it will save or bring in. Here's the delta on that. Let's go ahead and move with it.

The challenge with informal learning is, by its very nature, informal learning is not a discrete program. People engage in different informal learning behaviors at different times, at different rates. Sometimes they're observable. Sometimes they're not. So, for example, I can sit back with a cup of coffee and sit forward and have a great thought and chase that to the end, and get on the phone and talk with somebody, and nobody may ever see that if they are not directly observing me. So, it is something that is nonlinear. It occurs at greater levels, sometimes lower levels other times. It doesn't come along in a discrete package. And it doesn't necessarily, by itself, lend itself to building a business case as well as it could. Now, that doesn't mean it's not worthwhile. It doesn't mean it's not something that organizations see the use for. They just don't have the language, or the framework, or the delivery mechanism to get it just yet, in a lot of cases.

CT: You just touched on how unstructured this kind of learning can be and how it can occur at all of these different time points. So I imagine this is a pretty difficult thing to measure. I know you have touched on that it has been measured through surveys, but other than that, what kind of challenges are there in measuring this informal learning in organizations, and what advice would you give to people in organizations that want to get at this idea better than they have before?

CC: I guess there is the measurement and then there is actually maybe driving it or doing something about it. The measurement piece is that you can't really measure the learning. You can measure behaviors. It's critical to think about the behaviors that somebody would engage in if they were trying to learn informally in your organization. In some cases, that's asking questions. In some cases, that's maybe shadowing somebody. In some cases, maybe that's simply observations or time just simply dedicated to doing something that's extracurricular, so to speak. It's giving people that expectation and understanding the behaviors that they would engage in that would lead to some sort of knowledge or information being gained other than through formal methods. As I suggested before, part of it is just culture. People need to have the expectation that this is something that they do. This is something that is valued. But there is also the notion of things that get in the way. Folks have to have resources and time for this. There was a seminal article by Steven Kerr sometime in the mid-70's from the City University of New York on what you really want to get when you incentivize people. You don't want to incentivize them for A but really ask for B. And so we can't expect people to reasonably engage in discretionary off-task behavior if they don't have the time to do it. If they are punished for taking risks. If it is



frowned upon to ever be wrong. If you are expected to be someone who always has the answers, all of these things get in the way of somebody taking a step back and saying I don't know, but I've got a little bit of time, maybe I'll try to figure it out.

CT: So, it sounds like there is certainly an organizational culture piece to this. Do you think there is maybe also an industry culture piece to this? Do you think some industries may do a better job of encouraging informal learning behaviors than others?

CC: Absolutely. There are some places that should not discover it. You probably don't want your nuclear power plant technicians engaging in informal learning when it comes to the controls that they are using. You don't want your brain surgeon engaging in informal learning to see what would happen if he pokes this thing or pulls on that thing. So it starts with, as anything else would, at least for individual performance and learning, what are the types of tasks, and what is the context in which this happens. Where there is a lot of room and need for informal learning is where you have people potentially working independently. Perhaps folks who are in sales or distributing, where there is a high degree of autonomy or decision making. Where there isn't necessarily a right or wrong answer, but there is a defensible answer. So you can think for example, lawyers in a lot of cases there is a most defensible answer. If there is not even a right one. Thinking about what the context and criteria are for performance is critical. In some cases, where there are just highly repetitive or potentially even somewhat mundane tasks, even though those are increasingly being automated now, it is not going to be fertile soil for someone who is perhaps counting widgets or swinging a hammer non-stop to be engaging in a lot of informal learning. In fact, time off task, for them, could actually lead to lower performance, and possibly lower pay and job satisfaction, as a result.

CT: I want to shift gears just a little bit here. I think it's not a total shift in gears given what you were just talking about with technology and automation. Here at the Work Science Center, we focus on the modern workforce, and the changing nature of work, in a lot of different ways. So, what is it about informal learning that makes it so important to the 21st century work context?

CC: That's a fair question that a lot of things that I said before when I said you have to link to the nature of the work itself, that is changing. So, for example, with increasing telework and distributed teams, it is increasingly more common that you don't have someone right there who has all of the answers. You have to go out and find it yourself. Or you have to work elsewhere to get that information. Higher levels of autonomy and responsibility are more and more common, not just with telework, but as teams are increasingly distributed globally, that individuals have to make their own decisions about the things that they spend their time on and don't. So they may not even be presented with the à la carte options of formal training programs that give them the information they need. They simply may need to go out and seek it out. And, time, too, is also a concern. So, for example, I had an interesting call yesterday with another member of my team who is in a data management role. In the span of two years from when she graduated her formal education training program, one of the database technologies she was using had already become largely defunct. As technology evolves quicker, and quicker, our formal training programs just won't keep up. And probably, frankly, they cannot be designed to keep up. So individuals will be sort of pressed increasingly to get the information they need, to build relationships proactively



that help to say “hey, here’s a heads up, you didn’t realize this particular type of coding is changing.” Or “the way we enter information into this database is changing.” As technology changes more and more quickly, and evolves, we have to have a format for learning and for approaching that learning that adapts to that.

CT: So I think that that is really interesting because in industries where the technology is evolving like this, there is that enhanced need to continue updating your skillset. It sounds like you are talking about having a format for going out and doing that, so it is almost like, it’s almost the spectrum if you are providing somewhat of a format to informally learn. It is kind of a mix of formal and informal learning, so do you think there are ways that formal learning can impact informal learning, especially in that kind of a context.

CC: That is a great observation, Corey. When you think about it, it seems like a conundrum, but formal learning and informal learning can be pretty closely related. So, you can train somebody through formal education, to be better at informal learning. For example, you can teach them, train them, rather I would say, to recognize particular triggers in the environment. So, are people saying things that are inconsistent? Is there a need that is not being met? Is there something that has changed? There are various ways you can train people to be better informal learners. One thing I like to share, is that formal learning and informal learning are not inherently incompatible, in fact they can leverage each other to a great degree. But that informal learning just becomes more and more critical as the years go by.

CT: It is kind of an intersection of two seemingly opposite terms. So the last thing that I wanted to talk about was, just a simple search, Google search, of informal learning will show that there has been this explosion in interest in it in recent years. I think your comments today can kind of attest to that, and so I think people can use that, they can look at your prior publications to see what we do know about informal learning. But, what are some things that we don’t yet know about informal learning that we really need to gain a better understanding of going forward.

CC: Well, I wear two hats when I think about that, Corey. I wear my consultant, applied hat, and then I wear my researcher hat. The consultant side is we haven’t yet cracked the code about how to package it right, and how to create a business case for implementing it. Now, in some organizations, where they have, they sincerely want to drive a strong learning culture. That is where there is potential for, there are fertile fields to be able to get it to take off. But in those cases, you almost don’t need to build a business case. It’s something that is considered to be there. What I think that we still haven’t gotten right just yet is the ability to package it, and talk about it, and sell it as part of a business case just like we would package for any other initiative we were trying to advance. I think we haven’t gotten that yet. That is something that will just take some time, some technology, and frankly some good marketing and salesmanship. If I think about the challenges, also on the applied side, it is hard to think about it in more routine environments. So, as more and more folks either work telework or distributed or in offices and less manufacturing roles, or other roles where they have opportunities for just doing new things, you have to be in new environments and experiencing different things to really capitalize on informal learning. It is challenging to think about that when there isn’t a lot of change, but you still have to deal with things.



I would say that on the research side one thing that is really critical, we just don't know enough about is the role of time. Time when it comes to measurement, and time when it comes to resources. We don't know how long it takes for individuals to have to engage in informal learning behaviors before some learning takes place. We don't really know the relationship between the frequency with which informal learning behaviors take place and the amount of learning that occurs. So, I suggested before, it's non-linear. You can think of a formal classroom. You've got, if you have a syllabus, a training syllabus, whatever it is, there are seven discrete units, seven discrete skills, you can measure those through quizzes, and you can see that learning takes place pretty linearly. You don't have that so much on the informal learning side. You can talk about the behaviors that people engage in, but because they're discretionary it's hard to think about the learning itself. And then, with respect to the time as a resource, it's still not clear what the right amount of time pressure is for a given employee. So, if someone has too little time on their hands, they don't, in theory, have the time to engage in informal learning behaviors. On the other hand, if they have too much time available, they won't feel the need for it. So there's something of a Yerkes-Dodson curve in there, that there's a sweet spot, but we just don't know where that is yet. And, finally, we don't know how individual preferences interact with the environment to drive the extent to which somebody engages in informal learning behaviors. We know that people who have a modus for learning, or who are curious, tend to engage in those. We know that when the environment is supportive, it tends to happen. But we don't know about the confluence of the two, whether the whole is greater than the sum of its parts or not.

CT: There is a couple of things, I really want to ask a couple of follow up questions on based on that.

CC: Sure.

CT: You talked about building business cases for informal learning, I think that can be a really difficult thing to do, to show ROI from learning outside of these formal contexts. So, what are some ways that you've seen people, at least attempt to do that? What are some ways that you attempt to do that? Do you throw that number, that 70-90% of learning at work occurs on the job, or is there really more to it than that?

CC: Those things support a business case for driving some sort of informal learning initiative. But there's really, I think two parts of the challenge. (A) What is it? What is it you are actually trying to sell? It's not like you're trying to sell a program with a curriculum where folks go to training, they sit through it, and then they're done. What exactly is it that you're proposing? It's great to say that employees who engage in informal learning tend to have higher levels of performance, tend to have higher levels of knowledge and skill, tend to have better attitudes in general, and research supports that. But, so what? What next? What do we do? So what is it that we are trying to sell? What is it that we are trying to do? Potentially, and I don't know of anyone who has done this, at least strictly in the way that I would think of with informal learning, you could suggest, and package, a formal training program, that drives informal learning. But in that case, you're proposing a formal training program. So, there is something of an irony there, in that, you are never going to propose a purely informal learning program, you're going to propose something formal that drives informal learning behaviors. That recognition is probably where



most folks would start. Programs or tools that help to capitalize on that, so for example, team after action reviews or debriefs are one semi-formal structured way that individuals and teams after a recent performance event can reflect on what they did, can do some real root-cause analysis, plan on what they can do going from there, and have an iterative cycle of improvement. But again, that is a very concrete solution that could be provided that is designed to support informal learning. So, I suppose, we probably wouldn't go and put in a business case directly, for some sort of informal learning program itself. We would have to make the case that there is some program, some formal program, or tool, or technique, or technology that we are asking decision makers to pay for that will drive informal learning, and then make the case that those benefits are worth the costs.

CT: So, I think we are getting close to wrapping things up here. Are there any other last thoughts or anything you haven't mentioned that you feel would be really important for our listeners to hear about informal learning or the modern work context?

CC: Well, I think it would be just a general realization or kind of a reiteration of sort of the old adage that not everything that can be counted counts. Even though informal learning is challenging to operationalize, it is challenging to directly build a business case for, it's challenging to pull together the research on, even though it's challenging doesn't decrease the value of leveraging it. Though, again, I can't sit here and say I know exactly the best way to do that, but I do know that the organization that learns to do that will find ways to unlock a lot of value and will find ways to drive a lot of unintended or side benefits. So, for example, one of the things that repeatedly shows up on surveys with the organizations that I've worked with, is that the number one driver of their employee engagement is the opportunities that individuals have, that individual employees have to learn and develop and grow at the organization. Don't get me wrong, the biggest pain point most people put on any survey is their pay and their benefits. They want more pay and benefits. And, of course, pay and benefits are important but when you take that off the table, it is, and actually if you leave it on the table, it is not the biggest predictor of employee engagement. It is those things that let employees know that they have the opportunity to grow, and develop, and have a career. So, when I loop that back, driving informal learning is a direct way to leverage that. So, again, I would emphasize that it may be challenging to operationalize and measure and even drive, but the organization that does that will really crack the code to some pretty extreme amounts of value.

CT: Thank you, Chris, for joining us today and sharing your insights. I really think this was something that was very informative and something that our listeners will really appreciate. Thank you to our listeners, for joining us as well. For other podcasts and interesting reads related to the modern workforce and the changing nature of work, please visit the Georgia Tech Work Science Center website at <http://www.worksciencecenter.gatech.edu>.

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