



Book Informal Learning

Rediscovering the Natural Pathways That Inspire Innovation and Performance

Jay Cross
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Recommendation

Do people learn best by sitting in a classroom taking notes? Not according to “eLearning” expert Jay Cross. Instead, he says, companies should champion nontraditional, informal learning methods, including: “unconferences,” “unworkshops,” “eLearning,” “Courageous Conversations” and even “grokking” (sci-fi writer Robert A. Heinlein’s term for “instantaneous, holistic recognition” or understanding). Cross says properly presented informal learning programs can give your firm a better return on its training investment than formal learning. He explains why that is and how to use his approach. Despite some repetition and fluffy filler, *BooksInShort* recommends this book to learning officers, training managers and human resources professionals who want to know more about setting up informal learning initiatives.

Take-Aways

- Employees don’t need to sit through costly training programs in a classroom to learn.
- Most workers dislike formal learning, which isn’t the best way for them to gain the knowledge they need.
- Between 80% and 90% of actual workplace training uses informal learning.
- People naturally, intuitively engage in informal learning.
- Teach your staffers how to use “whole-body intelligence” and intuition to learn.
- The internet is the world’s greatest informal learning resource.
- Acquiring new knowledge requires “making and maintaining good connections,” so encourage “learning networks” and “communities of practice.”
- Foster discussions in café settings and informal “learnsapes,” as well as online.
- Treat your staff as “free-range learners.” Give them the means; they will learn.
- Expect considerable resistance when you change from a formal instruction system to an informal one – that’s the nature of a paradigm shift.

Summary

Learning Does Not Require a Classroom

Must mastering new information always involve classrooms, assignments and instructors? No. The most effective learning happens outside such formal environments. People learn more effectively with informal instruction – working with each other, seeing, sharing and doing tasks in context, so they can immediately put new skills to use. They pick up more helpful information in the hallways, in the lunchroom, in the coffee room and even on the bus than in the classroom. Despite this, formal instruction remains the “knee-jerk solution...of corporate learning.”

“People are learning all the time, in varied settings and often most effectively in the context of work itself.”

Informal learning simply provides better results than classroom instruction, which relies on artificial constructs that often have little to do with the real world. Since workplace training is almost always targeted at novices, superior students (usually the best workers) quickly grow bored and tune out the material. For such reasons, workshop and classroom training is responsible for between 10% and 20% of employee learning. The remainder takes place informally, through talking, observing and solving problems by trial and error. Many formal training methods signal to students that they are somehow deficient and must make up for it; that’s not the ideal start for productive learning. In other words, the basic premise of most work-force training is flawed.

“Meta-Learning”

The process of “learning how to learn” is called meta-learning. Workshops that teach this skill help participants master different methods for absorbing knowledge. Their techniques include debate, group activities, repetition and reflection, all intended to empower “personal knowledge management.” Participants work with mentors, conduct research and maintain journals to build their ability to assimilate information effectively and judiciously. They practice explaining material to themselves in order to capture it, and they develop their intuition about how to select, retain and use data. To develop your intuition and use it to bolster the way you learn, follow these steps, listed according to the acronym “A CLUE”:

- “Acknowledge” the value of intuition.
- “Cultivate” a mind-set in which you “engage intuition.”
- “Listen” closely to your “intuitive voice.”
- “Understand” that you must work to hear your intuition over the interior din of false assumptions, prejudices and fears.
- “Exercise” your intuition by practicing making judgments and weighing them.

Executives Respect Knowledge but Disdain Training

Many managers find it hard to seem to be enthusiastic supporters of formal instruction. Indeed, most supervisors aren’t happy to have their workers stuck in classrooms. Yet those same managers want well-trained workers who can execute their jobs. Such leaders should champion informal learning and reap its business benefits. For instance, by making product knowledge accessible, informal learning helps generate sales. Knowledge workers currently “waste a third of their time looking for information,” so giving them a better grasp of relevant factual material can increase their productivity. Informal training makes work more enjoyable, thus reducing absenteeism, stress and health care expenses. This kind of training provides a meaningful return on investment by channeling educational funds where they do the most good. It also improves work results, encourages innovation, reduces costs, and boosts performance and professionalism.

“Learning is like breathing, so much a part of our lives that we’re unaware of it.”

Some people soak up knowledge most efficiently by simply browsing for meaningful information. In fact, browsing is, perhaps, the perfect metaphor for informal learning. In a classroom setting, the professor is in charge and dictates what people will learn and when they will learn it. Informal learning puts students in control of their own “learnscape,” the framework where the absorption of data occurs. A learnscape is a system for taking in new information “without borders.” It can be anything from “a coaching session” to “contacting the help desk” to doing research online.

“Knowledge workers are people who know more about their work than their bosses do.”

Some managers may worry that, since informal learning is, indeed, informal and unstructured, it is impossible for them to control. What they mistakenly see as a negative is actually a positive. Formalized learning places uncomfortable barriers – that is, lecture plans, formulaic memorization, senseless homework and irrelevant grades – between adult students and what they really want to know and learn. Intuitive, natural, informal learning demolishes these obstacles.

The Power of Networks

People learn from their day-to-day interactions, relationships and social networks. Workers are interested, instinctively, in maximizing these networks, so they can figure out the best ways to do their tasks, assimilate new processes and discover more about the world around them. The essence of mastering knowledge is “making and maintaining good connections in a network.” Just ask an authority how he learns: When Marc Rosenberg – “a pioneer in the field of training and design” – wants to learn something, he says, “I ask somebody. Cultivate the right people to ask.” That is how real learning gets done. Such learning is not about “know-what.” It’s about “know-who.”

“All learning is self-directed.”

Learning officers should view workers holistically, not as empty buckets into which they pour data. Human resources directors, training supervisors and other managers should regard their employees as “emotional beings” and act accordingly. People cannot learn if they aren’t fit, mentally or physically, or if they are emotionally troubled. Such negative factors affect mastery and performance. Of course, individuals ultimately are responsible for their own physical and emotional states, and their own development activities. Your firm’s goal is to establish a “creative knowledge society” built on “trust, challenge, self-direction, relevance, immersion, passion” and “talents.” As workers observe their colleagues’ satisfaction, their productivity will soar – along with their willingness to learn.

A Picture Is Worth a Thousand Words...But Words Are Also Important

People derive far more information from illustrations than from words. Pictures are meaningful to everyone and help workers learn more efficiently. According to the book *Visual Language*, by Robert E. Horn, using images can “improve decision making, make a better impression, shorten meetings, promote group consensus and persuade audiences.” Because images “feed the eyes,” they help people develop a more comprehensive understanding of any subject.

“We humans are sight mammals. We learn almost twice as well from images and words as from words alone.”

Still, words matter as well. Christopher Locke, co-author of *The Cluetrain Manifesto*, states that “business is a conversation,” and that knowledge workers need to be able to have “interesting conversations” with each other. In effect, these workers “construct knowledge” through their discussions. Or as collective intelligence expert Tom Atlee says, “Dialogue is the central aspect of co-intelligence.” One way to engage workers in meaningful learning conversations is to set up a “World Café.” Bring people into a room with several large tables covered with flip-chart paper. Seat them in groups at the tables, each with a “host.” Have the participants discuss a learning topic for 10 minutes while making notes on the paper table covers. Then have the groups (not the hosts) move to different tables and continue the conversation, referring to the notes the previous group made. Rotate once more and then share your insights. This enjoyable, informal process helps people discover “patterns and linkages” in their topics.

“Communities of Practice”

All professionals belong to communities of practice: groups of peers who share experiences and learn from one another. Anthony Bourdain discusses the way these communities work in *Kitchen Confidential*, his inside look at being a restaurant chef. He describes how novice chefs learn by working alongside seasoned veterans. Using this see-and-do process, students do not learn just how to cook – they learn how to be chefs, a far more encompassing activity. Other professionals, craftspeople and specialists can garner the skills they need within self-organizing communities of practice that function like ant colonies or beehives. Working with such communities boosts learning. Computer networking giant Cisco Systems uses community-of-practice teams in numerous technical areas. Participants post videotaped symposia online to share the knowledge they develop with Cisco’s “thousands of sales engineers.”

The Web and eLearning

The web is the greatest repository of immediately available information ever assembled, an amazing resource for informal learning. Many businesses build on e-learning which takes place automatically when people seek knowledge online. Some trainers “blend” employees’ “computer learning with classroom learning.” However, the best approach is “unblended learning” – a combination of whatever tactics work best for an individual learner or group. Instead of the term “blend,” consider the construct of personal “interaction” – “learner-to-content, learner-to-learner and learner-to-infrastructure.” See the internet as an “unworkshop” or “virtual water cooler.” Lots of actual corporate learning takes place when people interact next to the real water cooler. Now, you and your staff can learn all you want online – at the web’s virtual water cooler – in a networked environment at your own pace and according to your requirements.

“Learning is not compulsory but neither is survival.” (W. Edwards Deming)

You can choose among many other informal learning approaches, including:

- **“Unconferences”** – These unstructured business meetings shun “keynote speakers.” They bring experts, or “geeks,” together to brainstorm, have a good time, build “genuine community” and engage in “high learning – breakthrough thinking born of diversity.” Some gatherings use wiki postings to discuss new ideas and provoke further discussion.
- **“Courageous Conversations”** – Pfizer uses this workshop, which has some formal learning aspects (such as an instructor), to facilitate candor and communication. Participants learn how to talk about difficult issues, a skill that abets informal learning.
- **“Grokking”** – This term for “instantaneous, holistic recognition” comes from Robert A. Heinlein’s science fiction classic *Stranger in a Strange Land*. The use of images greatly facilitates this kind of “empathetic,” “profound” and immediate understanding.
- **“Storytelling”** – Human beings respond to narrative. Stories are “the buzz of the beehive,” so sharing positive tales is a powerful “change tactic.”

“Executives don’t want learning; they want execution.”

To correct the balance of formal training versus informal learning, support more of the latter and less of the former. Instituting such a change won’t be easy; paradigm shifts never are. You must contend with corporate politicians, “information hoarders,” sacred cows, rules of thumb and the “way we do things here.” How do you change learning tactics in the face of habit and mindless opposition? Take Peter Drucker’s advice: “Focus on opportunities rather than problems.”

“A knowledge worker needs one thing only: to learn how to learn.” (Peter F. Drucker)

When the digital chip manufacturer LSI Logic switched from classroom training to informal learning, it started by simply closing its training department and shifting its executives’ focus to talent management. The company appointed a governing committee of vice presidents that represented each important professional function. Instead of hosting formal training programs, it placed “development plans” online. Employees and managers now work together to develop a learning plan and to decide which specific competencies individual employees need to master. The plan may include “on-the-job learning, coaching, books, and other means.” After four years of this informal approach, the company is reinstituting some formal training, particularly in “compliance and certification,” but informal learning remains LSI’s default setting.

“Free-Range Learners”

When planning your firm’s informal learning initiative, think of your employees as free-range learners. You don’t have to outline and monitor everything they do. Instead, establish a work environment that encourages self-directed learning, and “provide nutrients for growth.” Then, “let nature take its course.” Informal learning does not emerge overnight, and its path varies from company to company. Start with a focus on the long term, including a “multiyear” budget. Keep everything simple. Organize your program from the learners’ perspective. Set up a “learning council” to help develop an “enterprise learning strategy.” Use the precept, “Work = learning; learning = work,” as the basis of your informal learning program, then get out of the way and let your people learn. They will know exactly what to do.

About the Author

Adult learning expert **Jay Cross** is a columnist for *Chief Learning Officer* magazine. He coined the term “eLearning” and is the former CEO of the ELearning Forum.
