

INFORMAL LEARNING IN “PERFORMATIVE” TIMES: INSIGHTS FROM EMPIRICAL RESEARCH ON CANADIAN TEACHERS’ WORK AND LEARNING

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Abstract

This paper makes two contributions. First, it develops a typology of “informal learning” that illuminates the different discourses of the hidden, yet important (as well as problematic), orientations to informal learning. This typology is then used to deepen analyses of teachers’ workplace “informal learning” derived from a 10-year empirical study on Canadian teachers’ work and learning. Three main themes are identified: the difficulty of differentiating informal and formal learning at the empirical level; the limitations of the research methods used to illuminate more tacit levels of learning; and the challenges to collaborative learning under the continued institutional rigidity of schooling. Additionally, under present conditions of work intensification, a significant portion of teachers’ informal learning is reactive rather than deliberative. The paper suggests that although it may be seductive for some teachers, or even necessary for teachers without secure positions, to take up the subject position of “empowered lifelong learner”, this move cannot be assumed to represent increased autonomy.

Résumé

Cet article est doublement utile. D’abord, il établit une typologie de «l’apprentissage non formel» qui fait ressortir les différents discours sur les orientations tacites, mais tout de même importantes (et problématiques) dans ce domaine. Cette typologie sert par la suite de base à une analyse plus approfondie de «l’apprentissage non formel» des enseignants à partir d’une étude canadienne sur le travail et le perfectionnement professionnel des enseignants, qui a duré 10 ans. L’article identifie trois thématiques : la difficulté inhérente à distinguer l’apprentissage formel de l’apprentissage non formel sur le plan pratique; les limites des méthodes de recherche utilisées dans l’identification de niveaux d’apprentissage moins évidents; et les défis liés à l’apprentissage coopératif dans le contexte de rigidité institutionnelle constante de l’école. De surcroît, à une époque d’intensification du travail, bon nombre d’enseignants optent pour l’apprentissage informel par obligation plutôt que par choix. L’article suggère enfin que même s’il peut être séduisant pour certains enseignants, ou même essentiel pour les enseignants sans assignation permanente d’opter pour l’apprentissage tout au long de la vie, cela ne signifie toutefois une plus grande autonomie.

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Introduction

In “performative” times,¹ informal modes of workplace learning are gaining increasing attention by policy makers, practitioners, and academics. For example, informal learning has become a key stratagem in the regime of “lifelong learning” employed as a form of governmentality (self-regulation) of worker-citizens by organizations like the European Commission (Tuschling & Engemann, 2006). In parallel, under the imaginary of the “learning society,” management theorists and consultants envision informal learning as a favoured modality for organizational efficiency, human/intellectual capacity-building, and maximal flexibility in knowledge-intensive workplaces according to the needs of the “new” economy (Garrick & Usher, 2000; Marsick & Volpe, 1999). In the literature of adult education, informal learning is often theorized as an undervalued and undersupported mode of professional/worker learning, where formal learning is represented as only the “tip of the iceberg” of adult learning (Livingstone, 1999; Tough, 1979). Recognition and support of workers’ informal learning can be framed toward the aims of democratizing workplaces and reducing underemployment (Livingstone, 2003). Yet “formalizing” informal learning can also become a technique of managing subjectivities according to organizational goals, “empowering” workers whilst increasing surveillance and regulation (Garrick & Usher). In the field of education, informal modes of learning and leadership, such as action research and “learning communities,” also have increasing purchase in the literatures of teachers’ professional development and school change (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 1999; Fullan, 1995; Harris, 2003; Hoekstra, Beijaard, Brekelmans, & Korthagen, 2007; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 1996; Williams, 2003).

A number of scholars theorize the “informal” of informal learning (Colley, Hodkinson, & Malcolm, 2004; Livingstone, 1999, 2001; Straka, 2004). Defining the term is difficult because human learning remains an elusive phenomenon, both in metaphysical and socio-cultural terms. Attempts at defining learning are complicated by our histories of learning and non-learning as schooled subjects. Schooling has become so naturalized in modern society that learning has come to stand for explicit, institutionalized learning (often of propositional knowledge) against which the adjective “informal” is added to produce an array of opposing and varied meanings. Some uses of the term “informal learning” centre on the degree of intentionality and awareness of one’s learning (Eraut, Alderton, Cole, & Senker, 2001). Others suggest that the organizational context, rather than the learning, distinguishes formal from informal learning (Straka). Consequently, as Colley et al. (2003) suggest, researchers have to define the parameters of informality and formality carefully, according to the particular purposes of their research.

¹ A number of terms for describing the historical conditions that give rise to the increasing salience of “informal learning” could suffice here, such as “era of accountability”, “audit culture”, “new capitalism”, or “age of empowerment”. I place postmodern “performativity” at a deeper (more causative) level than the other descriptors. In a context of substantive diversity in pluralistic society and a loss of credulity in the grand narratives (Lyotard, 1984), measurable outcomes take on heightened value. In other words, without the trust in God/the State/schooling, diverse groups want performance indicators and other, often quantifiable, tangibles. Ultimately, what becomes the common framework for all is the market. In the West, neoliberalism is so strong not because “people” believe in monetarist policies or small governments, but because the market becomes the lowest common denominator amidst competing agendas with no unifying philosophical, moral, or existential foundation.

The purpose of this paper is to explore and illuminate complex meanings, uses, and challenges of teachers' workplace informal learning in the contemporary moment. This is achieved by outlining and examining a few key tensions between informal learning culled from the literature and the findings of the Work and Lifelong Learning (WALL) empirical study on Canadian teachers' work and learning, where the ubiquity, importance, and value teachers place upon informal modes of learning were prominent (Smaller, Tarc, Antonelli, Clark, Hart, & Livingstone, 2005; Tarc, Smaller, & Antonelli, 2006). Most of the WALL findings on teachers centered on self-reporting of their engagement with learning and their working contexts. Indeed, in an era of work intensification and increased scrutiny on Canadian teachers' professional development, with little empirical data on teachers' workplace learning, central aims of the research were to find out how teachers were engaging in their learning, both formally and informally, and to hear how teachers themselves perceive their learning needs and desires. Additionally, given the lack of input teachers typically have in the policy process, it was also important for us to present their survey and interview responses. Descriptions and analyses of Canadian teachers' engagement with informal learning have been presented in a number of documents produced by WALL research members (Clark et al., 2007; Smaller et al., 2005; Tarc et al., 2006). In these documents, informal learning has been cast in a very positive light. Alongside the productive possibilities that valuing and better supporting teachers' informal learning affords, this paper draws upon literature to critically illuminate some of the limits of, and challenges to, realizing these potentialities. Research does not end with responding to one's original intentions or questions, but also involves reflecting back upon the research design and working assumptions to rethink and possibly reconceive one's theoretical categories and assumptions, and imagine new questions and approaches (Hansen, 1976).

In the next section of this paper, the theoretical orientation and a framework for considering the discourses on informal learning are provided. Following this section, findings from WALL research on teachers' informal learning are reviewed. Reflections of the "learnings" from the research and their bearing upon the tensions and typology of informal learning presented in the literature are then outlined. The paper concludes with comments on the research limitations.

What Is at Stake in Casting the Research Gaze on Workers' Informal Learning?

A basic assumption underlying this paper is that discourses and discursive products are founded upon normative concerns and have material effects. Therefore, no research can claim or represent its "findings" as simply empirical, to be accepted, for example, at face value. Our research team has invested considerable time and resources in illuminating how Canadian teachers perceive their learning. As with any methodological approach, ours has no doubt influenced how teachers have self-reported. Nevertheless, we have found that while teachers have been more ambivalent about their experiences with formal modes of learning, they have been unanimously positive about the value of informal modes of learning. The approach of this paper, then, is to draw out the uses of informal learning in the literature as a frame to revisit the WALL research on teachers.

The analytic approach of a number of scholars in cultural studies² (in education, anthropology, and sociology) who employ critical, poststructural, and/or postcolonial perspectives attuned to (geo)historical specificity have informed this analysis. Relatively speaking, these scholars generally privilege and theorize *context* as they work to understand why particular phenomena gain salience in a particular time-space conjuncture or phase of modernity (Scott, 2004) or globalization (Jones, 2000). Accordingly, the literature of informal learning is explored not to find the true definition or nature of informal learning, but to understand the motivations for studying informal learning and how the term is *used* in the present historical conjuncture. A sampling of these wider uses of informal learning is then brought to bear upon a rereading of the WALL research findings on teachers' informal learning.

The purpose here is not to provide another synthesis of the literature on informal learning. The aim is to understand the particular ways the term is used in the literature and the intentions and effects of these uses. Nevertheless, a couple of key findings emerging from the syntheses conducted by Colley et al. (2003) and Straka (2004) remain pertinent. As Colley and her colleagues conclude, at the empirical level the distinction between informal and formal learning breaks down. Both modes of learning occur in any scene of learning, and it is the interrelations of formality and informality that are distinctive across different contexts. It is these interrelations or dynamics of formality and informality that need to be better understood to enhance adult learning. And, with Straka, centering the definition of informal learning on the kind of learning (for example, deliberate or tacit) or kind of knowledge (for example, propositional or embodied) is conceptually unstable because it is not learning that can be organized and controlled as much as teaching and the external conditions in which learners are to engage. Accordingly, Straka writes, "'Formality' cannot be grounded in the individual. The key has to be found in the context of the external conditions in which the person's learning took place" (p. 10).

To help conceptualize the various uses of informal learning, a tentative typology follows. Note that the separate categories of this typology are interrelated.

Informal Learning as the Undertapped Base of the "Iceberg"

A considerable amount of workers' learning and "know-how" remain undervalued and underrealized in workplaces (Livingstone, 2003). Across many domains, it is recognized that better understanding, recognition, and support of workers' informal modes of learning can improve upon workplace relations, worker autonomy and motivation to learn, and overall job satisfaction. Many proponents also assume that such improvements will necessarily increase the organization's productivity or the quality of its product. This assumption continues from the Total Quality Management (TQM) approach emerging in the 1980s to the "capacity-building" for flexible mobilization of more recent times. Where theorists of adult education and workplace learning privilege the worker autonomy aim of the hoped-for complement, management and corporate leaders privilege organizational efficiency and profit optimization aims. Where adult educators are typically critical of human capital

² For example, this general approach is exemplified, in distinct forms, in much of the work of the following scholars: Stephen Ball, Stuart Hall, Thomas Popkewitz, and David Scott.

theories, management theorists are working to make human capital theories less simplistic by, for example, incorporating a theory of social capital upon a human capital frame.³

Informal Learning as a Counter to Modernist Assumptions of Learning and the Learner

Explicit, intentional, individualist, and incremental learning have been the dominant modes of learning in formal education as conceived under the imaginary of the rational, self-enclosed, autonomous learner. Informal modes of learning—as tacit, affective, and incidental—are often theorized against such formal modes of learning and visions of the learner. In large part, the base of the iceberg remains untapped because it lies below the murky depths. A number of discussions drawing upon informal learning in the literature (Hoekstra et al., 2007; Straka, 2004) draw upon the work of Eraut (Eraut et al., 2001, for example), who differentiates three distinct kinds of learning: deliberative, reactive, and implicit. Investigating the less intentional and conscious modes of learning, while deeply challenging, is very important because these modes may represent a large percentage of workers' knowledge largely developed on-the-job outside of formal education or training. These less tangible modes of learning also represent serious challenges to empirical research as workers are unlikely to be able to articulate their tacit or embodied knowledge underlying their worker competencies.

Informal Learning as Political/Emancipatory Work

Given the historical uses of schooling and cultural capital in the (re)production of a hierarchically organized, classed society, “non-formal education” and informal learning sometimes carry with them a critique of the contrived and scholastic nature or colonizing effects of formal education and learning. Colley and colleagues (2003) situate these conceptualizations of informal learning in the political rather than the theoretical domain. Illich's (1972) call to “deschool” society and UNESCO's non-formal education initiatives to aid processes of modernization in the (decolonizing) “developing” nations during the post-WWII decades are key examples of the term's political lineage (Colley et. al.; Tuschling & Engemann, 2006). Some present uses of the term informal learning still carry the residue of a critique of schooling as contrived and colonizing; however, more recent uses commonly cast schooling and other formal modes of education as too rigid and slow to change under the demands for increasing competitiveness in a globalizing economy (Marsick & Volpe, 1999). Both adult educators and management gurus proclaim the emancipatory potential of informal modes of learning, but these modes may be appropriated within a neoliberal imaginary.⁴ Colley et al argue that these emancipatory claims have been exaggerated (p. 16). Thus, these claims must be considered cautiously.

3 For example, the World Bank now frames “poverty alleviation” largely through a social capital lens (www.worldbank.org/prem/poverty/scapital/index.htm, retrieved July 29, 2007).

4 By a “neoliberal imaginary,” I am referring to how the logic of neoliberalism, as the dominant politico-economic orthodoxy (Harvey, 2005) privileging market rationalities across multiple domains of human organization, begins to be taken up as everyday, common sense understanding by ordinary people (Rizvi, 2007).

Informal Learning in the Regime of Lifelong Learning and Governmentality

The pervasiveness of the discourses of lifelong learning emanating from influential transnational, multilateral policy think-tanks such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (Henry, Lingard, Rizvi, & Taylor, 2001) and the European Commission (Tuschling & Engemann, 2006), and taken up across a wide array of organizational contexts, have in large part been responsible for the increased attention given to informal learning. Tuschling and Engemann claim that education has given way to lifelong learning as learning becomes disengaged from organized contexts (p. 455). Learning becomes both "life-long" and "life-wide:" "While the classical field of learning was formed by closed institutions, that were to be attended in the first quarter or third of the lifespan, lifelong learning declares any place and any time as suitable for learning" (p. 457). Ultimately, informal learning becomes a stratagem in the regime of lifelong learning for the individual to self-discipline and self-regulate through the required need to make transparent and document his or her learning. As Tuschling and Engemann argue: "The subject itself has to formalize the non-formal and informal by self-reporting skills and by self-describing its own condition. Self-assessment and concurrent self-profiling is the relationship one ought to have to oneself in a society of lifelong learning" (p. 464). For Garrick and Usher (2000), where the informal is "formalized," there is "increased potential for surveillance and regulation . . . [with the] panoptic characteristics of the new 'flexible' learning" (p. 12). And, as Garrick and Usher emphasize, employees are constructed not only as empowered and active learners, but as "self-regulating subjects" (p. 13).

Informal Workplace Learning: The Case of Teachers

The above typology is useful in examining the case of schoolteachers who emphasize the importance of informal modes of learning in the WALL study on teachers. Each of the distinct uses of informal learning is very relevant to gaining a sense of the wider dynamics at play under which teachers learn and are to learn. A large part of teachers' "know-how" remains tacit, embedded in their practices. To be a "reflective practitioner" (Brookfield, 1995) requires an examination of one's practices to make more explicit one's learning and pedagogical knowledge. Hoekstra and colleagues (2007) argue in their research that overly rationalistic approaches to teacher learning, which focus primarily on deliberate and cognitive learning, can have very limited effects on improving practice.

Further, contemporary professional development discussions have drawn on management discourse highlighting the importance of the active, empowered teacher-learner as an agent of change for organizational improvement. By these discourses, teachers are also constructed as self-regulating subjects. Employing a similar analytic as the governmentality analysts, Smyth (1992) illustrates how, despite its emancipatory rationalizations, teachers' "reflective practice" can effectively act as a technique of control under the guise of devolving autonomy carried out in the context of neoliberal school restructuring;⁵ in this scenario, teachers are reflecting and responding to administrative

⁵ *Neoliberal* restructuring privileges market logics and solutions for the provision of state schooling, manifesting in a whole set of processes toward privatization, including: providing "school choice" such as magnet and charter initiatives, standardized testing to provide school rankings, pressures for schools to compete and market their "product" to their "clients", etc.

and classroom demands and needs engineered not by themselves but by the emergent conditions of intensifying workload in underfunded school boards. Illuminating a similar (and troubling) process of “steering from a distance” under new capitalism, Gee, Hull, and Lankshear (1996) highlight how “empowered units” internalize organizational “values and goals—often without a great deal of negotiation or conscious reflection and without the exercise of very much top-down authority” (cited in Fuller, Hodkinson, Hodkinson, & Unwin, 2005, p. 53).

For a number of reasons, teachers are a particularly interesting group of worker-professionals to study. First, their area of expertise is learning. Their day-to-day roles cover such a broad set of tasks that a great deal of their informal or incidental learning, in and out of school, can potentially be considered as relevant to their practice. Teachers are required to respond to the demands of a postmodern age through the lives of stakeholders, most especially their students, while working within a largely modernist institution. Relative to other professions, teachers generally believe themselves to have high levels of control at the micro level in their classrooms, but very little discretionary control at the organizational levels (Livingstone & Antonelli, 2007).

In the next sections, I consider how the conceptualizations of informal learning presented above link up with the findings of an empirical research study on Canadian teachers’ work and learning. I begin with a description of the empirical research with which I have been involved for the past four years.

Summary of Empirical Research on Teachers’ Work and Learning

The study revisited in this paper has been in process since 1997,⁶ and has combined a number of qualitative and quantitative measures. In 1998 and again in 2003, comprehensive eight-page questionnaires were mailed out to randomly sampled elementary and secondary school teachers across Canada (n=1,500 and 2,000, respectively), with effective response rates of approximately 50% for each occasion. In addition to general background and workload questions, respondents were asked to comment in detail on their informal learning in their workplaces, their homes, and their communities in the past year, and on their participation in formal learning events, including courses, workshops, conferences, etc. Other questions explored the ways in which workplace relations and government policies and programs intersected with teachers’ desire for, and engagement in, their formal and informal learning activities.

In the years following each national survey, a number of qualitative projects were undertaken. In 2004 and 2005, following the 2003 national questionnaire survey, a total of 13 focus groups with five to six participants in each group were conducted in the provinces of Alberta, British Columbia, Nova Scotia, and Ontario. Again, building upon the data collected in the surveys, participants were asked to explore issues relating to their own learning and professional development, and the ways in which government policy and workplace relations intersected with this learning. In addition to interviews with

6 The first stage of the study was the New Approaches to Lifelong Learning (NALL) project. NALL and WALL were large multiple-partner projects, supported by grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, investigating the work and learning of workers across a number of sectors/professions. Both WALL and NALL used multiple choice survey instruments followed by qualitative case studies.

a cross-section of practising classroom teachers, focus group interviews were conducted with occasional teachers in one urban school board in Ontario. A last set of interviews were conducted individually with beginning teachers in the same urban school board.

Given the diverse methods employed for gathering data from teachers, we were rewarded with a rich array of information from which to construct a picture of how teachers perceive their engagement as learners. Based on a comparative analysis of their questionnaire responses, and the more qualitative data collected from the diaries, interviews, and focus groups, it is clear that most teachers across Canada are significantly engaged in their own further learning, to enhance both their capacity to engage in their day-to-day teaching responsibilities in the classroom and their overall general knowledge. In the 2003 survey, full-time teachers reported an average of about 7.5 hours of formal learning activities weekly. In general, teachers were also very engaged as informal learners, reporting an average of four hours per week of work-related informal learning in 2003, unchanged from the survey in 1998. Almost all respondents indicated that their work-related informal learning has been very helpful (51%) or somewhat helpful (46%) to their work. In the focus group interviews, teachers consistently spoke to the necessity and value of learning informally with their colleagues and/or mentors. Teachers made multiple statements like: "I think the best professional development I have ever had that I had gotten the most from is talking to people in my own school, and having the time to do that."

In addition to work-related informal learning, respondents averaged seven hours per week in community, household, or other related informal learning in the 2003 survey. More than half of the respondents also indicated that this informal learning in other domains was helpful in their work as teachers.

Workload intensification was a dominant theme in the project analysis. In the survey almost 80% of respondents reported that their workload had significantly increased (44%) or increased (34%) over the past five years. The total number of work-related activities being reported in 2003 produced a mean of 50.2 hours compared with the mean of 48.9 hours from the 1998 survey. Workload intensification was also a dominant theme in the focus group interviews, sometimes discussed alongside the term "accountability," which was explicated with reference to the downloading of administrative duties onto teachers, increased paper work, increased reporting on students, and increased supervision. In turn, several teachers reported that this intensification of workload impacted negatively upon their time and energy to engage in learning, both formal and informal. In response to an interview question on obstacles to engagement with learning, one teacher's remark is illustrative: "The paperwork. It impacts on the time that you might do some of that informal learning after school or at lunch because you are busy filling out forms in triplicate or putting together yet another referral package for an assessment."

Also related was the high number of respondents reporting in the survey that the overall level of stress in their work had "significantly increased" (46%) or "increased" (35%). Again, the focus group interviews provided some illustrative examples of workload

compression through increased tasks, accompanying stress levels, and their negative impacts upon teachers' health or wellness.⁷

Linking the Research with the Literature on Informal Learning

The purpose of this section is to reflexively (re)consider informal learning and note some tensions between the literature and the research study on teachers' learning. Specific attention is given to teachers' self-reporting on their informal learning from the WALL phase of research (2003–2007). Three main themes that surfaced in our previous analysis (Tarc et al., 2006) link up to the literature presented in the earlier section, namely: the “messiness” in differentiating informal and formal learning (in spite of the attempts through the research design to differentiate them), the limits of researching learning through surveys and focus group interviews, and the challenges of collaborative learning within institutional rigidity. While the survey does ask respondents about their explicit learning, the results from one question where respondents report on the average number of work-related hours of informal learning per week suggest that different respondents interpreted informal learning differently. Significantly, about 12.5% of respondents reported engaging in less than one hour of informal learning per week, yet other respondents reported tens of hours of informal learning per week, ranging right up to the maximum capped value of 71 hours per week. Both ends of this range are surprising. Perhaps teachers reporting on the low end were considering informal learning as deliberate and explicit goal-directed learning, whereas teachers reporting on the high end may have been including the whole iceberg of learning that may, however indirectly, inform their practices. For example one interviewee commented:

There is nothing that impedes my informal learning. I do what I want to do, sheer existence whatever you are interested in, you are learning all the time so there aren't any specific things that I can identify that this is a challenge to informal learning. I think if I was totally asleep that would be the challenge. As long as I'm awake and conscious . . .

For this teacher, all of his conscious activity was potentially work-related informal learning. Generally, the findings indicate that individual teachers understand the relationship between their teaching and their learning differently.

Probing the survey data further, two groupings were constructed for comparisons to other categories (Tarc et al., 2006). The first group comprised those teachers reporting less than one hour per week of work-related informal learning, and the second group comprised teachers reporting 10 or more hours per week. The average values (means) presented in Table 1 include only full-time classroom teachers.

⁷ In spite of these pressures, however, 32% of full-time respondents reported that they were “very satisfied” with their jobs, while a further 55% were at least “somewhat satisfied.” By comparison, only 8% were “dissatisfied” and 2% “very dissatisfied” with their jobs.

Table 1. Comparing “High-informal” Learners to “Low-informal” Learners

Groupings: Hours of informal learning per week	Average hours of informal learning per week	Average years of teaching since qualifications	Average hours of formal learning per week	Average working hours at school per week	Average working hours at home / elsewhere	Average total work week ⁸	Average hours using Internet at home
Less than one hour N=70	0.2	19.1	4.0	39.6	8.5	48.1	2.9
More than 10 hours N=60	17.3	15.9	12.4	45.0	11.2	56.0	4.1

A number of conjectures are drawn from analyzing these numbers. First, there is a significant difference in the seniority of the teachers between groups (albeit both groups show many years of experience), suggesting that the more senior teachers⁹ are spending less time engaging in learning. Perhaps less experienced teachers are more active in their informal learning as they may be more willing to adapt to new roles voluntarily. Our interview data indicates that teachers’ seniority (years of experience) affected their engagement with learning in a few ways. Early in their careers, apart from the direct usefulness of courses to their practices, teachers take particular certificate courses to increase salaries and teaching options. Beginning teachers also seem more likely to seek out advice or ideas from their colleagues (and consider this interaction as learning) than more experienced teachers, who may view their interactions with other peers as coaching or socializing rather than learning. Of course, for all teachers, changing teaching assignments, grade levels, or curricula likely increase the need for, and participation in, (informal) learning by all teachers (Dehli & Fumia, 2002).

Second, and generally speaking, there does not seem to be any “substitution” effect, where teachers engage more in one mode (formal or informal) of learning at the expense of the other. Rather, teachers reporting the highest levels of informal learning are also involved in significantly more hours of formal learning. It could be that the formal learning activities intensify or multiply periods of informal learning and vice versa. For example, formal learning activities may provide some of the content that is later shared or tested in more informal scenarios, or provide the contacts for future collaboration. This conjecture further supports Colley et al.’s (2003) thesis that informality and formality exist in every scene of learning. One teacher, who tended to see all of his conscious activities as

8 The averages reported in the table were calculated based on a number of questions that divided the various tasks teachers completed at school and at home. The average working hours at school per week includes all activities taking place at school, such as extra-curricular activities.

9 Keep in mind that the years of experience cited are averages. Thus, the “average” teacher in the “informal learning” group is not a junior teacher. However, there are likely more beginning teachers included in this grouping, which lowers the average.

informal learning, also had heavily invested in formal learning in a doctorate in education and multiple technology courses; in turn, the expertise garnered in the technology courses supported informal collaborative projects and new learning with his colleagues in the school setting. Conversely, informal learning embedded in classroom practice compelled some teachers to seek out formal courses or workshops emphasizing a particular content or skillset.

Also, and in the context of workload intensification, teachers sometimes spoke of informal learning almost as a survival mechanism—learning how to manage multiple and competing tasks—rather than as a more autonomous activity directed proactively by the teacher in an area of pedagogical interest. For example, the following teacher illustrates the “survival” side of informal learning under workload intensification: “Because the working conditions have changed so much . . . the informal learning has skyrocketed because you are constantly learning. You have to learn that new curriculum, you are just moving along, moving along, so it’s never ending.”

While this particular teacher mentions having to learn new curriculum, in the context of this focus group discussion, “new curriculum” stood in for a whole set of tasks and, thereby, learning that teachers necessarily were compelled to take on. This “on the go” and “getting by” informal learning represents reactive rather than deliberative learning, categories in Eraut and colleague’s (2001) typology of non-formal learning. While some teachers clearly recognized the existence and pervasiveness of this survival mode of learning in response to intensified workload with insufficient supports (e.g., learning new software in the process of doing digital report cards, teaching new courses before textbooks have arrived, repairing photocopiers, etc.), the teachers did not associate this reactive mode as representing their learning. For example, the teachers did not typically conceive of their learning how to meet new technical or administrative demands as learning.

As stated, the dominant example given of teachers’ engagement with informal learning was collaboration with colleagues. Although the research clearly indicated that teachers learn from and value collaboration with their colleagues, less clear is what or how well teachers were learning. On this latter point, it would seem that focus group interviews may not be an optimal method to illuminate teachers’ engagement with learning for two reasons. First and most significantly, it may be necessary to be embedded at the teaching site and interview teachers alongside observations in classrooms and in staff and departmental meetings to get better insights into the dynamics of teachers’ learning, whether proactive or reactive. It was hoped that the interviews could dig below the levels of intentional learning upon which the survey had to settle. Certainly, the interviews drew out the “reactive” learning teachers had to perform in order to manage the changing demands of their work. However, other methods embedded within the teacher’s day-to-day practice would likely be more useful in illuminating the deeper (more tacit) levels of learning. They might also provide a more realistic picture of the actualities and specificities of teachers’ learning and resistances to learning. (Of course, increased levels of intimacy, such as observing and interviewing teachers in the classroom setting, would produce new methodological challenges.)

Second, the focus group interview seemed to enact a space where teachers performed as good team members and “active learners.” While teachers were critical

of institutional aspects of increased workloads and the public scrutiny of teachers, they were unanimous in their high regard for collaboration with colleagues. Yet clearly as the attention to *building* "learning communities" implies, collaboration amongst staff is not a given. Anyone who has taught in schools knows that conflict as much as cooperation is part of the dynamics of staff relations. Further, working in the "privacy" of one's own classroom with the "door shut can offer teachers—as much as they are team players—a sense of autonomy in their practice. Yet these layers did not arise in discussion under the focus group arrangement.

There was a definite institutional impediment to optimizing teachers' collaboration and "flexible mobilization" to build and sustain learning communities. In spite of the interest in promoting and supporting teaching as the "learning profession" (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 1999), the lack of organizational support for teachers' informal learning suggests that schools do not represent a "knowledge intensive work context" for teachers according to the necessary characteristics set out by Belanger and Larivière (2005, p. 20). For example, while many spoke of the value of mentoring and of observing colleagues teaching, these valued learning activities came with obstacles that limited the teachers taking them up. A number of times teachers cited the difficulty of leaving one's "own" classroom or students. A few teachers explained that one of their colleagues could lose their planning period if they took the initiative to observe a colleague teach. Other teachers explained the difficulties of finding common planning times in complex and full schedules and of extensive supervision time that interfered with the possibilities for collaboration. Teachers also noted that, in present times, department heads and administrators had little time to support or engage in peer observation.

Teachers' anecdotal reporting suggests that while collaborative modes of learning are possible and even sometimes promoted by administration, the rigidity of the timetable, the teacher's traditional role (that one teacher needs to be sovereign over their class(es) for the duration of the year or semester), and the curriculum and testing regimes, among other factors, limit teachers' participation. In some sense, the interviews revealed the contradictory space teachers have to negotiate—for example, jumping on board as team players in accordance with the latest professional development trend but with limited material, and sometimes administrative, supports. Teachers have to negotiate the devolving of accountability in the contradictory spaces of educational reform (Dehli & Fumia, 2002). They are invited to initiate peer coaching, but understand that their absences ought not to affect the day-to-day routines and supervision, nor how "their" students perform.

Based on our focus group interviews with full-time teachers, they *generally* do not seem to accept the subject position of the stressed out knowledge worker of the postmodern learning organization (Garrick & Usher, 2000), nor the "optimally flexible" empowered lifelong learner (Tuschling & Engemann, 2006). Most of the teachers interviewed had 10 or (many) more years of experience; a number of the beginning teachers who were telephoned indicated that they were too busy to volunteer to participate in the focus groups. The more experienced teachers, while stressed out with work intensification and adapting to change, generally resisted envisioning themselves as adaptable or flexible, articulating more traditional notions of their professional identities. These teachers were also quite aware of the educational restructuring taking place in their provinces, and they criticized aspects

of neoliberal reform and discourses. In their critiques, teachers employed terms such as: “accountability”, “data-driven” reform, “compressed” working schedules, “expediency” as an operating principle, and “conservative ideology-driven” reform.

However, if we revisit the comparison of the teachers reporting high versus low hours of informal learning, there is some correspondence with premises emerging from the governmentality theorists. High informal learners, in comparison to the average, reported higher levels of formal learning, higher levels of working hours, higher stress, and *greater* job satisfaction. This result, although tentative, does connect with Garrick and Usher’s (2000) description of the “‘seduction’ at work and by work—a seduction through empowerment” (p. 12). In other words, being empowered as a lifelong learner and more productive employee is “seductive” in the sense of feeling a greater sense of autonomy or productiveness (job satisfaction), even where it tends toward greater levels of work intensification and stress. Moreover, a few teachers interviewed *do* seem to be taking on some of the characteristics of the flexible, enterprising self, especially teachers with little seniority or teachers who are un- or underemployed, as in the case of some of the occasional teachers interviewed. One of the full-time teachers, quoted above as constantly engaging in informal learning, exemplified the subject-position of the flexible, lifelong learner; he was highly engaged in both formal and informal learning and able to respond to his frequently changing assignments. This teacher described himself as “very flexible”, explaining how he constantly has been shifted from one school to the next (“pink-slipped”) and from one teaching assignment to the next. Had we interviewed more teachers with little seniority, we might have heard similar narratives about the need to stay current and be permanently updating.

Informal learning, especially as a means for constructing the “adaptable worker,” can become the responsibility of the individual worker, who has to maintain his or her relevancy for a changing economy. At the extreme, funding or opportunities for professional development could be intentionally minimized where individuals take it upon themselves to engage informally to be current and employable. At this extreme, informal learning becomes a form of ongoing, unpaid overtime exerting pressure on contract teachers who try and maintain reasonable work-home boundaries, and on teachers who are trying to secure full-time contracts. Even for teachers with job security, the following is illuminative in terms of the blurring of boundaries between work and home, heightened in an age of interconnectivity and competitiveness:

So we are constantly on call in terms of . . . last night I got an email telling me that I better review something that I had taught yesterday because this woman felt that her child didn’t learn it properly and she and her husband struggled to teach him, and the email was sent at 9:30 last night. I had a phone call from a parent this year; she left the message at 3:40 a.m.

Clearly these examples illustrate the changing working conditions with the blurring of work-home boundaries and pressures for continual communication and responsiveness to the clients and stakeholders in schooling. These changing conditions, in turn, shape what and how teachers are learning and further diffuse the focus of teachers’ learning from the domain of classroom pedagogy.

Returning to the heuristic developed earlier in the paper in regard to what the research on teachers' learning has illuminated, first, the metaphor of informal learning as the untapped base of the iceberg is consistent with the research. As stated, our research methods were not well-adapted to probe the more murky depths of learning. Again, the research showed that teachers engaged in a great deal of informal learning and valued this mode; however, the specific dynamics were only superficially illuminated. Second, in the focus group interviews, teachers provided more specifics on the reactive modes of informal learning, which again suggests that theories and methodological approaches relying on the teacher as the rational, autonomous learner might be too limiting. Third, as for the emancipatory potential of informal learning, it appears that some teachers may understand themselves as empowered learners; however, most teachers described external influences in a context of work intensification as directing the content and timing of their learning. Finally, it appears that the governmentality lens might be the most useful in which to situate teachers' informal learning within larger social forces.

Conclusion

This paper has explored a few key conceptual tensions of informal learning emerging in the literature and demonstrated how they link up with the analysis of teachers' informal learning derived from a large-scale empirical study. In revisiting the analysis, it is clear that additional research with alternative approaches is needed to better understand and support the interrelations of formal and informal modes of teachers' workplace learning. Care has to be taken to find methodological approaches that can begin to make explicit much of the practical knowledge of teachers that remained largely opaque under the focus group interview format used. Interviews embedded in the worksite might have greater potential to uncover the more reactive and implicit modes of learning. To probe more deeply into the actualities of teacher collaboration *and conflict*, job-embedded and individual interviews would be helpful.

Perhaps the central dilemma is how to structure and support informal modes of learning that privilege teacher autonomy over adaptability. With the governmentality analytic, this paper finds that, as new productive possibilities emerge for enhanced collaboration and learning, so do potentially new, less explicit, and less centralized forms of control. *If* lifelong learning and learner empowerment can be extracted from the human capital paradigm underlying workers' learning and autonomy as primarily a *means* toward economic productivity, then supporting teachers as lifelong learners definitely represents a progressive and valuable aim for improving schools. However, under the current dominance of a neoliberal imaginary, teachers' *autonomy* in their work and learning remains an elusive concept that can not be assumed to have enlarged by the increasing presence of discursive commitments to teachers' "lifelong learning", or to building "learning communities." I suggest that future research on (enhancing) teachers' workplace learning utilize a governmentality lens to counter uncritical conceptions of, or prescriptions for, teachers as "lifelong learners", and to assess more accurately the emerging productive possibilities and the new dangers of diminishing autonomy through self-regulation that emerge as teachers' informal learning gains increasing attention and support in schooling.

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