The Reinforcement Revolution:

How Informal Learning Makes Training Real

Contributors

Craig Perrin, AchieveGlobal

Victoria Marsick, Columbia University

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With waves of change in corporate learning, it may be time to replace the antiquated notion of "training reinforcement" designed to push reluctant employees into behaviors that might otherwise fade. What our wired and multi-tasking world needs is a pull approach that leverages informal learning to serve individual and big-picture goals. This paper distills an ocean of recent research in support of informal learning as the ideal partner of today's complex training initiatives.

Fueled by intelligent technology in a shifting global market, several megatrends have arisen that continue to reshape our understanding of corporate learning:

- **The Knowledge Era.** The industrial era has given way to a knowledge era for many around the world. New roles demand continuing education, and knowledge workers naturally want to keep their expertise current.

- **Globalization.** Employees and customers are multicultural, global, or both. With much work in virtual teams, often in multiple countries, leaders need to stimulate and leverage the ideas of diverse employees.

- **Rising Customer Demands.** Customers now expect a tailored experience—interactive, customized, and co-created. For industry-leading organizations, that experience is integral to their value proposition in ways that require continuous learning.

- **Flatter Organizations.** Fewer management layers and greater de-centralization now put learning and decision-making in the hands of employees closest to customers.

- **Permeable Boundaries.** Because knowledge is increasingly distributed, solutions to complex problems must engage professional and social networks within and among units and disciplines.

- **Immersive Technologies.** People now seek and use information in entirely new ways. Globally shared 24/7, information is increasingly crowd-sourced. Web 2.0 and handheld devices have changed the way people communicate and learn.

Traditional Learning Under Siege

Along with these trends, brain research continues to drive today's reassessment of learning theory (Rock, 2009). Cognitive and neuroscientists are challenging long-held views of learning, notably behaviorism, which emphasizes the shaping of behavior through conditioned responses to environmental stimuli. While these mechanisms can and do support learning, recent brain research has found that the emotions also profoundly affect how people respond to stimuli. D'Amasio (1994, 2010), for example, describes how feelings deeply affect thought and action. Other "constructivists"

describe the active role of learners in making meaning and shaping their worlds through their experiences.

Aging "modernist" views, which prize reason and objectivity, are increasingly under siege, even if these views still inform most corporate training. In contrast, "postmodern" research is now describing the subjective ways that people make sense of their environment, which in turn influence what they attend to and how they learn.

Much recent research has emphasized how social learning really is. Individuals drive learning, of course, but they also share knowledge with each other to help the organization itself learn. A long line of research continues to fuel an enduring interest in knowledge management, team learning, communities of practice, and "the learning organization":

- In his seminal work, Bandura (1977) found that individuals learn socially by observing and modeling skills, both technical and interpersonal.

- Peter Senge (1990) showed how organizations learn through five "disciplines" (shared vision, team learning, mental models, and systems thinking) and suggested ways to leverage individual learning within groups and by the entire organization.

- Wenger (1998) found that people learn naturally in communities of practice, working together in pursuit of common interests.

- And recently, Thomas and Seely Brown (2011) described resource-rich, interactive environments where people learn by engaging others, often through gaming or play.

In today's learning-intensive, highly participative collectives (think of Wikipedia, for example, or a special interest group on LinkedIn or other social site), peer-to-peer learning replaces expert-centered learning as members explore core interests for their own sake.

The Rise of Informal Learning

To tackle new challenges in the workplace, employees now rely less on formal training and more on organic, informal learning. Formal classroom or virtual-classroom training is still vital, of course, but in today's fast-changing environment, employees also need to think on their feet and continue learning to improve how work is done. For example, Tapscott (2009) confirmed what's obvious to many: Informal learning through social networking is pervasive among younger "NetGens" and many motivated older workers.

Yet, while interest in informal learning continues to grow, some still ask what it looks like, how to "formalize" it (if that's even possible), how to support it, and whether and how it works.

Most researchers define informal learning as "organic," or naturally arising rather than externally imposed. Compared to formal learning, informal learning is less structured, on-the-spot learning from experience. Some informal learning is intentional, or planned and designed, such as structured on-the-job training. Some informal learning is incidental, or the unintended by-product of another activity, such as unconsciously learning from an expert during a project meeting (Marsick and Watkins, 1990).

The American Society for Training and Development described informal learning as "not easily recognizable as formal training and performance support ... without a conventional instructor and [with] employee-controlled ... breadth, depth, and timing. It tends to be individualized, limited in scope, and utilized in small chunks."

Gilmore (2008) provides this example of informal learning:

An employee is plugging away at her desk when she comes across unfamiliar terminology. A quick Google search turns up a few possibilities, but to make sure she understands the term in the context of her business, she queries a co-worker via an instant message. Her peer quickly confirms the accurate meaning, and she gets back to her project.

So informal learning is pervasive. It is also deeply influenced by its context, including tasks, processes, roles, and settings. Scheeres, Solomon, Boud, and Rooney (2010) describe informal learning as "integrated development practices" embedded in work, outside of formal training, and managed or implemented by non-trainers.

If informal learning is difficult to describe, it's even more difficult to observe: Informal learning is tacit,

intuitive, sometimes semi-conscious, and not explicitly articulated. Still, many studies confirm that—when conditions are right—motivated people learn naturally in pursuit of their goals. This type of learning, when integrated with daily routines, is typically triggered by a jolt, challenge, or surprise. Strategies include trial-and-error, reflection, observation, interaction, self-directed learning, and collaborative problem solving.

The 20/80 Rule

The "70/20/10 rule" familiar to many learning professionals holds that 70 percent of learning occurs on the job, 20 percent occurs through relationships, and 10 percent occurs in formal training. McCall, Lombardo, and Eichinger at the Center for Creative Leadership originally suggested the 70/20/10 breakdown of organizational learning, and General Electric later tailored it for its own use (Corporate Leadership Council, 2004). Many others have co-opted this rule, often defining the components in different ways (for example, Janus, 2008; Shroff, 2006), as a result causing some confusion among learning professionals.

Though 70/20/10 is widely quoted—and frankly more honored in PowerPoint than in practice—it simply describes where or when people learn: on the job (the 70), during mentoring or coaching (the 20), or in the classroom (the 10).

A simpler, more useful division of learning focuses instead on how people learn–either formally or informally–implying a new rule, the 20/80 rule: 20 percent of learning is formal and 80 percent is informal, a ratio with wide support in the research.

Formal classroom and virtual-classroom training are and will remain common and effective ways to learn. AchieveGlobal proposes to greatly intensify the impact of formal training by unifying it with employee-driven informal learning occurring outside the classroom.

The 20: Formal Training

Well-designed formal training quickly and efficiently helps learners acquire core knowledge and skills. For example, in formal training based on AchieveGlobal's time-tested design approach, known by the acronym CAADA (Del Gaizo, Perrin, and Karl, 2003), learners:

Commit to learn.
Focused activities give learners a visceral sense of how new skills can overcome job-related challenges.

Assess current performance.
Structured assessments measure current knowledge and skill use.

Acquire knowledge.
Presentation, reading, discussion, videos, simulations, and other media and activities acquaint learners with important concepts and skills.

Develop competence.
Structured rehearsal in a safe setting, including peer feedback, builds learner confidence to apply new skills in the workplace.

Apply new learning.
Planning for later skill use models the process required for informal learning in the workplace.

CAADA is a powerful process for grounding learners in complex skills. It encourages commitment, self-knowledge, careful observation, practice, feedback, and application planning. But most of the classic "reinforcement" that historically follows formal training, such as follow-up skills-practice or content-review sessions – amounts to more formal training, rather than tools that facilitate informal learning. As noted, research confirms that no matter the excellence of formal training (and excellence does matter), 80 percent of learning is informal, learner-driven in the workplace, not in the classroom.

Before continued learning from experience can become truly central, both learners and training professionals need a clear understanding of the many informal learning activities that can help people hone and apply skills first encountered in formal training.

The 80: Informal Learning

Meeting that need is the Intentional-to-Incidental (i-2-i) Continuum™, which maps a full range of activities that comprise informal learning. The i-2-i Continuum™ organizes the many ways that participants in formal training (the 20) can continue learning informally (the 80) in the context of their jobs:

The i-2-i Continuum™

As indicated by the two poles of the i-2-I Continuum™, each of these informal learning activities is either Intentional (resulting from a conscious effort), Incidental (a byproduct of doing something else), or a blend of the two.

At the far left of the i-2-i Continuum™ are several intentional, structured, yet still informal activities, which learners and their managers negotiate and tailor to each learner's goals:

- **Learning Reviews** help people assess past action by analyzing strengths, turning points, blind spots, and so on, and plan to improve in the future. These reviews can be spontaneous or facilitated with checklists, assessment tools, or routine reports or audits.

- **Coaching** by peers or managers helps an employee set and attain individual and organizational goals, taking on a new role, for example, developing leadership skills, or improving teamwork.

- **On-the-Job Training** is a time-tested way to learn from a peer. Today's structured on-the-job training (S-OJT) adds design to an otherwise ad hoc reliance on employees to teach each other (Jacobs, 2003).

Several less structured but still intentional activities fall further toward the incidental pole of the i-2-i Continuum™:

- **Knowledge Sharing** is especially useful when there is no established way to do something like when an employee shares a process innovation with co-workers. Knowledge sharing may be as simple as a "lunch-and-learn" or as involved as a web-based community of practice.

- **Mentoring,** perhaps the oldest type of informal learning, meets a range of task, career, and psychosocial needs (Ragins and Kram, 2007). Mentoring may incorporate some structured learning, but its heart is a voluntary, natural, caring relationship that endures over time.

- **Self-Study** is independent research to pursue goals and develop skills. It might involve internet searches, reading, or experimentation and often bleeds into social learning as people seek guidance along the way.

- **Job Aids** may be simple or elaborate, paper or electronic, graphic or verbal, widely shared or not. Job aids help people with tasks they don't perform often enough to internalize the steps, such as conducting a formal performance review.

- **Electronic Performance Support Systems (EPSS)** contain online tools as well as information at the level of detail that each user needs to perform a task. An EPSS might templatize a technical review, for example, or a decision-making or problem-solving process (Chang, 2007).

Yet further toward the incidental pole of the i-2-i Continuum™ are informal activities that help people learn from each other or that promote truly spontaneous learning:

- **Job Shadowing and Job Sharing** deepen knowledge or skills associated with an unfamiliar role. These activities require clear goals, a way to document observations, help in making sense of observations, and sometimes recommendations for improved collaboration.

- **Role Modeling** is the process by which people, often unconsciously, observe and imitate competence in others. Observers can enhance their learning by setting goals, noting what they observe, and planning discussions, including interviews of their role models.

- **Reflection** is more challenging than it sounds, especially when other demands leave little time. Structure and support can aid reflection, such as regular dialogue with colleagues about one's actions, their consequences, and future steps.

- **Teaching** is an excellent way to solidify knowledge. To make teaching a learning activity, the teacher integrates personal knowledge with established expertise and helps others find meaning in their own experience.

- **Networking,** aided by social media, creates opportunities to learn from others with shared interests or expertise. Even if networking connects people who share few interests, a meeting of diverse views can generate new ideas and solutions.

- **Water-Cooler Learning** has changed little in today's online universe. We hear things differently— and share different things—in relaxed dialogue with trusted contacts. The value of this kind of learning, a byproduct of casual interaction, depends on the openness of those involved.

All these informal learning activities, whether intentional or incidental, can stand on their own. They realize special value, however, when applied to concepts and skills acquired during formal training. Traditional "reinforcement" pushes people into post-training activities they would not otherwise perform —into a facilitated group discussion of training content, for example. Informal learning, by contrast, pulls people toward continued learning and application by integrating formal training with work as people address challenges in the context of their jobs.

How—and How Not—to Support Informal Learning

Support for informal learning in part takes shape as a dedicated tool for each informal learning activity—a learning review template, for example, a mentoring guide, a social-network map, and so on. A specific tool may be flexible enough to apply to multiple skills or

situations, or it may focus on a specific skill or concept introduced in formal training.

But there's danger here. To drive post-training progress toward specified goals, learning professionals may prescribe a specific series learning activities. In fact, a rigid sequence of informal activities deprives learners of the ability to choose how and when they deepen and apply what they've learned in formal training. The result of formalizing informal learning in this way is to reduced the value of both types of learning in meeting daily work challenges.

Consider this analogy: If formal learning is like the sequence of courses leading to a university degree, informal learning is like a Montessori school where students, having mastered the basics, freely choose from a range of available activities. In the workplace, each type of learning plays its role: formal grounds people in core concepts and skills, and informal supports continued learning and application. Working together, sequential formal learning (the 20) and non-sequential informal learning (the 80) support skill mastery and business results. The key for learning professionals is to recognize that what motivates informal learning is not rigid requirements, but the practical needs of learners to succeed in the tasks and achieve the goals that comprise their jobs. To use a different analogy, if formal learning is a path, informal learning is useful detours along the way, highly relevant to the journey because they help learners apply new skills and knowledge to improve their performance.

A sample "array" of sequential formal and non-sequential informal components might look like the graphic found in Figure 1 on page 7. The overall objective for a group of first-line leaders in this example is to "use coaching skills to improve employee morale, productivity, and retention." Here, ten informal and non-sequential learning activities and related tools support four formal and sequential training modules. After the formal training, learners apply their new skills (with support from learning professionals or their managers) by engaging in self-selected informal activities that help them achieve the overall objective.
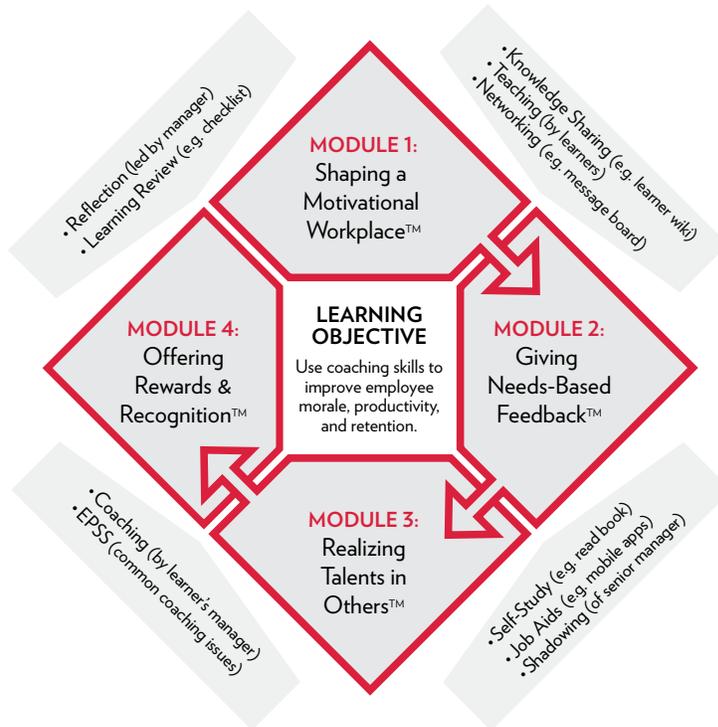
Figure 1. A sample combination of formal and informal learning activities.

To implement this unified approach, learning professionals may follow these sequential steps, some familiar from traditional training implementation:

1. Assess training needs against organizational conditions and strategic and functional goals.

2. Develop or acquire formal training that grounds learners in the needed concepts and skills.

3. Identify a small number of informal activities matched to the formal training content.

4. Develop or acquire at least one tool for each identified informal learning activity.

5. Educate learners and their managers about available activities and tools.

6. Monitor, support, and recognize learners' efforts to leverage informal activities and tools.

7. Assess the usage and effectiveness of the selected activities and tools.

8. As needed, adjust the informal learning activities and/or related support.

Beyond this basic process, organizational culture needs to encourage independent learning, and AchieveGlobal can help identify what matters most.

Learning-intensive job design, for example, makes a difference, as do positive work relationships among people who can help when needs arise. Leaders especially can foster this climate by offering learning support, coaching, recognition for self-directed and social learning, and encouragement to try new things and learn from mistakes (Dweck, 1999). But final responsibility remains with the organization to create a climate where informal learning can thrive. The goal is proactive, reflective, and creative employees who pursue competence as an integral part of their jobs (Marsick and Watkins, 1990).

AchieveGlobal's 20/80 Learning™ integrates formal and informal activities to realize benefits over and above those of traditional "training reinforcement." Rather than pushing reluctant learners into new behaviors, 20/80 pulls in the direction that learners want to go, promoting individual development and business results. In this way, 20/80 Learning™ supports an open, decentralized, networked culture, paving new avenues and fueling a continuous learning journey.

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About the Contributors

Craig Perrin

As AchieveGlobal's Director of Solution Development, Craig Perrin is a thought-leader who works cross-functionally and with clients to guide creation of a range of responses to market needs. Since 1986, he has played a central role in developing the company's flagship programs in leadership, sales, and customer service; co-authored two best-selling books; written many articles and position papers; and produced eLearning and video that have earned scores of national and international awards. In 1998, Craig was named Times Mirror Editor of the Year. Craig holds a B.A. and M.A. from San Francisco State University.

Victoria Marsick

Victoria is a professor of adult and organizational learning at Teachers College, Columbia University. Before becoming faculty in 1983, she directed training and development at UNICEF. Victoria and Martha Gephart co-direct the J.M. Huber Institute for Learning in Organizations, founded in 1999 with funding support from the J.M. Huber Corporation. Victoria's work focuses on getting the most from learning through work—in pursuing individual goals or in collaborating with others in teams and groups; and leveraging learning for performance and organizational change. Her research likewise focuses on understanding and enhancing informal learning, team learning, and organizational learning. Victoria holds a Ph.D. in Adult Education from the University of California, Berkeley, CA.

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We understand the competition you face. Your success depends on people who have the skills to handle the challenges beyond the reach of technology. We're experts in developing these skills, and it's these skills that turn your strategies into business success in the 21st century.

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World Headquarters
8875 Hidden River Parkway, Suite 400
Tampa, Florida 33637 USA
Toll Free: 800.456.9390

www.achieveglobal.com