

Theory to Practice

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Introduction

Since starting this master's program and learning more about the concept of lifelong learning, my eyes have been opened to the areas in which I *too* am a learner. It is easy to forget about the informal learning taking place in my everyday life, but the more I look for that type of learning, the more I realize I am *constantly* learning. To evaluate my informal learning experiences, I will be using Marsick and Watkins' revised model of informal and incidental learning. This model is not linear or sequential, but is comprised of the following steps: triggers, interpreting the experience, examining alternative solutions, learning strategies, produce the proposed solutions, assess intended and unintended consequences, lessons learned, and framing the business context (Marsick & Watkins, 2001). When in any of those steps, one may go back multiple times and look at the context in which they are assessing the situation. In the following examination of my informal learning experiences, I will put into parenthesis the steps in the model when applicable and then focus in on specific steps of the model when optimal.

Informal Learning Experience: Work Related

As an educator, I have the desire to help students be confident, purposeful, and self-supporting/self-reliant- specifically in their academic life. I always try to give students the tools they need to be successful, but then make *them* do the work. Working in admissions, I do not have much contact with students after their integration into Ivy Tech. However, last week I had a new experience that helped me learn how to help a student become self-reliant in an area that I do not normally deal with. A student left me a message asking if she could talk with me about a problem she, and many other students, were having in one of her classes. She ultimately needed to file a complaint about her professor. At first I had no idea what the protocol was for students who were having trouble with a professor; this was a new experience for me (triggers). I wanted

to make sure I was not only following college protocol, I wanted to make sure I was being professional and friendly to this student, and I wanted to make sure I didn't get too involved, since I know the importance of students being in charge of their own college experiences (interpreting the experience). There were quite a few ways I could approach this situation, but I ultimately reached out to my boss asking what the protocol was for students who were having difficulties with a professor. He shared with me college protocol and I shared that with the student (produce the proposed solutions), all the while praising her for taking a stance and encouraging her to share the information with her follow students.

I was very proactive in this informal learning experience. Proactivity is one of Marsick and Watkins enhancers of informal learning. Proactivity “suggests a readiness to take initiative, an alertness to the environment and to the opportunities it might afford learning” (Marsick, Watkins, Callahan & Volpe, 2009, p. 576). From this experience, I learned a new way to help students take charge of their academics and how I can help, without hand holding (lessons learned). This experience even bolstered my career self-efficacy, which is my belief in my ability to “choose, prepare for, and be successful in a given occupation” (Lemme, 2006, p. 316).

Informal Learning Experience: Role Related

Another informal learning experience, happened within my role as a junior high leader at my church. I firmly believe that “learning is produced through interaction among consciousness, identity, action and interaction, objects and structural dynamics of complex systems” (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 160). This role within the church community has allowed me to take action, make relationships, help connect others, and hold informal meetings and events. This has allowed me to learn within my small community how to better support my students and their surrounding family members. This role has helped me define a part of my

social identity which consists of- connectedness (deep connection with others), expansiveness (many experiences across many memberships), and effectiveness (involvement and empowerment) (Wenger, 2000). And this informal learning experience was transformational in my approach to leadership within that role.

Last year, I had a student confide in me that her sister was being physically and verbally abusive to her (trigger). This was a new experience for me and I immediately started thinking about who needed to know about this situation- her mom, her dad, my leader, and my leader's leader. Should I be the one to contact her parents? Where and when was it most appropriate for them to be notified (framing the business context)? I also was thinking about what my role was in this situation (interpreting the experience, examining the alternative solutions). I didn't want to jeopardize/complicate my relationship with the student or her parents (assess intended and unintended consequences). I ultimately decided it was my leader's role to speak with her parents. After working through this experience, I pay even more attention to student's verbal and non-verbal cues when they talk about their home-life, school-life, friend-life, etc. Thankfully this particular student *did* confide in me about her life; however, this experience taught me the importance of looking deeper.

Informal learning in itself is interesting because it has to be identified by the learner as a learning experience, for it to formally called learning. "Individuals bring themselves to their learning tasks, and so, their strategies and approaches are mediated by their beliefs, values, histories, and prior socialization" (Marsick, 2009, p. 273). As you can see from my informal learning experiences, I deemed this situation as significant and determined this experience as useful and meaningful to my own practice. Informal learning is everywhere, I just have to reflect.

References

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