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Informal learning, spontaneous learning in online courses

Learning does not necessarily have to take place in a dedicated environment and according to preset patterns. Spontaneous learning can deliver important results

We are used to thinking of **learning** as a journey that needs the presence of teachers, students and classrooms, whether physical or virtual. Traditional education, in fact, is based on precisely these three elements, which interface with each other to create a learning experience. Over the years, there has been a shift from physical classrooms to **e-learning** or hybrid training, but the idea that learning requires an organized and predetermined path has remained. Even online courses are designed: virtual classes are organized according to a precise schedule, and different modes of teaching are embedded within the training path in a thought-out way.

But learning is a typical human characteristic and, therefore, part of human nature. We all go through training experiences all the time, without even realizing it, and, very often, it is these that give us the strongest basis for taking concrete action and solving the situations that the world puts before us. Therefore, a training course would be even more effective if it included within it some elements of **Informal learning**, which would add spontaneity to the learning journey.

What is informal learning?

As we have already explained in a **previous article**, **informal learning** refers to a mode of autonomous learning that takes place outside of a predetermined environment and intended for the dissemination of information by a lecturer. Informal learning does not involve any planning or precise structure and is completely learner-driven, with the learner being able to decide how to interact with other people, what topics to cover, and what channels to draw on, based on his or her own interests and needs.

In informal learning, the process of knowledge sharing does not take place in physical classrooms or even in virtual classrooms and **does not involve the presence of teachers** in charge to disseminate information or explain concepts. Informal learning can manifest itself in different forms: from reading a newspaper article or a post on social networks, to a simple conversation in front of the coffee machine or in the car and watching a video explaining how to achieve a certain result. Informal learning, therefore, turns out to be driven by the students themselves who, depending on their interest and motivation, can choose what content to access, in what mode and quantity, following their own pace.

Despite the absence of the main actors in traditional training, informal learning proves to be very effective and allows people to store knowledge more quickly and sometimes without even realizing it. According to the **70-20-10 training model**, informal learning plays a key role in the overall learning of a person's life, while courses and lectures are only a small part of it. This model, in fact, claims that:

- 70% of learning is from **experience**;
- 20% is derived from social and **collaborative learning**;
- 10% occurs through **training programs**.

Creating a training system that supports informal learning, therefore, turns out to be a winning move for companies, which could initiate learning courses with the strength and importance of **spontaneity** in mind.

Characteristics and advantages

Informal learning, therefore, turns out to be excluded from the traditional forms we are accustomed to linking to education, because it takes place without the presence of an actual teacher or a predefined pathway: everything is in the hands of the student. In particular, informal learning has the following characteristics:

1. It **is spontaneous**: the user learns without finding himself within a training scheme and is free to dictate the time and mode of learning, according to his needs. Training, therefore, can take place at the times, places and in the ways the learner prefers. The naturalness with which knowledge is acquired is the main characteristic of informal learning.
2. It is **action-based**: new knowledge is acquired through practice. This approach, therefore, goes beyond the need to experience what has been learned in theory classes. In informal learning, in fact, there is no moment of explanation, but the acquisition of new knowledge occurs in a direct way: the training process takes place in a practical situation, in which the user must immediately deal with a problem. In this way, learning is reversed: useful knowledge and necessary skills are derived from practice.
3. The learning environment has no physical constraints: there is **no need for any classroom**, either real or virtual, nor is there any physical material useful for training. The moment of learning is also completely in the hands of the student, free from a controlled and predetermined context set by the teacher.

These features enable informal learning to convey a quantity of information in line with the interests of the user, who, learning naturally and spontaneously, automatically focuses on content that reflects his or her interests and needs. The user himself chooses the information he wants to access, without coercion or obligation. Therefore, the context in which training takes place is untied from a rigid environment with the presence of fixed roles, but is more like a time of sharing **peer-to-peer**. This exchange can take place in person or be conveyed by social networks, which give the possibility of creating communities that bring together individuals with the same interests.

These strengths explain the effectiveness of informal learning in each individual's personal learning process. Ensuring the presence of spontaneity in a training course can also be very beneficial for companies or institutions that decide to create courses for their students or other users. **The advantages**, however, are not limited to increased learning effectiveness. In fact, informal learning can provide:

- An **improvement in workers' knowledge**;
- The **lowering of training costs** because there is no longer a need for training materials or physical events;
- The **development of new ideas**;
- The **practical preparation of employees**, who are brought face to face with the real situation right away.

These strengths are an added value to traditional training courses, because they allow the learner to move away from the forms of learning proper, linked to the lecturer and teaching materials, and draw on sources more suited to his or her needs. The result is the creation of a **tailor-made course** that completely coincides with the user's needs and preferences, without the need to define in detail the process of acquiring information, but making room for the naturalness of learning.

Spontaneity in online courses

Informal learning can be an ally not only of traditional learning, but it can go so far as to back up **e-learning** by fitting into online courses. One of the main qualities of the Internet, in fact, is that it facilitates communication between people even far apart, who can interact spontaneously, making use of the means of sharing that the virtual world makes available. Surfing the Internet also constitutes a possible source of information, which occurs naturally. This aspect of the virtual world has highlighted the importance of the informal dimension in the field of online learning as well.

In order to incorporate spontaneity into online training projects, it is possible to create path that have at their base the idea of **autonomous learning**, which leaves the user freedom regarding the mode and timing of learning, but includes moments of evaluation. In this way, despite the absence of a predetermined path, one can realize the effectiveness of spontaneous training by testing the skills acquired from time to time.

In order to allow spontaneity to enter e-learning courses, it is essential to create a **personal learning environment**, which is a not predetermined training space, created by teachers, but fine-tuned by the student him/herself, to acquire new knowledge. The personal learning environment can be built with digital tools, such as blogs, social media, podcasts, apps, and online messaging systems. In this way, students themselves manage their own learning and decide how and when to carry out their educational project.

How to incorporate informal learning into e-learning

To make an e-learning training program more effective, informal learning can be placed alongside **online courses** aimed at school and university students or workers. To do this, companies can focus on creating opportunities for colleagues to share with each other by fostering joint initiatives or creating shared platforms on which to exchange opinions and information. Virtual courses for students can also act in the direction of informal learning, encouraging students to follow their passions, providing them with additional learning materials based on their interests, and allowing them to choose the most suitable path according to their needs.

Some useful **strategies** for applying informal learning to online courses can be:

1. Encourage **virtual spaces for sharing** and discussion, where topics of interest can be freely discussed;
2. Designing **personalized paths**, which provide for the user's free choice of the content to be addressed and the mode of use;
3. Include **moments of testing or self-testing** on broad topics, so as to allow the student the opportunity to assume knowledge independently;
4. Give space to **social media**, which offer informal sharing possibilities and provide an infinite amount of information in any field, but in an easy way;
5. Giving more emphasis to **practical situations**, so that students can start from a concrete experience.

The application of natural learning to online education is helpful in enhancing and increasing the involvement and interest of the user-users, who will be led to complete the educational journey according to their needs and in a natural way.