Informal Learning of managers in a multinational company in Germany, Great Britain and Spain: an Intercultural Comparison

The paper focuses on managers’ informal learning within the context of their company’s learning culture. It asks: How do managers learn informally in the context of different learning cultures? In different European countries, what are the differences and similarities in informal learning between three companies? The paper first identifies a terminological basis for informal learning, with special reference to the German debate. Thereafter it outlines the comparative design for the study. Using the category resources for informal learning, the paper then gives an insight into the research study. The study results are presented in three steps: a descriptive and analytical juxtaposition, a descriptive comparison, and an analytical comparison. The analytical comparison gives an idea of the reasons for the differences. Finally, the interpretation of the comparison is discussed critically.

1. Informal learning

1.1 Discussion on informal learning

In the German discussion, informal learning was long characterized by what it was not, i.e. unplanned, unorganised, or subconscious. Schöpfthaler (1981) coined the term ‘residual category’ for informal learning. Dohmen (1999, p 25) defines informal learning as “…unplanned and non institutionalised learning in all aspects of life…” and as a “…natural type of human learning…”5. He formulates the main characteristics of informal learning as “…immediate in everyday life…”, “…determined by a reason – incidental – sporadic…”, as well as “…holistic – problem oriented…”. This understanding of informal learning limits the awareness of informal learning. The terminology for empirical research is missing. Informal learning that happens in organised or institutionalised education is likely to be excluded from the empirical research.

4 Parts of this paper are based on an already published papers in the Journal Andragogical Studies (Egetenmeyer 2011)
5 Translated by R.E., original: nicht planmäßig organisiertes und nicht institutionalisiertes Lernen im Lebensvollzug, natürliches Grundform menschlichen Lebens (Dohmen 1999, p 25)
similar to american authors (marsick & watkins 2001), authors in germany focus on the context of informal learning. straka (2000; 2001, p 56) has studied ‘learning in informal environmental conditions’. through this it is possible to talk about learning in an informal context.

this contextual understanding of informal learning is the basis of several current studies. studies using surveys typically ask for the context as well as the resources people use for informal learning. the canadian nall-study (livingstone 2000) studied informal learning by asking about learning activities in different learning contexts: ‘employment’, ‘community volunteer work’, ‘household work’ and ‘other general interest’. schiersmann (2006) has asked in her survey for ‘work-based learning’, ‘learning in the community and in private’ and ‘learning through the media’. kwan/schmidt/tippelt (2009) studied elderly people’s informal learning and asked about ‘reading activities’, ‘computer and internet use’, ‘tv, radio and video use’, ‘family, friends and colleagues’, ‘museums’ as well as ‘libraries and learning centres’. in most of these studies it seems that informal learning ‘just happens’ in a chaotic and unstructured way if the context offers enough options and possibilities.

the adult education survey (european commission 2005) included informal learning. it studied informal learning by investigating the use of specific resources for informal learning: ‘learning from printed materials’, ‘learning from computers’, ‘learning from family members, friends, colleagues’, ‘learning from tv/radio/video’, ‘learning from guided tours of museums, historical/industrial sites’, and ‘learning in learning centres (including libraries)’.

in all of these studies there is almost no discussion on how informal learning differs in different european contexts.

1.2 terminological basis

the following european union definition has been the basis for this research:

informal learning is a natural accompaniment to everyday life. unlike formal and nonformal learning, informal learning is not necessarily intentional learning, and so may well not be recognised even by individuals themselves as contributing to their knowledge and skills. (european commission 2000, p 8)

the research presented here has been designed as an interview study. consequently, the research could only focus on the informal learning experiences that the interviewees could articulate.

for a terminological basis, positive criteria of informal learning were developed. in the study (egetenmeyer 2008) this acted as a heuristic model. informal learning is understood as a subjective learning activity which is influenced in a specific way by its context. the companies form a specific context for informal learning. they influence different aspects of informal learning.

figure 1: informal learning as ways of learning within a company

source: according to egetenmeyer (2008, p 18)

the assumption of the study is that companies operate in different contexts which influence the informal learning that takes place. regional and national contexts create meta-contexts into which the company contexts integrate. there are other reference-contexts, e.g. customers, into which the company-context is only partly integrated.

the operationalisation of the term informal learning was focused on the following five aspects: learning subjects, learning motives, ways of learning, resources and informal learning control.
different countries. As the study researches the learning cultures in the three companies, it is named “intercultural comparison” but not “international comparison” as Charters/Hilton (1989, p.3) are proposing comparison in different countries. In 2005 19 semi-structured interviews were carried out in German and English in three similar firms. All the firms belonged to one affiliated group, located in Germany, which build and sell dive systems. The interviewees were managers and people responsible for Human Resource Management (in the following called Human Resource Managers). Based on an understanding of informal learning which is subject specific, the firms’ learning cultures were studied through the description of the subjective learning behaviours of the managers on one side, and the strategies of the Human Resource Managers on the other. In each firm four managers and two to three Human Resource Managers were interviewed.

Differences in informal learning across the three learning cultures were researched by analysing and comparing the content of the interviews. To do this the author chose a four-step procedure.

1. **Descriptive Juxtaposition**: Following the above understanding of informal learning, the situations in the three companies used as case studies, were described and compared. The results of this first step are a collection of several learning subjects, learning motives, ways of informal learning and resources used in each company. Each of these aspects stand side by side.

2. **Analytical Juxtaposition**: The analytical juxtaposition looks at the common features of informal learning within each case study. What are the ideas behind the different learning subjects, learning motives, ways of informal learning and resources? What are the common features which guide informal learning in each company? In this way, different analytical foci were used to get an in-depth view of each informal learning category.

3. **Descriptive Comparison**: Common features within each company were identified and then compared between the different case studies. This allowed an analysis of the similarities and differences between the situations in the three companies. Also, by looking at the differences between the case studies, further concretisation could be made. Then, in addition, further analysis of the coherence within each case study could be carried out.

4. **Analytical Comparison**: The fourth step was to identify the reasons for these differences. Links could then be made to common educational characteristics in the three countries. In this way the analytical comparison aims to examine “the social, cultural, economic and political forces” (Titmus 1999) which shape informal learning in the three contexts.

The last two steps refer to two categories of comparative research identified by Titmus (1999). Also, through the above process the aim of the study is to follow Charters & Hilton’s (1989, p.3) definition of comparative study in adult education.

“... A study in comparative international adult education (…) must include one or more aspects of adult education in two or more countries or regions. Comparative study is not the mere placing side by side of data concerning one or more aspects of adult education in two or more countries. Such juxtaposition is only a prerequisite for comparison. At the next stages one attempt to identify the similarities and differences between the aspects under study and to assess the degree of similarities or differences. Even at this point the work of comparisons is not complete. The real value of comparative study emerges only from stage three – the attempt to understand why the differences and similarities occur and what their significance is for adult education in the countries under examination and in other countries where the finding of the study may have relevance.”

In addition to these three steps, the juxtaposition was done in two steps. Thus, the study, on the basis of the juxtaposition, already has an analytical focus. As the study is exploring adult learning, the interviews provide several individual aspects of the managers’ learning processes. To find an analytical basis for a comparison it was necessary to look at the links between the individual interviews – and therefore the different kinds of informal learning within each case study – before a comparison between the case studies was possible.

Within the limited space of this paper, we present the juxtaposition of one aspect of the study – the resources for informal learning. This juxtaposition is followed by a descriptive comparison of the informal learning resources in each of the three case studies. Followed, finally, by the analytical comparison.

3. **Resources for informal learning: descriptive and analytical juxtaposition**

In the interviews, several resources were found. These were described as potential for informal learning. Beside the organisational structure of a company, the managers perceived attitudes towards informal learning as important resources. In the following I distinguish between personal, structural, temporal and ideational resources.

3.1 **Personal Resources**

The interviewees mentioned several people who supported informal learning in their work. People who can give advice, can answer questions or can show them new ways to learn. In the context of an enterprise, there are several people who can act as a personal resource, e.g. supervisors, colleagues or experienced staff.

The German managers named several people they used to support their informal learning: supervisors act as role models or as supporters, e.g. through feedback. Predecessors and more experienced colleagues acted as senior experts. Peers were used for personal interactions. Direct reports gave feedback. The German interviewees showed that they used various people to give different perspectives for their informal learning. Different people acted as personal resources depending on their roles and experience. The interviewees identified differences in the roles of their supervisor and other colleagues. Whereas supervisors were a resource because of their position, colleagues were a resource...
because of their individual experiences.

The British managers identified their supervisors as advisors and supporters. Their colleagues acted as discussion partners, senior experts or as special experts. The interviewees described having an interactive role with their supervisor. This means that their supervisor actively encouraged their informal learning. They describe peers taking a similarly active role as a personal resource for informal learning.

In the Spanish company the following personal resources were identified in the interviews: supervisors acted as promoters, colleagues as responsible people and peers as senior experts. Typically, in the Spanish company the managers identified people whose role included acting as a support for colleagues, as personal resources for informal learning. This means that people with that specific responsibility are identified as personal resources. This indicates a responsible-oriented character for personal resources in the Spanish company studied.

In summary, German interviewees used various colleagues in a heuristic way as personal resources. They name different people as possibilities for supporting informal learning. This indicates that they then use different perspectives on a subject. That makes it possible to have a diverse perspective on a subject and supports a knowledge-oriented approach to informal learning. The British interviewees used specific people for their informal learning activities. They mainly describe sharing experience with supervisors or peers. In the Spanish company they describe personal contacts with people with specific knowledge or abilities as resources. The company structures identify people who are responsible for different topics. These people with responsibilities act as personal resources.

3.2 Structural Resources

Structural resources mean the internal organisation of a company which makes informal learning possible or which constrain informal learning. International structures as well as organisational aspects, are part of structural resources: working methods, agreements or instructions.

In the German company the following structural resources support informal learning: appraisal interviews, a broad literature offer, access to information technology, networks, organisational aspects and company growth.

The structural resources found in the German company interviews are distinguished by their enabling characteristics. This means that the interviewees described resource possibilities for informal learning. The structural resources were described by the interviewees as having a heuristic character. The description was more focused on the potential of the resources, how they were used depended on the individual learner.

In the British company the following structural resources could be identified: appraisal interviews, specific publications, in-house experts, regular team meetings as well as cooperation with German colleagues. A function-orientation could be identified in the structural resources of the British company. This means that each structural resource has a specific function. Structural resources get by this their value through the specific function.

In the interviews with the Spanish managers, the following structural resources were identified: intranet, the organisation of the company, responsible people, membership of an international concern, regular team meetings as well as the coffee machine as a central meeting point. The structural resources in the Spanish company have an orientation-character. They are characterized by specific responsibilities and an organisational framework which provides guidance. The structure helps the individual find support for their informal learning as it is clear who is responsible for each single question. Further characteristics of structural resources are personal relationships and a good environment for personal interaction.

In summary, the German managers interviewed use structural resources to get several perspectives on a topic. They identified a possibility for informal learning as learning from colleagues who had different work experiences. Furthermore, they also described having open access to publications as a support for informal learning. In contrast, the British managers saw explicitly selected publications or a specific knowledge exchange as supportive, which points to a goal-oriented approach. The Spanish managers referred to the organisational structure through which they could contact people with similar tasks. A specific form of guidance is available in the Spanish company. This guidance can help employees to integrate themselves into the company. Furthermore, the structure gives them a specific possibility for informal learning.

3.3 Temporal Resources

Informal learning is often integrated in working tasks. Nevertheless, learning also needs time of its own. Under temporal resources, we include all of the conditions which the company or individuals create to enable them to have time for informal learning.

In the interviews with the German managers we can identify temporal resources such as, working time on trust, an induction and the availability of temporal independence. This indicates that the interviewees used the independence in their day to day work as a temporal resource for informal learning. This indicates the enabling character of the learning processes and personal responsibility for learning activities.

In the British company time for exchange of knowledge as well as the possibility to set one’s own priorities could be identified as a temporal resource. In the interviews indications could be found which showed that temporal resources were created for a specific purpose. This shows goal-orientation as a
characteristic of temporal resources.

In the interviews with the Spanish managers, references which point directly to the use of temporal resources for informal learning were not found. Several references which point indirectly to temporal resources were times provided for training or workshops. In addition, the coffee machine that was mentioned also supports informal exchange among colleagues in the company. The open culture of discussion described in the Spanish company is an example of temporal resources. Managers can take time to explain issues or answer questions. Through this, structural and ideational resources in the Spanish company provide temporal resources for informal learning.

In summary, in the German company independence can be identified as a temporal resource. This allows for individual methods of learning. In the interviews in the British company, we observed a goal-orientation. In the Spanish company the aspect of belonging to the organisation plays an important role.

3.4 Ideational Resources

Ideational resources are attitudes in the companies concerning the professional and personal continuing development of the employees. Ideational resources can be understood as values or cultural aspects in the companies which support informal learning.

In the German company, the following ideational resources could be identified: a willingness to delegate broad responsibilities, patience, acceptance that mistakes happen, and collegiality.

The interviews indicated that ideational resources created a positive environment for informal learning. The interviewees describe resources which make emotional informal learning possible.

In the British company, broad responsibility, filling jobs internally and collegiality can be identified as ideational resources for informal learning. The ideational resources described are goal-orientated. The first two ideational resources are ways of motivating informal learning. The collegiate attitude could be an indication of a common responsibility for the success of the company. Besides this, managers refer to the fact that it depends on the employees’ willingness to take part in informal learning activities.

In the interviews with the Spanish managers, the following ideational resources could be identified: trust, which they got by having new responsibilities, a culture of open discussion, as well as a supportive attitude towards the learning interests of the staff. The ideational resources in the Spanish company are about providing for learning possibilities. It is up to the staff to use them. Beside this, friendly relationships with colleagues were described as important.

In summary, in the German interviews the importance of having independence for individual learning could be found. Internal promotion in the British firm indicates that people are supported to reach an internal goal. In the Spanish company the culture of open discussion is important and being able to solve problems by contacting colleagues.

4. Comparison of resources for informal learning: descriptive comparison

In comparing the resources for informal learning in the three companies, we identified differences concerning character, function and context.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>German Company</th>
<th>British Company</th>
<th>Spanish Company</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>heuristic</td>
<td>function-oriented</td>
<td>responsibility-oriented</td>
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<tr>
<td>Function</td>
<td>enabling informal learning</td>
<td>supporting a specific target</td>
<td>giving guidance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Context</td>
<td>independence</td>
<td>company targets</td>
<td>collegial relationship</td>
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Source: author’s own (according to Egetenmeyer 2008)

While the resources identified in the German company indicate a heuristic approach to informal learning, the resources identified in the British company indicate a function-orientated approach. The resources identified in the Spanish company are characterized by specific responsibilities which support informal learning.

We can see these differences if we take a closer look at the personal resources. The German interviewees name various people, each of whom they use in different ways to support informal learning. This shows that people are available and enable informal learning. Further, independence as a context condition is seen as a supportive factor by the managers. It puts the choice of resources into the hands of the learners.

The idea of a function-orientated approach to informal learning taken by the British managers is supported by the choice of supervisors and colleagues as personal resources. The primary characteristic of these resources is that they
contribute to the company’s success. Transparent targets are necessary if a function-oriented approach to resources is taken. These were seen in the British company studied.

In the Spanish company people with a specific responsibility are used for informal learning. Their function is to give guidance to colleagues. A characteristic of the way personal resources are used is a collegial relationship which makes the resources easier to access.

5. Informal learning in three countries: analytical comparison

How can these results be interpreted? There is of course no doubt that there are strong organisational influences on the informal learning of managers. Surely differences between informal learning can be found, if three different companies in one country are studied. The study focuses only on the informal learning of managers in these companies. It does not intend to present the whole learning culture of the three companies.

The results show that informal learning depends on concrete resources in a personal, structural, temporal and ideational manner. Informal learning does not just happen. It depends on the resources which are available. Furthermore, the study shows that managers in different companies value different resources, although overall similar resources are available in the three companies. In the companies, a similar approach to how and which resources are used could be identified.

The different approaches to informal learning in the three companies studied indicate a similarity between the three approaches to learning and the educational traditions of each national context. In the informal learning of the German managers, references to German educational philosophy could be found. The heuristic character of the learning resources, which enable learning, demonstrate an understanding of open learning shaped by a subjective oriented educational philosophy of an all-round educated human being. Independence seems to be an important context for the German managers. Everyone should have access to education at any time and in any place. By this, the German interviewees indicate the importance of enabling learning and having freedom in their learning processes. Furthermore, understanding plays an important role. This reflects the ideas of the German educational philosophy according to Humboldt. You can also find the presence of British characteristics: goal-orientation, systematic and functional methods of informal learning. This understanding indicates an educational system directed towards goals and examinations. This reflects the British education system with its orientation towards goals and benchmarking and where a good examination result can be seen as the goal itself. Reflections of the Spanish education system can also be seen in the Spanish characteristics: adult education in Spain developed from creating educational access for workers and migrants. The focus was on integration. You can also find this integration approach in the Spanish interviews in the study.

In this way we can make links to the education traditions of the countries in which the companies in the research study are based. This finding is highlighted through two contrasting examples from the British company. One interviewee has an American education and work experience background. He approaches informal learning from a superficial perspective, very similar to the other company managers. However, based on the reasons and strategies for his informal learning, we can see differences between his approach and the characteristics outlined by the British managers. In the same company, another interviewee has both a German grammar school and a British higher education background. Interestingly, research into his way of informal learning shows a lot of characteristics common to managers with a British education background and some characteristics common to managers with a German education background. This analysis therefore asks whether in this context, it is more the culture of higher education than the company learning culture that shapes the informal learning. From this, we could see Mason’s third process that he associates with globalisation: “new hybrid identities are becoming, at the expense of national cultural identities, increasingly visible” (Mason 2007, p.179).

6. Conclusion: Reflection on the comparison

International or intercultural comparisons should always be interpreted taking into account the cultural perspective and knowledge of the researcher(s). Arthur (2008, p. 59ff) identifies three different meanings “…the primary meaning which is constructed in relation to self and its cultural context and the secondary meaning which is collectively constructed from the other primary meaning by the group.” The third meaning is a kind of knowledge which is constructed by the “negotiation processes within the group.” Looking at these distinctions, the present study is based on a single researcher’s interpretation. This, therefore, avoids several pitfalls which can arise in comparative studies carried out by research groups (cp. Bron 2008). However it also limits the role of the three examples in this study: The three case studies are not equally researched cases. In validating the study we should be aware of the “ethnocentric perspective[s]” (Mason 2007, p. 183) of the researcher. As the researcher is German, the study provides only a German perspective (with some international experience…) on informal learning in the three case studies. Terminology used, and the composition of the interview guide, are grounded in the German debate. Because of this, the British and Spanish characteristics can only be understood in relation to the German perspective. The study, therefore, follows Wagner’s idea of relationship, which is “more appropriate to the bringing together of two equivalent entities of viewpoints” (Wagner 1981, p. 3). Or looking at Titmus...
Taking this into account, the value of the present study lies chiefly in a deeper understanding of informal learning in Germany. In this respect, when identifying specific characteristics, the study aim is “making the familiar strange” (Spindler and Spindler 1982, p. 43). This follows Reischmann’s words “the outside-look to a foreign country reflects back to better understanding one’s own country: observations made in a foreign context help to better perceive and understand adult education and how it operates not only in the other but also in ones own country”. (Reischmann 2008, p. 21) These positive criteria of informal learning are developed against the background of the German debate in adult education.

References


