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Difference Through Cultural Contexts: Informal Learning in Three European Companies

Abstract: The ways in which adults' education and learning processes have been studied has changed radically in the last decades. For a long time there has been an idea that learning and teaching take place formally, in fixed locations and at fixed times. This paper is based on an intercultural comparative study. It studies the managers' subjective perspective on learning in their workplaces in Germany, Great Britain and Spain. The research question of the study is: how does informal learning vary in diverse cultural contexts? The paper focuses on the contexts in which the informal learning of the managers happens: which contexts do they value as supportive? Which people, structures, time and ideals do they value as important for their subjective informal learning? The results of the study refute the assumption that informal learning happens chaotically and in an unstructured way. It questions the European approach to informal learning and the way of comparing adult learning in Europe.

Key words: informal learning, comparative adult education, learning in the workplace, intercultural adult education.

Introduction

The ways in which adults' learning and education processes have been studied has radically changed in the last decades. For a long time the idea has been that learning primarily takes place formally, in fixed locations and at specific times. The focus has been on adult learning which happened in the presence of a teacher. Looking at more subjective oriented concepts of learning, the focus was on more diverse adult learning offers and possibilities. Learning also happens

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outside educational settings. If we look at European Policy on informal learning, we find a discussion of what informal learning is not: it seems to be outside institutions, without a teacher etc. It seems that research is based on a hypothesis that informal learning ‘just happens’ if there are enough offers and possibilities. Informal learning seems to be chaotic and unstructured. There is little discussion about the influence of the cultural context for informal learning.

This paper is based on an intercultural comparative study (Egetenmeyer, 2008). It studies managers’ subjective perspectives on learning in their workplaces. The research question of the study is: how does informal learning differ in diverse cultural contexts? For this question three case studies in Germany, Great Britain and Spain were carried out. Through this, internal structures of informal learning have been identified. They depend on the context in which informal learning happens.

In this paper I focus on the context in which the informal learning of the managers happens: which context do they value as supportive? Which people, structures, time and ideals do they value as positive for their subjective informal learning? Firstly, I focus on the discourse in adult education around informal learning. Secondly, I present the research design of the study. Then I show the differences between the resources for informal learning in the three case studies. Finally, I identify the characteristics of informal learning in the three contexts studied.

Informal learning

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...’². 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...’³. This understanding of informal learning limits the awareness of informal learning. The terminology for empirical research is

² Translated by R.E., original: nicht planmäßig organisiertes und nicht institutionalisiertes Lernen im Lebensvollzug, natürliches Grundform menschlichen Lebens (Dohmen 1999, p 25)

³ Translated by R.E., original: unmittelbar im Lebensalltag, anlassbedingt – zufällig – sporadisch, unbewusst – beiläufig, ganzheitlich – problembewusst (Dohmen 1999, p 25)

missing. Informal learning that happens in organised or institutionalised education is likely to be excluded from the empirical research (see also Dugid, Slade & Schugurensky 2006; Aberton 2008).

Similar to British 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'. Kuwan/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.

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 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.

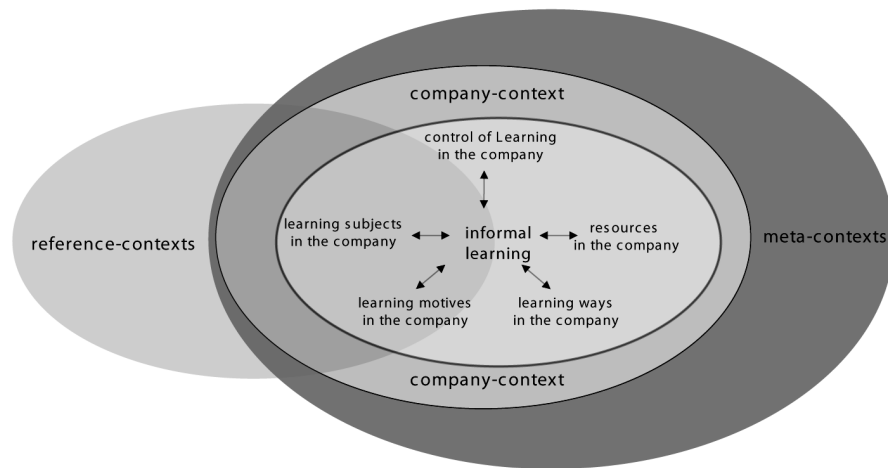


Figure 1: Informal learning as ways of learning within a company

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: which subjects and topics do people learn informally?
- Learning motives: what motivates people to learn informally? Which situations lead to informal learning?

- Ways of learning: how do people learn informally? Which ways and form of acquirement do they use?
- Resources: which media, people, structures and temporal resources do people see as helpful for their informal learning?
- Informal learning control: how is informal learning assessed? Is there any kind of control over the results of the informal learning processes?

Research Design

The research on informal learning in companies looked at their learning cultures. I therefore did a review of German literature on learning cultures and developed an analysis-instrument. The following aspects of company's learning cultures have been studied: (1) staff learning behaviours (subjects studied, motivation for learning, learning methods, resources, informal learning control), (2) structures and instruments provided by the company (resources, support), (3) company's learning philosophy, (4) perspectives about learning in the company.

To find out about the cultural differences in informal learning, an intercultural comparative study was designed to study the informal learning of managers in three companies in Germany, Great Britain and Spain (Egetenmeyer 2008). In 2005 19 semi-structured (ethno methodological) interviews were carried out in German and English in three similar firms. The three firms build and sell drive systems for the car, ship and train industry, industrial industry. All the firms belonged to one affiliated group, located in Germany, but each had a lot of independence, especially in human resources. As the machines were mainly developed and produced in Germany, and sold in Spain and Great Britain, I included in the German sample managers who had comparable tasks and responsibilities to the managers in Spain and Great Britain.

The interviewees were managers and people responsible for Human Resource Management (in the following called Human Resource Managers). Based on an understanding of 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.

In the comparative content analysis of all interviews, the differences in informal learning between the three learning cultures were analysed. The analysis identified both similarities in the instances of informal learning in each firm as well as differences between the three firms. These were found in the informal

learning subjects, the motivation for informal learning, the informal learning methods, the resources for informal learning and the control of informal learning.

Within the limited space of this paper, the comparison will focus on the resources which the managers used for informal learning. The study was done by a single researcher from Germany and therefore the analysis is seen from a German perspective. The study focuses on the managers, so it is also helpful to keep in mind that in the analysis the focus is on a specific group of 'informal learners'.

Resources for informal learning

In the interview, 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.

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.

..my supervisors have shaped and influenced and promoted me most. There I have learned most. (D5-FK, 19)⁴

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.

⁴ Translated by R.E., original: ...haben mich meine Vorgesetzten am stärksten geprägt und beeinflusst und gefördert. Und dort habe ich auch am meisten gelernt

The British managers identified their supervisors as advisors and supporters. Their colleagues acted as discussion partners, senior experts or as special experts.

...if I have a problem with something and I am struggling to find a solution, I can discuss it with him (supervisor, R.E.), but at the end of it, he will always say to me: What do you think you should do? He will not force me this way or that way and will allow me to be in control of that. (GB3-FK, 73)

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.

But if I don't know who is the correct person to answer my question, I have to call the area manager, and if he cannot answer, he will look for the answer in Germany. (ES3-PE, 116)

you have the boss of the product group and he can try to help you. (ES2-PE, 51)

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.

Structural Resources

Structural resources mean the internal organisation of a company which makes informal learning possible or which constrain informal learning. Interna-

tional 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.

Literature resources are provided, ... library resp. organized distribution of magazines ... is a library for us. There are resources available ... which are available individually, if you subscribe to the distribution, if you are interested in. (D3-PE, 55)⁵

Access to the intranet which is here designed in direction of a knowledge database. ... you get of course information through the intranet. (D3-PE, 53)⁶

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.

For example the lady we just employed, I need her to understand the manufacturing side of business quickly. So I said to her: in one or two months, I want you to go and spend two days with the production people so you learn what they do. (GB2-PE, 87)

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.

⁵ Translated by R.E., original: Da werden also Literatur-Ressourcen zur Verfügung gestellt, ... Fachbücherei bzw. Umläufe von Zeitschriften, ... die dann durch Umläufe gehen und damit dem Einzelnen zur Verfügung stehen und man kann sich auf den Verteiler setzen, wenn einen das interessiert.

⁶ Translated by R.E., original: Zugang zu Intranet, was ja hier ein Stückchen Richtung Wissensdatenbank ... aufgebaut ist. ...wo ... man dann natürlich auch die Information bekommt im Intranet.

You have here ... a General Manager. You have a Rep [Responsible Person, R. E.] for administration and controlling. The Rep knows the customers, knows the relation. He can also teach these persons a lot about customers etc, etc. (ES2-PE, 64)

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.

Here in Spain, it's very usual to have only one coffee machine for all the different departments. (...) Usually the people of the tie (white collars, R.E.) don't have contact with the people of the workshop (blue collars, R.E.). (...) all the people must go to the workshop. And have contact with the people of the workshop. (ES2-PE, 122–124)

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.

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.

We need engineers or we need employees, who also, perhaps an over exaggeration, go over the next horizon and pick out an idea from the next flower. Yes,

this is possible at [name of the company]. This is possible. Because everybody has the time and freedom. (D6-FK, 93)⁷

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.

We would generally do it through our own facilities of internal training: who can show you how to do that? Go and spend half a day with them. (GB2-PE, 87)

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 we can identify independence 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.

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.

⁷ Translated by R.E., original: Wir brauchen Ingenieure oder wir brauchen Mitarbeiter, die auch mal, jetzt krass, über eine Wiese gehen und aus der nächsten Blume eine Idee ziehen. Ja, und das geht beim N.N.. Das geht. Weil die Zeit und den Freiraum hat jeder.

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.

...allows you to solve unconventional tasks and to establish independence, if one just has the courage and the readiness to take on responsibility (D2-PE, 19)⁸

There is a lot of patience. ... I still can say: I have not been here long, please explain it to me, what do you think. Or: What do I have to do? (D6-FK, 33)⁹

That I allow mistakes, that people can skate on thin ice ... (D5-FK, 81)¹⁰

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.

You obviously have a track record that you can achieve, providing you show a desire and a willingness to move forward. But that door is always available. I think certainly for me personally, if anybody really, if they have the drive and commitment to take opportunities and learn new experiences, then [name of the company] will give you that opportunity, absolutely. (GB3-FK, 65)

The collegiate attitude could be an indication of a common responsibility for the success of the company. Beside 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.

For example, he gives me a new responsibility, the responsibility to control the marketing in Mauritania. If he gives me this responsibility, this means that he trusts me, and with this I will be able to improve my commercial capability. (ES3-FK, 102)

⁸ Translated by R.E., original: ...unkonventionelle Aufgaben lösen darf und einen sehr großen Freiheitsspielraum sich erarbeiten kann, wenn man eben einfach, den Mut und die Verantwortungsbereitschaft dazu mitbringt.

⁹ Translated by R.E., original: Also da herrscht hier eine sehr große Geduld. Ich habe also lange Zeit und das kann ich zum Teil immer noch machen, sagen: Ich bin noch nicht so lange dabei, erklärt mir, was ihr meint. Oder: Was muss ich tun?

¹⁰ Translated by R.E., original: Dass ich Fehler zulasse, dass die Leute sich auch mal auf dünnes Eis begeben können ...

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.

Comparison of Resources for Informal Learning

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

	German Company	British Company	Spanish Company
Character	heuristic	function-oriented	responsibility-oriented
Function	enabling informal learning	supporting a specific target	giving guidance
Context	independence	company targets	collegial relationship

Figure 2: Comparison of resources in informal learning
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-oriented 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..

Conclusion

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 indicates 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.

The study refutes the assumption that informal learning is unstructured. It provides instead indications that informal learning follows hidden rules which differ according to the context. An inherent structure of informal learning which is influenced by its cultural context could be seen. Although there are similar resources for informal learning available in the three companies, the managers identified different ways of using the resources. These results show hidden rules in informal learning. It shows that there are differences in informal learning in companies in different European countries and it also shows that approaches to informal learning are close to the educational philosophies of the countries. The results, therefore, give us a reason to ask, is it really the same, if we talk about informal learning in different contexts. What consequences would it have at an international level, if we talk about strategies and targets which affect informal learning, e.g. recognition or accreditation of informal learning? What would these results mean for a fair formulation of European benchmarks or surveys which focus on informal learning?

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Razlike koje se javljaju u kulturnim kontekstima: informalno učenje u tri evropske kompanije

Apstrakt: Načini na koje se istraživalo obrazovanje i procesi učenja radikalno su se promenili u poslednjih deset godina. Dugo vremena je postojala ideja da se učenje i podučavanje odvija isključivo formalno, na određenim lokacijama i u određenom vremenu. Ovaj rad predstavlja komparativnu interkulturalnu studiju i istražuje subjektivnu perspektivu učenja menadžera na njihovom radnom mestu u Nemačkoj, Velikoj Britaniji i Španiji. Istraživačko pitanje studije je kako informalno učenje varira u različitim kulturnim kontekstima. U ovom radu, kontekst u kome se dešava informalno učenje menadžera je sledeći: koji kontekst oni procenjuju kao podršku? Koje osobe, strukture, vremenske okvire i ideale oni procenjuju kao pozitivne za njihovo subjektivno informalno učenje? Rezultati ove studije pobijaju pretpostavku da se informalno učenje odigrava na haotičan i nestrukturiran način. Ona preispituje evropski način odnosa prema informalnom učenju i načine upoređivanja učenja odraslih u Evropi.

Ključne reči: informalno učenje, komparativno obrazovanje odraslih, učenje na radnom mestu, interkulturalno obrazovanje odraslih.

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