



## Dr Peter Honey reviews 'Informal Learning at Work: How to Boost Performance in Tough Times' by Paul Matthews

A very long time ago, in May 1970 actually, I wrote an article called 'Stop the courses, I want to get off!'. I had become disenchanted with the futility of running formal courses when evaluations clearly showed that most of the learning was lost as people re-entered the real world of work after a period of time in a classroom. My suggestion was that courses should be banned for a period of at least one year to 'force' trainers to find alternative ways to help people improve their performance. I even went so far as to recommend that trainers should receive an electric shock every time the word 'course' passed their lips. When the article was published, in *Industrial and Commercial Training*, I received a number of abusive letters from trainers with a vested interest in maintaining the illusion that courses worked!

I only mention this so that you can see that for over 40 years I have been advocating that work based learning, 'real' learning, should take priority over formal courses and programmes of instruction. Some years later (but still a long time ago!) in 1994 I published a paperback called '101 ways to develop your people, without really trying!' encouraging line managers to use everyday happenings at work as learning opportunities. Despite the book being reprinted four times, with over 20,000 copies sold, and despite the advent of flexible 'anytime, anyplace' eLearning, I still find that informal learning at work is vastly underutilised.

Imagine my delight therefore when I read Paul Matthews's book extolling the advantages of harnessing informal learning and making a strong business case for doing so. The first two chapters leave one in no doubt that integrating informal learning into the culture of organisations is essential, not just to survive but also to thrive, in an increasingly competitive world. But the book does not merely make the case for informal learning, valuable though that is, it also gives numerous examples of informal learning in action. There are at least two chapters packed with ideas – over 50 of them - on how to get informal learning at work to happen in utterly practical ways that will enhance performance.

The book also gives advice on how to tackle obstacles and there is a very valuable chapter on the implications emerging informal learning has for L&D professionals. 'There is a fundamental change in the role of L&D, from producing and delivering formal learning to creating and managing environments in which learning is part of work.....The challenge now is to help people to be more effective when they are learning informally. It is about giving people the tools they need and the skills to use those tools to manage their own learning requirements in the moment'.

I smiled my way through Paul Matthews' book and I very much hope it will have more impact than my previous offerings. The continued underutilisation of work-based learning is short-sighted and wasteful. Informal learning opportunities are not only plentiful; they are relatively inexpensive and always timely and relevant.

I say a loud hurra to Paul Matthews' book. We all need it.

Dr Peter Honey, 529 words, March 2013

