

# Study confirms the importance of informal learning in hospitals

June 10 2020

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The coronavirus crisis has shaken the structure of the Spanish healthcare system, leaving staff backed into a corner in their fight to beat the infection. However, doctors, nurses and other hospital and healthcare

workers around the country have managed to acquire essential knowledge and adapt to these extraordinary circumstances in a matter of days. Plus, they've done it without attending courses or conferences; nothing but old-fashioned cooperation.

Clara Selva Olid, professor at the UOC's Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences explained: "Informal learning and a culture of unconditional cooperation have given rise to a rapid and brilliant response from different healthcare bodies across the country."

According to a recent study published in the *Journal of Workplace Learning* in which Clara Selva Olid participated, this informal knowledge exchange is much more valuable than it's often given credit for in working environments.

She said: "Learning within our workplace plays a very important role in developing, improving and bringing our skills up to speed. As a natural result of the long hours we spend at work, this is without a doubt one of the most beneficial contexts in which to develop our professional and personal skills."

Traditionally, huge importance is placed on what people learn through [formal education](#), which is organized and given specific objectives. Academic years and terms, seminars and conferences would be typical examples. However, professionals also learn by exchanging experiences in an informal setting, for example over a cup of coffee or by observing how their colleagues work.

As such, this research, which was conducted alongside Carlota Riera from the University of Vic (UVic-UCC) and Miguel Sahagún from the University of Aguascalientes (Mexico), sought to shed light on the relationship between formal, informal and peer learning within a workplace setting. For this, the researchers conducted a nine-month ethnographic study with a team of gynecologists from a hospital in

Catalonia. The researchers were able to observe and analyze the daily routines and practices of the team's 44 members, comprised of doctors, nurses, midwives and administrative staff.

## **The value of informality**

According to Selva, the results suggest that "contrary to what many people and organizations may believe, the great value of learning is found, above all, in informal contexts and in interactions between people, more so than in formal learning activities. The less hierarchical the organization, the more and richer the learning opportunities, which also prove to be more equal, democratically speaking." Therefore, "an [organizational culture](#) that fosters dialog and equal participation throughout its community boosts learning acquisition for individual members as well as for the group as a whole." Additionally, employees find learning more enriching when it occurs among peers, in other words, among people who identify with each other as equals.

Selva said: "Now that we have the results, we think it's necessary that current and future organizations highlight the importance of equality among their staff. Besides, bearing in mind the clear relationship established between equality and participation, it seems evident that promoting equal roles must be a goal for any organization that aspires to ignite complex learning the requires assimilating diverse knowledge quickly and efficiently."

In the case of hospitals, hierarchy and the scientific nature of knowledge have proven to be obstacles in this exchange. According to the UOC researchers, "a healthcare center's organizational culture legitimizes some kinds of learning over others, often with more vocational than scientific interests. Promoting greater participation and a horizontal structure among [medical professionals](#) and nurses, for example, would greatly benefit organizations and enhance their learning capacity."

## An emergency tackled as a team

This has been perfectly illustrated by the COVID-19 emergency. Selva said: "Teams were not prepared, from a formal training point of view, to tackle a health crisis such as this one. Within the space of a few hours, any kind of pyramidal and [hierarchical structure](#) that would normally make it more difficult for everyone to participate, became obsolete before this call to action. All professionals loaded with experience and knowledge have been essential players in transforming hospitals. Organizations have spontaneously facilitated the flow of learning and the participation of all staff members to find the most appropriate solutions in a way that is not mediated hierarchically, but rather is driven by a common and shared objective. This is the kind of learning you carry with you forever, and the hope is that some of this information remains embedded within the very fabric of organizational cultures."

**More information:** Carlota Riera Claret et al. Peer and informal learning among hospital doctors, *Journal of Workplace Learning* (2020). [DOI: 10.1108/JWL-11-2018-0141](https://doi.org/10.1108/JWL-11-2018-0141)

Provided by Universitat Oberta de Catalunya

Citation: Study confirms the importance of informal learning in hospitals (2020, June 10) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-06-importance-hospitals.html>

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