



## Sources of Information about Experiential Workplace Learning

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### Abstract

This *CASEmaker* bibliography includes selected references for understanding the uses and benefits of experiential learning in the workplace. Experiential workplace learning prioritizes professional learning that stems from the individual's active engagement in the problem-solving that surrounds typical workplace tasks. When learning is shaped through work experiences, the learning tends to be more immediately applicable and generalizable with fewer knowledge to practice gaps.

### Introduction

Professional development within early childhood intervention and early childhood special education is too often characterized by workshops, presentations, and webinars (Bruder et al., 2009) despite the well-known ineffectiveness of these types of professional development (Dunst & Trivette, 2009; Dunst et al., 2010; Winton & Collum, 2008). Sambrook (2005) distinguished between learning at work and learning in work, where the former refers to formal training workplaces provide through in-service workshops and online formats, and the latter refers to informal job-based experiences that result in knowledge transfer in context. When it comes to effective learning, the field of early intervention could make better use of workplace learning opportunities (learning in work) to increase practitioners' knowledge, skills, and abilities with regard to becoming current with evidence-based practices. Experiential workplace learning (EWL) has been used across a wide range of workplaces to help employees implement key practices.

### Definition and Key Characteristics of Experiential Workplace Learning

Experiential workplace learning is rooted in the work of Kolb (1984, 2015), Dewey (1938), Piaget (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969), and Vygotsky (1978) and is an application of experiential learning theory in the workplace. Experiential learning has been known to enhance outcomes for children and students for more than 100 years, but has only been applied and studied in the workplace within the last few decades. Experiential learning can occur in diverse settings, some contextual (i.e., on

the job learning, see Dernova, 2015; Fenwick, 2008; Manuti et al., 2015) and some decontextualized (e.g., learning games, simulations, role plays). EWL typically refers to learning experiences that are contextualized and opportunistic (i.e., occurring during the real work experience) and is also referred to as practice-based learning (often in medical settings) or situated learning (Billett, 1996; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Bierema and Eraut (2004) note that "...very often learning and working occur at the same time and sometimes, as in problem-solving, they are identical" (p. 55). EWL prioritizes learning through the problem-solving that occurs as workers are engaging in their jobs and learning from the successes and setbacks as they perform their work. This *CASEmaker* bibliography focuses on selected references for understanding the uses and benefits of experiential learning in the workplace.

Although no agreed upon definition exists, EWL has been defined as semi-formal and informal contextualized professional learning that occurs during the experience of performing one's work duties and reflecting upon

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work activities for the purpose of improving work-based outcomes (Sexton, 2021). A key feature of EWL defined across the literature is that the learner conducts the work through which learning occurs, engages in reflection of that work, and uses the reflections to plan for continuous improvement as measured by the outcomes of the work (Boud et al., 1993; Fenwick, 2008; Lundgren, et al., 2017; Trede et al., 2016). Other features of EWL are that learners engage intellectually, emotionally, socially, and physically in authentic tasks; learners investigate personal assumptions and values; and learners benefit from successes and setbacks as they naturally occur (Boud et al., 1993). The selected references below describe and define experiential workplace learning.

- Boud, D., Cohen, R., & Walker, D. (1993). Understanding learning from experience. In D. Boud, R. Cohen, & D. Walker (Eds.), *Using experience for learning* (pp. 1-17). SRHE; Open University Press.
- Illeris, K. (2011). *The fundamentals of workplace learning: Understanding how people learn in working life*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203836521>
- Kolb, D. A. (2015). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development* (2nd ed.). Pearson Education.
- Sexton, S. (2021). Early childhood intervention induction: An example of experiential workplace learning and peer coaching. *Teacher Learning and Professional Development*, 6(1), 21-37. <https://journals.sfu.ca/tlpd/index.php/tlpd/article/view/79>

**Rx      Prescription for Practice      Rx**

Improve your knowledge about experiential workplace learning with the following readings:

- Eraut, M. (2011). Informal learning in the workplace: Evidence on the real value of work-based learning. *Development and Learning in Organizations*, 25(5), 8-12. <https://doi.org/10.1108/14777281111159375>
- Moon, J. A. (2004). *A handbook of reflective and experiential learning: Theory and practice*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203416150>
- Rush, D. D., & Shelden, M. L. (2020). *The early childhood coaching handbook* (2nd ed.). Brookes.

## How Experiential Learning Takes Place

Although experiential workplace learning is informal learning that occurs in the workplace, experiences can occur across a continuum from informal, incidental experiences to more semi-formal, facilitated experiences.

### Informal Workplace Learning

Some estimate that 75% (Bancheva & Ivanova, 2015) to 90 % (Cerasoli et al., 2017) of workplace learning is informal. Informal learning is characterized by learning that occurs during critical moments of need embedded in the context of conducting the work (Manuti et al., 2015). Informal learning occurs in situations not specifically orchestrated to enable learning or altered to encourage or ensure learning (Dale & Bell, 1999). Informal workplace learning is integrated with daily work routines, not highly conscious, can be haphazard, and happens by chance. The selected sources that follow provide information about informal workplace learning.

- Bancheva, E., & Ivanova, M. (2015). Informal learning in the workplace: Gender differences. In J. Ostrouch-Kamin'ska & C. C. Vieira (Eds.), *Private world(s): Gender and informal learning of adults* (pp. 157-182). Sense Publishers. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6209-971-5\\_12](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6209-971-5_12)
- Cerasoli, C. P., Alliger, G. M., Donsbach, J. S., Mathieu, J. E., Tannenbaum, S. I., & Orvis, K. A. (2017). Antecedents and outcomes of informal learning behaviors: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 33, 203-230. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10869-017-9492-y>
- Manuti, A., Pastore, S., Scardigno, F. A., Giancaspro, M. L., & Morciano, D. (2015). Formal and informal learning in the workplace: A research review. *International Journal of Training and Development*, 19(1), 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijtd.12044>

### Semi-Formal Workplace Learning

Experiential workplace learning can also be semi-formal. Eraut (2011) found that learning in the workplace can be enhanced by improving opportunities for productive engagement in a wide range of work processes. Working alongside a colleague enables someone to learn by asking questions, receiving feedback, and reflecting on the outcome of their decisions when they happen (Eraut, 2011). When work is inherently social, such as when employees work on teams or in close prox-

imity to one another, learning is often facilitated by the team process. Informal workplace learning can be made semi-formal by strategically pairing opportunities for reflection and feedback within the work, thus making the experiential learning an inductive process of personal reflection and action (Manuti et al., 2015). Semi-formal workplace learning is often promoted in education, nursing, and other health professions where employees are assigned a mentor, coach, or preceptor to ensure that learning occurs in the moment and subsequent implementation capitalizes on continuous learning. The sources below provide more information about contexts in which semi-formal experiential learning is commonly used.

- Eraut, M. (2011). Informal learning in the workplace: Evidence on the real value of work-based learning. *Development and Learning in Organizations*, 25(5), 8-12. <https://doi.org/10.1108/14777281111159375>
- Sexton, S. (2021). Early childhood intervention induction: An example of experiential workplace learning and peer coaching. *Teacher Learning and Professional Development*, 6(1), 21-37. <https://journals.sfu.ca/tlpd/index.php/tlpd/article/view/79>
- Trede, F., Sutton, K., & Bernoth, M. (2016). Conceptualizations and perceptions of the nurse preceptor's role: A scoping review. *Nurse Education Today*, 36, 268-274. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2015.07.032>
- Yardley, S., Teunissen, P. W., & Dornan, T. (2012). Experiential learning: AMEE Guide No. 63. *Medical Teacher*, 34(2), e102-e115. <https://doi.org/10.3109/0142159X.2012.650741>

### Factors Affecting Learning at Work

Eraut (2011) found that support and feedback were critically important for gains in confidence, learning retention, and commitment to occur. Eraut (2011) also noted that the right level of challenge was important, and a significant proportion of the work needed to consist of new challenges that were not so daunting as to reduce confidence. The workload needs to be at a level that allows the learner to respond to new challenges reflectively, rather than develop coping mechanisms or short cuts that might later prove ineffective. Commitment to work can be impacted by the quality of the support provided to the learner in the form of feedback received and appreciation for the value of their work, resulting in a personal sense of importance. Fuller and associates (2007) note that the political nature of some places of work create an

uneven distribution of learning opportunities for some. The availability of coaches and mentors within the workplace is on the rise in education settings and can make learning more accessible (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Use of a capacity-building coaching framework can provide the learner with the appropriate amount of feedback and opportunities to reflect and make good use of the experiential learning opportunities (Rush & Shelden, 2020; Sexton, 2021).

- Eraut, M. (2011). Informal learning in the workplace: Evidence on the real value of work-based learning. *Development and Learning in Organizations*, 25(5), 8-12. <https://doi.org/10.1108/14777281111159375>
- Fuller, A., Unwin, L., Felstead, A., Jewson, N., & Kakavelakis, K. (2007). Creating and using knowledge: An analysis of the differentiated nature of workplace learning environments. *British Educational Research Journal*, 33(5), 743-759. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920701582397>
- Lundgren, H., Bang, A., Justice, S. B., Marsick, V. J., Poell, R. F., Yorks, L., Clark, M., & Sung, S. (2017). Conceptualizing reflection in experience-based workplace learning. *Human Resources Development International*, 20(4), 305-326. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13678868.2017.1308717>
- Rush, D. D., & Shelden, M. L. (2020). *The early childhood coaching handbook* (2nd ed.). Brookes.

### Benefits of Experiential Workplace Learning

Experiential workplace learning holds benefits over formal learning events. When learning is shaped through work experiences, the learning tends to be more immediately applicable and generalizable with fewer knowledge to practice gaps. Eraut (2011) found participants learned much more through their work than through formally organized learning events. The increased learning may be due to grounded cognition when an individual's cognition is highly engaged during work experiences resulting in rapid learning (Barsalou, 2008). Informal learning at work is positively correlated with flexibility, employability, adaptability of learning to context, rapid transfer of knowledge to practice, and quick resolution of work-related problems due to regular review of work practices and performance (Manuti et al., 2015). The selected references below are sources of information about the benefits of experiential workplace learning.

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- Development and Learning in Organizations*, 25(5), 8-12. <https://doi.org/10.1108/14777281111159375>
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- Conclusion**
- A number of sources of information were included in this CASEmaker bibliography that provide a description of experiential workplace learning, explain the factors that influence workplace learning, and describe the benefits. Experiential workplace learning has been shown to be especially helpful in teacher education and nursing and can be applied to other fields such as early intervention where hands-on learning is a necessary bridge between the pre-service preparation most providers receive and competence in using the cross-disciplinary practices unique to early intervention. Capitalizing on the hands-on learning opportunities that exist while engaging in work could be an effective and efficient model of professional development, especially for novice practitioners.
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