

A Study on Life Sports Instructor's Informal Learning Type and Learning Improvement Method

Seung-Yong Kim¹

¹Division of Sport Science, Hanyang University,
Ansan, 15588, South Korea

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to present a life sports instructor's learning type and learning improvement method through informal learning. To achieve the purpose of this research, this study selected 4 instructors of the life sports instruction field as research participants. In addition, this study brought to light on a life sports instructor's learning type and the learning improvement method in depth using the ethnographic research method based on Spradley's domain analysis and taxonomic analysis through the research participants' case. The research results were as follows: First, This study could classify a life sports instructor's learning type through informal learning into 5 sorts, i.e. 'experience, learning, research, distribution, expansion.' Second, As regards the learning improvement method for a life sports instruction through informal learning, learning environment should be constructed 1) from the personal and content-related aspects, 2) cultural and environmental aspects, and 3) institutional and organizational aspects. An instructor at a life sports instruction field is relatively lacking in the opportunity to get formal learning in comparison with office job workers. Conclusively, this study thinks that the informal learning type and learning improvement method have important educational significance for the increase in professionalism as a life sports instructor.

Key Words : Life sports instructor, Informal learning, Learning type, Learning Improvement, Learning improvement method

1 INTRODUCTION

The instruction at a life sports field, unlike that at school physical education, or elite sports, is done mostly for general members of society (adolescents and adults etc.) as an instruction object. Moreover, the instruction of life sports is not limited to the technical guidance of each event only, but various roles covering program planning, operation, management, and assessment, etc. are required. Accordingly, an instructor of life sports is required to be equipped with the quality and ability as a sports expert available for such role performance. Therefore, the growth process into a sports instructor, who teaches and guides sports trainees, has an important influence on a sports instructor's improvement in professionalism and ability.

The growth process into an expert in sports education can be largely divided into the three sorts, i.e. formal growth, formless growth, and informal growth. Formal growth literally means that it is made through formal sports expert education. In short, there is a certain form of institutionalization and rules in formal sports expert education and it can be called an intentionally organized education mostly by the systematic curriculum. Accordingly, this education refers to the one investing a person with a transcript, academic degree, and certificate (Mallet *et al.*, 2009).

Formless growth, as an education achieved in a short period, refers to the education of the form like a workshop, or seminar and conference. In a case of sports instruction experts who carry out routinely tight business, it is never easy to participate in formal education. However, formless education is done spontaneously in a comparatively short period, and this education can be called a comparative organized learning opportunity while it is conducted outside of a formal education institution. Accordingly, formless education could be conducted continuously and extensively according to a sports instructor's participatory will. In a sense, this education is an extension of formal education by classification of the growth process.

In contrast, informal education can be called an educational behavior, or learning method considerably differentiated from the aforementioned formal & formless growth. In one word, informal growth is the form that makes it possible for a learner to get an education from daily experiences. This form includes actual instruction experience or learning through natural experience in daily routines, and experiential or executive learning conducted on the basis of a learner's self-directedness & autonomy at a workplace (Cseh *et al.*, 1998). Accordingly, self-directed learning is a much similarly used term to informal learning (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999).

The effect of informal learning in corporate environments has been reported continuously since the 1990s. According a research by the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, seventy percent of new knowledge in the workplace is obtained through informal learning (Lohman, 2005). Dobbs (2000) also explained that seventy percent of learning that contributes to the overall working knowledge is generated in informal manners. Moreover, the study reported that ninety percent of materials learned in the workplace are the result of informal learning, rather than formal learning (Conlon, 2004; Sorohan, 1993).

The informal learning like this is the lesser-known area notwithstanding that it is the most frequently conducted form, and also the most influential learning domain among the conducted learning at an everyday field, and the general perception of its importance and interest in this form are pretty insufficient. In addition, most of the research is judged that a company's actual investment in learning is lopsided on formal learning (Cross, 2007). However, interest in and research on informal learning for life sports instructors, who work in a complex and diverse area, is insufficient compared to the importance of the subject. Therefore, this study aimed to look into a life sports instructor's informal learning type through the qualitative research on instructors involved in a life sports field, and soon after the process, to present a learning improvement method through informal learning.

2 RESEARCH METHOD

Participant in research: The subject of the current study is life sports instructors, who are sampled via quota selection strategy, a criterion-referenced selection method. This method is primarily used in quantitative studies because an important criterion for sampling research subjects is whether they have sufficient information adequate for research objectives (Creswell, 1998).

In specific, participants in the current study currently work for sports centers and institutions related to life sports, and are life sports instructors with diverse experiences ranging from five to twenty years. Four life sports instructors were selected, all of whom are actively engaging in self-development learning and informal learning activities and have an interest in the topic and objectives of the current study. Table 1 shows the characteristics of the study participants.

TABLE I
CHARACTERISTIC OF PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH

	Gender	Age	Instruction Career	Main Major Practice
Kim	Male	47	20years	Swimming
Lee	Male	45	17years	Swimming, Fitness, PT
Park	Female	36	10years	Aerobics, PT, GX
Choi	Male	31	6years	Fitness, PT, GX

Data collection: The current study collected data through in-depth interview, non-participatory observation, and related documents. In-depth interview, which was the primary data collection method, were categorized into official and unofficial interviews, with the former utilizing semi-structured method, and the latter conducted in non-structured method.

Official interviews were individually executed, with a running time of forty to sixty minutes, and a participant was given three to four sessions. Unofficial interviews were conducted as required, for ten to twenty minutes per each session. The researcher in the cur-

rent study visited the workplace of the interviewees, in places that the participants preferred to give them a comfortable environment.

Overall in-depth interviews were recorded under the agreement of research participants, in order to prevent the researcher from missing any interview data. In addition, non-participatory observation and related documents were collected in the current study in order to supplement interview data and better understand informal learning conditions. The non-participatory observation data was collected by watching the study participants' actual class instruction and other work activities to understand their working environment, as well as to supplement information lacking in the in-depth interview data. Collected documents involved various information regarding informal learning and life sports instructors.

Data analysis: In-depth interview data was primarily used in the analysis of the current study, with non-participatory observation and document data playing auxiliary roles. First, two sessions of coding the in-depth interview data were conducted, after which the processed data was analyzed according to the objectives of the study. The current study made an effort to maintain the emic (perspective as internal players) of the study participants in the process of analysis and used domain analysis and taxonomic analysis techniques, introduced in Spradley's (1980) as ethnographic research methods.

In specific, among the data coded twice, there were seventy-seven data points that served the objectives of the current study. Through domain analysis, these coded data points were then categorized into eight areas, which were in turn classified into two key topics after taxonomic analysis. The two key topics are *learning type* and *learning improvement method* of life sports instructors achieved through informal learning.

Verity of research: As reliability and validity in quantitative studies are explained in terms of truthfulness and certainty, the current study implemented triangulation, member checks, and peer debriefing processes that increase validity and reliability of the overall domain and taxonomic analyses (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). In addition, the research made sure to prevent the collected data from interfering with the participants' private lives, in consideration

of the ethical guidelines for a study of this kind.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Five learning types and three learning improvement methods were identified as informal learning experienced by the life sports instructors in their field. The results of the classification are displayed below.

Life sports instructor's learning type through informal learning

This study could classify a life sports instructor's learning type through informal learning into 5 sorts, i.e. 'experience, learning, research, distribution, expansion.' In addition, different types of informal learning were organically interrelated to each other, forming a benevolent cycle closely tied to the process of beginner life sports instructors obtaining experience and becoming experts in their field.

Experience: In general, learning takes place as acquired knowledge and techniques are applied to the context of actual working environment and using them to solve problems. In particular, using newly-obtained knowledge in the field is crucial: Since the same knowledge can be applied differently depending on a diverse range of situational contexts, the learner must enter into problematic situation, work to solve it by applying his or her knowledge to the field. Simply put, the learner understands what was not understood during text-based or oral learning in the process of getting hands-on experiences.

As there are numerous variables in the actual workplace, the worker will learn by a ceaseless cycle of trial and error as he or she applies the acquired knowledge. While experiences of failure can engender negative emotions at the time, but it becomes deeply ingrained in the mind, which prevents the worker from making the same mistake.

Even after receiving an explanation and experiencing the field, one cannot immediately understand uncommon and unfamiliar tasks just by couple instruction sessions. The life sports instructor must

"In general, I get explanations with words, which I can understand to a certain degree. But when I am faced with the actual situation, I get confused, and I have to experience the actual to make the knowledge my own (Kim)."

"Although I receive sufficient instruction and understand it, the field of life sports are rife with diverse situations. So, I think no two situations are the same. It must be because my students all have different features. As such, it is difficult to respond with simple verbal explanation. Nothing happens according to my expectations. It is more so when there is no experience to back up the knowledge (Lee)."

"Beginner instructors make many mistakes and experience much difficulty when working in the field for the first time. They are usually very disconcerted about the experience, but they become more careful and calmer as time passes. They learn on their own while going through this process (Kim)."

write down the knowledge in a journal or a note and learn the knowledge repeatedly. In addition, as attempts to make the acquired knowledge one's own accumulate, at a certain point all of the experiences bind into one, leading the life sports instructor to experience true learning in which the knowledge is fully made into his or hers. At the end, life sports instructors experiencing certain problems and situations directly are a learning type that influences informal learning.

Learning: With an almost bare background in the field, beginner instructors begin learning by understanding the atmosphere in the workplace, studying the vocabulary, and accepting various stimulations. They stay in the field of life sports instruction to watch experienced instructor talk to each other and the students and conduct other types of tasks. Through this process, the beginner instructor is familiarized into the workplace atmosphere and vocabulary, and obtains an overall understanding of knowledge re-

quired for the workplace.

"I was puzzled at first, because I did not know what the [experienced instructors] were talking about and doing. But still, I sat and listened to their conversations and instructions (Choi)."

"I thought spending time together [with the experienced instructors] was most important. Learning the work functions and other information formally was also important, but what helped me a lot was spending time with [experienced instructors] and being with them in the field (Park)."

Life sports instructors, with a will to learn about the workplace, seek ways to approach the diverse learning materials. They require basic data such as learning materials, expert instruction manual, or other guidelines that can be utilized in an actual work process. Rather than taking interest in theoretical knowledge needed to understand their work, the beginner instructors look for information that can be immediately applied to the workplace and directly help the. In addition, when they are not satisfied with the internal information, they actively seek out external information.

"I looked far and beyond, because I did not know. I looked for any information out there, and where I could find it. It is good to have materials like a manual, since I will be able to read it when I have questions (Lee)."

Acquisition of information and knowledge through internet falls under this category. With well-organized document or text-based information, however, getting hands-on experience at the site is often more effective for learning. In order to learn more practical tasks, as such, life sports instructors visit the field to experience the workplace.

That is, because workplaces for life sports instructors do not feature separate training session for new employees, most of the instructor learning is executed in their daily work routine. This can be problematic, as more experienced instructors rarely take time to

approach the beginning instructors and provide explanations about the work process. As such, new instructors first approach more experienced colleagues to find answers to their questions. Talking to instructors at a similar level can also help, because employees with similar levels of experience can more pertinent information through an understanding of each other's knowledge. Such situation in the life sports instruction workplace can be expressed as *learning*, a type of informal learning.

Research: A process of introspection is important in internalizing the knowledge acquired by practice. Many learners neglect to focus or contemplate on the events of the past, wasting the value of precious knowledge from field experience. As such, it is important for life sports instructors to think about the lessons learned from their experiences, and organize ideas about the kinds of efforts required to build upon such lessons.

"I look back about what I did well and what I did not. That makes me realize what I should do in the future (Lee)."

"After finishing a task or solving a problem, I take time to contemplate on the process after work hours. It is a sort of self-reflection. I do this from time to time (Park)."

After beginning life sports instructors become familiar with their work, they begin seeking deeper knowledge directly and indirectly related to their tasks. For example, they research theoretical aspects of their practice, or make efforts to obtain certifications regarding their work.

"Life sports instructors in the field are not very interested in the theory when they start out. But after they gain more experience and become familiar with their work, they begin taking interest in such aspects. How do I put it... It is a process of deepening (Choi)."

Viewing their field of work based on the gradually accumulating know-how allows the instructors to see elements that require improvement or rationalization, or those that are irrational. This

makes them work to make improvements to resolve complaints from colleagues or customers, or enhance factors that they felt were inconvenient. In this, the instructors first make work-related knowledge and skills as their own, and move on to acquire deeper knowledge to change their work environments. This process can be rationalized a *research*, another informal learning type of life sports instructors.

Distribution: By recording and passing on the know-hows they accumulated, life sports instructors look for ways to help their newer colleagues. This process can generate opportunities for instructors to naturally systemize practical know-hows or unsystematic knowledge, and allow them to organize their acquired knowledge in their minds.

"There is only so much that a person can remember, so I make a sort of 'know-how notebook,' where I write down what I learned from the field, as well as knowledge, experience, methods, and cautions. I have a book of my own on work knowledge (Lee)."

Experienced life sports instructors wish to pass on their know-how to their junior colleagues, in order to provide advice and guide as a senior professional with longer experience and more know-hows, and to train their successors who will continue their work. In providing instruction to less experienced employees, senior instructors can find what they did not know before, and come across new perspectives that offer new chances for learning.

"When new instructors come, I think about what and how much to tell them. I study or prepare for these opportunities, since I have to provide some direction to new instructors who do not know anything about the field (Kim)."

"[New instructors] sometimes ask me things that I never thought about. This can be difficult, but it is an opportunity to learn more about my job (Park)."

In this process of distribution, accumulated know-how is organized and distributed, which shows that this learning type also

offers opportunities for life sports instructors to engage in informal learning.

Expansion: If instructors were more interested in their own area of work in their workplace, in this new phase they expand their horizon to the outside. They work to find implications from other sports centers or life sports facilities to apply what they learned to their workplace.

"I try to go to academic seminars and workshops related to life sports to exchange information and discuss points for improvement as often as possible. Staying in one place for a long time prevents me from following the trend and fall behind (Park)."

Expansion of perspective regarding their professional area also takes place. After their focus on their own professional field, life sports instructors actively accept changes to the professional environment and make efforts to complement where they are behind.

"The times and environment are rapidly changing. I think I should follow the trend without falling behind. I am a bit old, but in order to be a leader and not die out, I think I need to take interest in areas that are not in my expertise. The future world will emphasize creativity and convergence (Lee)."

Solid understanding of their own professional area allows life sports instructors to expand that perspective outside. This shows that even highly experienced life sports instructors sustain learning activity, which can be expressed as expansion, an informal learning type.

Learning improvement method for a life sports instruction through informal learning

As regards the learning improvement method for a life sports instruction through informal learning, learning environment should be constructed 1) from the personal and content-related aspects, 2) cultural and environmental aspects, and 3) institutional and organizational aspects.

Personal and content-related aspects: First, instructors need to actively accept trial and error. They repeat the process of failure and learning from their mistakes while applying their acquired knowledge to internalize it. Trial and error in this case negatively impacts performance in short term, but a long-term aspect of learning, it is a necessary learning process crucial to owning the knowledge.

Second, encouragement for developing expertise is required. In order for the instructors to enhance expertise, they must harbor the will to become a key member of their professional community and voluntarily engage in learning activities. The organization, in turn, must boost life sports instructors' sense of belonging and develop their expertise.

Third, the necessity of change and its direction must be suggested; the organization must bring up the need for change and propose its direction, that is, a vision. Experienced life sports instructors have expert knowledge and know-hows about their professional area, as well as a high drive and love for their organization and work. As such, leaders of life sports instruction institutions should propose directions by harmonizing the visions and values of experienced instructors intend to achieve by learning new areas with the visions and values of the organization.

Cultural and environmental aspects: First, there must be an interest and consideration for learning activities of the beginning instructors, who require advice and help from more experienced colleagues due to their near lack of knowledge on their work. However, in a culture in which work is at the center while learning is considered auxiliary, new employees have to mind the mood of more experienced colleagues who are busy, even if they have questions. In addition, when the day is busy learning takes a backseat to getting the work done. As such, life sports instruction organizations must understand the necessity of systematic learning for new instructors, and work to create a norm friendly to learning.

Second, instructors must be allowed to participate in decision-making. A culture must be created, in which instructors and the organization regularly share information and instructors actively take part in decision-making process. In the process of developing a new program, for example, instructor opinions should be respected

as those coming from experts, which will enhance their motivation to nurture their expertise through learning. It is desirable to allow instructors to directly and indirectly participate in decision-making not only for field work, but also for policy changes that impact their working conditions. In the end, improving organizational policies under the agreement of life sports instructors can improve the ownership of these professionals.

Third, defensive norm working against changes must be removed. Current life sports instructors should take a change-oriented attitude in which they accept new motivations from inside and outside of the organization to enhance the areas of knowledge that they are familiar with. Many organizations, however, are afraid of risks that come with change, thereby methodically rejecting new elements. This can arrest organizational and personal development, which in turn maintaining negative aspects of the workplace. In the end, actively accepting change and jumping into new areas create opportunities for learning, which in turn engenders sustained innovation.

Institutional and organizational aspects: First, information infrastructure must be established, in order to build a place for sharing knowledge. This will allow the instructors to share resources for learning and accumulate knowledge, in addition to informing them of organizational management information and giving them an outlet to express their opinions.

Second, rewards for merit must be provided, which is required to stimulate the efforts for learning that can enhance the expertise of the instructors. This not only refers to rewards for simple work performance, but also to those for personal capabilities. Such merit-based system promotes instructors based on their ability perform their job regardless of their education or rank, in addition to providing compensation for their performance within their rank. Under this system, the instructors are more likely to make efforts to improve their expertise in a systematic manner because promotions and compensations are made in accordance with abilities.

Third, instructors should be allowed to freely make proposals. Over-regulatory policies can make the instructors feel that their autonomy is violated. As such, if there are activities that can contribute to the instructors' personal learning and development of the

organization, life sports instruction institutions should induce employees to want to engage in such activities, rather than requiring them to employ them. Such changes can continue to improve the working environments for life sports instructors in the field.

4 CONCLUSION

An instructor at a life sports instruction field is relatively lacking in the opportunity to get formal learning in comparison with office job workers. Moreover, it's difficult for the instruction field environment to find an opportunity to get systematic learning for the increase in professionalism as a sports expert. However, a life sports instructor is required to be equipped with upskilling and specificity which do close interaction with learning participants having various demands and characteristics. Conclusively, this study thinks that the informal learning type and learning improvement method have important educational significance for the increase in professionalism as a life sports instructor.

References

- [1] Conlon, T.J., 2004. *A review of informal learning literature, theory and implications for practice in developing global professional competence*. Journal of European Industrial Training, 28 (2/3/4): 283-295.
- [2] Creswell, J.W., 1998. *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- [3] Cross, J., 2007. *Informal learning: Rediscovering the natural pathways that inspire innovation and performance*. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley, USA.
- [4] Cseh, M., Watkins, K.E., and Marsick, V.J., 1998. *Informal and incidental learning in the workplace*. In R. Torraco (Ed.), Proceedings of the Annual Conference of the Academy of Human Resource Development. Baton Rouge, LA: AHRD.
- [5] Dobbs, K., 2000. *Simple moments of learning*. Training, 37 (1): 52-58.

- [6] Lincoln, Y.S. and Guba, E.G., 1985. *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- [7] Lohman, M.C., 2005. *A survey of factors influencing the engagement of two professional groups in informal workplace learning activities*. Human Resource Development Quarterly, 16 (4): 501-527.
- [8] Mallet, C.J., Trudel, P., Lyle, J., and Rynne, S.B., 2009. Formal vs. *Informal coach education*. International Journal of Sport Science and Coaching, 4 (3): 325-341.
- [9] Merriam, S.B. and Caffarella, R.S., 1999. *Learning in adulthood (2nd ed.)*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- [10] Sorohan, E.G., 1993. *We do; Therefore, we learn*. *Training & Development*, 47 (10): 47-54.
- [11] Spradley, J.P., 1980. *Participant observation*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.