Incidental learning is unintentional or unplanned learning that results from other activities. It occurs often in the workplace and when using computers, in the process of completing tasks (Baskett 1993; Cahoon 1995). It happens in many ways: through observation, repetition, social interaction, and problem solving (Cahoon 1995; Rogers 1997); from implicit meanings in classroom or workplace policies or expectations (Leroux and Lafleur 1995); by watching or talking to colleagues or experts about tasks (van Tillaart et al. 1998); from mistakes, assumptions, beliefs, and attributions (Cseh, Watkins, and Marsick 1999); or from being forced to accept or adapt to situations (English 1999). This “natural” way of learning (Rogers 1997) has characteristics of what is considered most effective in formal learning situations: it is situated, contextual, and social.

Incidental learning can result in improved competence, changed attitudes, and growth in interpersonal skills, self-confidence, and self-awareness (McFerrin 1999; Mealman 1993; Ross-Gordon and Dowling 1995). However, not all unplanned learning is effective. Ford and Herren (1995) and Leroux and Lafleur (1995) highlight the “hit or miss” nature of incidental learning, and Dodge (1998) reports more serious consequences—for example, in the “learned” subversion of occupational safety practices in the workplace.

Incidental learning is often not recognized or labeled as learning by learners or others (Ross-Gordon and Dowling 1995) and thus it is difficult to measure and harness for use. However, “unintended consequences of a learning situation are often more important to the learner than the original objectives” (McFerrin 1999, p. 1). Adult learners often do not distinguish between formally and incidentally acquired learning (Mealman 1993) or prefer incidental learning opportunities to formal ones (Cahoon 1995; Ross-Gordon and Dowling 1995). Seniors in Woods and Daniel’s (1998) study retained incidental learning that was personally meaningful.

How can educators help learners make incidental learning outcomes explicit? Mealman (1993) explains how to create a climate that fosters incidental learning. Other suggestions include opportunities for social exchanges (Lawrence 2000; Powerful Partnerships 1998), arrangement of the workplace (Brown and Duguid 2000); development of critical reflection skills (Cseh et al. 1999); and facilitation activities (LearnScope Team 2000). The following resources provide additional information.


Most work-related learning occurs informally and incidentally and is self-directed. As one moves from planned and “other-directed” learning to informal learning and incidental learning embedded in experience, the visibility and distinctiveness of learning as a separate act diminishes.


Good office design can produce powerful learning environments. But much of that power comes from incidental learning. In the absence of good design, the need for more cumbersome formal learning and informing processes increases.


In the workplace, most learning occurs in the course of work practices. Incidental learning about computers through mutual problem solving and coaching had been more important in skill development than formal training. Incidental learning appears to constitute a socialization process.


Although online discussion group members can articulate an intention to learn from the discussion, much incidental learning also occurs. In a survey of group members, 29 percent said their learning from the discussion is incidental and 53 percent said they learn both incidentally and deliberately at different times.


Findings of a study of critical learning experiences of Romanian small business owners were used to extend Marsick and Watkins’ model to include both the sequences of learning processes and the language people used to describe them.


Evidence from the occupational safety and health field suggests that much unintentional learning that takes place in the workplace is not a result of conscious decisions and lacks critical reflection. Such learning may have negative consequences. Action can be taken to identify and mitigate the effects of unintentional learning.


Observations and interviews of 20 parishioners in Catholic rural parishes led by female lay pastors in the absence of priests identified conditions influencing incidental learning, including experience of change and the need to take action.


Work program coordinators in Georgia believe they are prepared to teach work ethics. However, their actual teaching of work ethics was informal or unintentional.
Much incidental learning occurred in a degree program that was not attributed to the course content itself. In a residential workshop, learning took place during evening social activities, on porch steps, during meals, at the computer lab, and in people’s rooms late at night.


Secondary teachers in Ontario reported that their teaching of employability skills was indirect—students absorbed them through classroom policies and management practices.


Most of the learning in small British businesses surveyed was incidental and sporadic. Only a fraction of incidental knowledge was communicated to others; thus it did not contribute significantly to organizational development.


Two types of incidental learning outcomes were observed: one from the students’ use of the technology itself and the second centered on an increase in time management ability, self-directive behavior, self-confidence, and self-discipline.


Incidental and intentional learning played equally important roles in adults’ overall experience. Incidental learning was fostered through small-group interaction, flexible course assignments, peer stories, application of learning in work and personal contexts, instructor-facilitated discussions, and applied research assignments.


Much learning takes place informally and incidentally, beyond explicit teaching or the classroom. Faculty can enhance informal and incidental learning in specific ways.


A major proportion of formally undereducated adults are very much engaged in informal and incidental learning. Study of the more informal and incidental forms of engagement in learning would reveal the learning that occurs through social networks.


Argues that adult educators use “learning” when they mean “education” and that this confounds and demeans incidental and informal learning processes. Suggests that adult educators need to build on how individuals learn naturally and incidentally.


African-American women involved in voluntary organizations reported frequent informal, incidental learning opportunities, resulting in changed ability to interact with others, growing self-confidence, and greater connection to group and community. They preferred this learning to formal education.


Changes in work are shifting the role of human resource professionals from formal training to supporting and capturing incidental learning in the workplace.


Case studies in the printing industry show that many employees kept their qualifications up to date through incidental learning (including learning by solving problems individually or with colleagues, asking for help from experienced colleagues, and learning under the boss or an experienced worker).


Results of a study showed that older adults can learn from incidental exposure to information (obtained by attending a lecture and film on tourism) and retain it.

This project has been funded at least in part with Federal funds from the U.S. Department of Education under Contract No. ED-99-CO-0013. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government. Trends and Issues Alerts may be freely reproduced and are available at <http://ericacve.org/tia.asp>.