

**CAEL**  
Linking Learning and Work

## The Hidden Classroom of the Workplace

*How employees learn at work in both formal and informal ways*



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September 2014



# The Hidden Classroom of the Workplace

## How employees learn at work in both formal and informal ways

Many of us are accustomed to the idea that we learn at school and that a college education is acquired in college classrooms. In reality, however, learning takes place in all aspects of a person's life — through military experience, raising a family, volunteering, and perhaps most significantly in the workplace. Learning that occurs in the workplace can be very job specific, but it can also be broader — something that helps employees develop skills and competencies, take on new responsibilities, and even contribute to the organization's bottom line.



Prior learning assessment, or PLA, is the term for the evaluation of the learning from a person's work and life experience for the purpose of awarding college credit for that learning. CAEL's LearningCounts service, for example, works with individuals to develop portfolios that showcase what they have learned and then present that portfolio to CAEL-trained faculty assessors who evaluate the learning for college credit toward a degree or other credential.

The workplace learning examples described in this report are taken from real portfolios by working adults participating in LearningCounts. The examples show how the workplace can, and does, serve as a learning laboratory for workers, suggesting that employers might benefit from understanding more about how this learning laboratory can contribute to the organization.

## How can workplace learning pay off?

Portfolio assessment is an important tool used to evaluate learning from work or life experience to earn college credit, thus saving employees time and money on their pathways to a degree.

We are able to get a clearer picture of how and where learning occurs in the workplace by taking a closer look at LearningCounts portfolios that demonstrate skills learned on the job. We selected 18 LearningCounts portfolios for closer examination, choosing those submitted by participants who are pursuing postsecondary degrees at a variety of institutions, and who are currently working in a range of career fields, including information technology (IT), business administration and management, nursing, human resources, and manufacturing. The knowledge that these employees gained in their workplaces earned them anywhere from 3 to 18 college credits, averaging 6 credits each (Figure 1). These 6 credits yielded a median cost-savings of nearly \$3,000 per person and average time-savings of a semester of part-time (half-time) study, though some students saved up to three semesters of study. (Cost savings calculation is explained in [www.cael.org/pdfs/Cost-Savings-from-LearningCounts2014.pdf](http://www.cael.org/pdfs/Cost-Savings-from-LearningCounts2014.pdf))

### AREA OF STUDY OF 18 LEARNINGCOUNTS PORTFOLIOS

- Business Administration
- Communications
- Criminal Justice
- Human Resources
- Information Technology
- Manufacturing
- Teaching

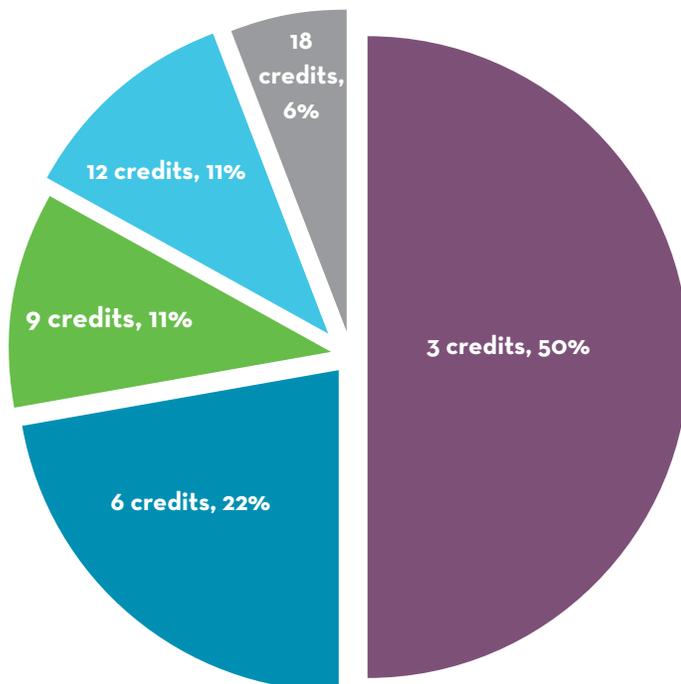


Figure 1.  
Number of college credits earned per employee enrolled in LearningCounts (n=18)

**Employee Profile: "Ashley"**  
Field: Nursing  
Portfolio topic: Communications  
Credits earned: 3

*"Ashley" started working in a mental health unit at a hospital right after high school while earning a CNA and then an LPN. Only three credits shy of her bachelor's degree and with an enrollment deadline fast approaching, she began LearningCounts to create a portfolio for a communications course.*

*Ashley learned the communication skills she demonstrated in her learning portfolio through mostly informal learning on the job. "It was a lot of trial and error in the beginning. Nurses have to win the trust of the patient because we know what is best for them in terms of health. The patient may not want to listen, so we have to get on their level and show them that we care."*

*In Ashley's workplace learning laboratory, she developed effective communication skills through experimentation and by observing and consulting more experienced nurses. By tying this learning to communications theory and demonstrating successful application of this theory, she was able to earn college credit. She completed her bachelor's degree and is now in graduate school while working in the cardiovascular unit of a hospital. "The process helped me realize that I do have skills, and without my job, I wouldn't have them."*



### How does workplace learning happen?

Learning that happens in the workplace can occur in a number of ways.

1. **Formal learning** is intentional learning that happens in college classes or professional trainings.
2. **Non-formal learning** takes place in a structured setting like a workshop or mentoring session.
3. **Informal learning** (or experiential learning) occurs when someone is exposed to situations that facilitate acquiring knowledge or a new skill.

Regardless of how an employee learns something, with the right resources, the knowledge and skills can be turned into college credit in a wide range of subject areas (see example in box).

## Formal learning in the workplace

Companies often provide in-house training to their employees or encourage them to take certain courses or obtain professional certifications to prepare themselves for the challenges of a specific work environment. Half of the portfolios we reviewed contained learning from these types of formal situations. For example:

- **Information technology** professionals received special instruction and classes on the use of software applications and systems along with changes or updates in technology.
- Within the field of **human resources**, employees earned credentials like the Professional in Human Resources (PHR) certification and, as important sources of information in the office environment, often had completed extensive training on topics like health care and personal finances.
- Those in **manufacturing** were trained in industry safety standards and had earned Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) certifications.

In addition, some LearningCounts participants incorporated into their portfolios learning from formal military training and employer trainings on resume building, sexual harassment, and cultural diversity. These types of formal learning lend themselves well to LearningCounts portfolio assessment.

### Employee Profile: "Ed"

Field: IT

Portfolio topics:  
Business Leadership,  
Communications,  
and Technology

Credits earned: 18

*In his first year of college, "Ed" decided to leave his studies to join the workforce in an entry-level position at an insurance company. For twenty years, he experienced "progression of continually increasing responsibilities" which resulted in his appointment as a senior executive.*

*Ed decided to look for other employment opportunities, but found that "not having a degree is often the reason for not being selected for a position," so he decided to pursue an MBA. With the help of LearningCounts, Ed was able to identify a variety of skills that he had gained as a manager in an international organization. He had participated in non-formal leadership training on a number of occasions, and his hands-on experience was extensive.*

*"I had no idea that I could earn credit for what I learned through experience, but I felt that should be able to. I had learned a huge amount and I really wanted to leverage that toward my degree." Ed now works as an IT consultant and is nearly finished with his degree.*

## Informal learning in the workplace

Whether or not employees participate in specific trainings or classes, their daily tasks or particular experiences can also result in learning worthy of college credit. Most jobs require a certain level of specialized knowledge that is often acquired informally by learning from peers and supervisors, studying instructional materials, or through simple trial and error.

- **Information Technology** portfolios demonstrated a great deal of learning through personal study and experimentation. One employee explained that, since technology moves at such a rapid pace, IT specialists must make an independent effort to remain apprised of the current state of their field. These workers tended to have a passion for technology that extended beyond their careers; and therefore, they had a breadth of self-taught or developed-on-the-job technological skills.
- In their portfolios, workers in **manufacturing** discussed their extensive hands-on experience with building, operating, and repairing equipment and machinery. When interviewed later, they reported that these skills were developed by observation of coworkers and eventual application of this learning, which resulted in college credit in topics such as parametric modeling and safety engineering.

Portfolios for other fields like communications, criminal justice, business administration, and project management cited increasing responsibilities as the vehicle for learning. When given a new task or responsibility, these individuals worked hard and drew on any and all resources in order to meet expectations, all the while gaining new skills and competencies drawn from the lessons of their successes and mistakes.

### Employee Profile: "David"

Field: Manufacturing

Portfolio topic:  
Parametric modeling

Credits earned: 9

*"David's" interest in drafting and engineering began in high school, where he took drafting classes and learned basic software. After graduation, he could not afford to go to college, and so he found an entry-level job at a manufacturing firm. In that particular workplace learning laboratory, he began what he describes as an "informal apprenticeship," learning new drafting techniques and 3D software from coworkers, and practicing during his breaks.*

*He took advantage of the courses and training offered through his employer, as well as the more informal learning that came from doing his day-to-day job. As his skills increased, so did his responsibilities; and he eventually became a lab technician. Yet, David still wanted to earn a degree. "In the manufacturing field, you can have experience, but I know that HR people don't always understand experience; they look for education."*

*David's self-taught drafting skills paid off when he earned 9 credits for modeling courses through LearningCounts. He has since earned his bachelor's degree and continues to use these skills in his work.*

## Non-formal learning in the workplace

Sometimes, employers organize non-formal situations in which the employee is likely to learn general lessons and tricks of the trade. This was especially true for the portfolio creators from the fields of business administration and criminal justice. In multiple cases, the employees were paired with mentors or worked very closely with supervisors in order to acquire the skills necessary to effectively fulfill their duties. For example:

- **Business administrators** recognized as future leaders were taken under the wing of upper management so that lessons in leadership could be passed along. Employers also provided leadership trainings and seminars, and in one case, personal assessment by an organizational psychologist to identify management strengths and weaknesses.
- In **criminal justice**, daily interaction with crime scene investigators allowed the employee to pick up on the procedures and protocols that typically would be conveyed during a more formal training or in a classroom.
- An employee in the field of **manufacturing** underwent a three-year apprenticeship that resulted in significant college-level learning.

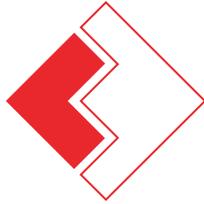
## How can employers help?

By seeing how these successful portfolio creators attained the high levels of college-equivalent learning, it becomes clear that the workplace is a dynamic setting for the conveyance of knowledge and skills. Companies can facilitate this learning by providing training, informal learning opportunities, and time to practice and develop new skills. Just as in university laboratories, employees in a workplace learning laboratory gather information from authorities in the field and test this new knowledge in a way that:

- demonstrates applicability,
- encourages knowledge retention (by practicing skills, they are better able to hold on to that learning), and
- takes advantage of opportunities to learn from errors and improve techniques.

Employees who have access to a range of educational opportunities, whether formal, informal, or non-formal, have the ability to become more effective and competent workers. When employers provide training, mentorship opportunities, and hands-on experience, the result can be a more skilled and prepared workforce.

Portfolio assessment is a proven method to help adult learners reflect on what they have learned and where they learned it, showcasing the many ways in which the workplace is a hub for learning – learning that is valued both in a postsecondary institution and on the job. They can also earn college credit through this process, which not only saves them time and money but also validates the knowledge and skills that they have gained from the workplace and helps them understand the relationship between their formal degree-seeking and their work/careers. Receiving portfolio credit, for one employee, “was really exhilarating. It was a validation of the work that I put in to developing the portfolio – and it validated the experience that I had.”



# CAEL

**Linking Learning and Work**

As a national leader, we strive to lead the evolving national discussion on unique challenges and opportunities linking adult learners and work. We advocate and innovate on behalf of all adult learners, regardless of their socio-economic circumstances, to increase access to education and economic security and to develop and provide effective services and tools. We work to enhance our thought leadership role through our research and work with adult learners, postsecondary education institutions, employers and government.

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