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# How online journalists learn within a non-formal context

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the understanding of workplace learning, with a focus on the non-formal learning that takes place among online journalists. The focus of this article is journalists working in an online newspaper and their experiences with workplace and non-formal learning, centring on framework conditions and learning environments.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The empirical data in this article are based on qualitative interviews conducted with journalists working in an online newspaper in the Western part of Norway. The sample comprises of five informants. The interviews were based on a combination of open-ended and more specific questions where the aim was to get a broad perspective on the informants' experiences workplace non-formal learning and to investigate alternative perspectives that emerged during the interviews.

**Findings** – The findings indicate that a theory of online journalists' workplace learning should take into account the fact that learning, in this context, takes place at various levels of conscious awareness, encompassing cognitive, behavioural, motivational and emotional aspects.

**Originality/value** – This project provides the field of workplace learning and journalism with context-specific research on the non-formal learning processes of online journalists.

**Keywords** Professional development, Workplace learning, Non-formal learning, Online journalism

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Until recently, research on online journalism has focused on its properties and how it relates to and is different from traditional journalism, as well as how it relates to established theoretical positions (Mitchelstein and Boczkowski, 2009). While studies have stressed how newsrooms cope with innovation and change (see Dupagne and Garrison, 2006; Paterson and Domingo, 2008), this study examines the framework conditions for action and non-formal learning within a newsroom as reported by online journalists. Defining online journalism requires differentiating it from “analogue” journalism based on its technological qualities (Deuze, 2001). The product of online journalism is multimedial and characterized by interactivity, and hypertextuality is involved (Ward, 2002).

Non-formal learning has been integrated into lifelong learning policies in Europe as a key asset regarding employment, employability and professional development on both the individual and corporate levels (see OECD, 2003, 2009; Werquin, 2010). Research on non-formal learning is extensive, and several empirical works have been produced in a wide range of professional arenas, including education (Hoekstra *et al.*,



2007; Lohman, 2006), medicine (Bahn, 2007), social work (Gola, 2009) and management (Enos *et al.*, 2003; McCall, 1998).

Knowles (1950) coined the term “informal learning” and is considered to be the first researcher to study informal learning among adults. His perspectives influenced further empirical research on adult learning – research that was based in various contexts and had distinct epistemic starting points (Straka, 2004). Le Clus’s (2011, p. 370) review of the literature on informal learning defines this type of learning as “planned or unplanned learning that is often spur-of-the-moment learning, self-directed, and involves trying new things and learning along the way”. In the same way that online journalists seem to rely on their own resources when practicing journalism, similar patterns are found in Hoekstra *et al.*’s (2007) study of teachers, in which the individual perspective on informal learning was identified (from the practitioner’s point of view) as more beneficial than collaboration with other teachers.

Recent research on the relevance and usefulness of the knowledge and skills acquired through formal education points to a significant gap between the formal knowledge and skills learned in educational institutions and the knowledge needed (Tynjälä, 2008). According to Eraut (2004), skills and knowledge from formal education can be transferable. However, he states that there is little evidence as to whether the knowledge that vocational and professional programmes claim to provide (i.e. theoretical knowledge, methodological knowledge, practical skills and techniques, generic skills and general knowledge about the occupation) is actually transferred into the workplace. This finding is supported by research on polytechnic graduates’ working-life skills and expertise (see Stenström, 2006; Tynjälä *et al.*, 2006).

In general, non-formal workplace learning can be distinguished from formal learning by its tacit nature and the spontaneous and unorganized character of the relevant learning process. This poses a challenge to the workers’ ability to make this knowledge and learning processes explicit and recognize when non-formal learning is taking place (Eraut, 2000a; Hager, 2004). Coffield (2000) describes the relationship between formal and informal learning as an iceberg: informal learning is represented by the large, submerged part of the iceberg. There have been several attempts to distinguish between non-formal and informal learning, and there are various discourses regarding these concepts (Colley *et al.*, 2002). The theoretical and analytical foundation for this article is Michael Eraut’s typology of non-formal learning, as shown in Table I (p. 6). Based on this background, “non-formal learning” will be used in the presentation and discussion that follow, and we will not distinguish between non-formal and informal learning. In this article, Eraut’s framework serves as a basis for understanding the learning-related aspects of the present study’s context, focusing on reactive and deliberate learning.

This study investigates the framework conditions for action and learning in relation to the environment that online journalists interact with (e.g. readers, colleagues and online forums) and in relation to work-specific tasks. The study provides a perspective on the learning environment within which online journalists practise their profession. In the next section, the article’s theoretical foundations will be presented.

### Theoretical framework

Eraut (2000b, p. 12) claims that the term “non-formal”, rather than “informal”, should be used because as he argues, most learning takes place outside formal learning contexts and informal learning involves:

**Table I.**  
Eraut's (2000a,  
p. 116, 2000b)  
typology of non-  
formal learning

Time of stimulus	Implicit learning	Reactive learning	Deliberative learning
Past episode(s)	Implicit linkage of past memories with current experience	Brief near-spontaneous reflection on past episodes, communications, events, experiences	Review of past actions, communications, experiences with events. More systematic reflection
Current experience	A selection from experience enters the memory	Incidental noting of facts, opinions, impressions, ideas. Recognition of learning opportunities	Engagement in decision-making, problem-solving, planned informal learning
Future behaviour	Unconscious effect of previous experiences	Being prepared for emergent learning opportunities	Planned learning goals. Planned learning opportunities

[...] so many other features of a situation, such as dress, discourse, behavior, diminution of social differences – that its colloquial application as a descriptor of learning contexts may have little to do with learning *per se*.

Therefore, the concept of non-formal learning is used in this article.

A typology of non-formal learning is presented in Table I, which illustrates non-formal learning in terms of *time of stimulus* and *level of intention*.

With implicit learning on one side, deliberative learning on the opposite side and reactive learning located in between, Eraut creates a continuum focused on the level of learning intention. Arthur S. Reber (1996, p. 5) coined the term “implicit learning” almost four decades ago and defined it as “the acquisition of knowledge that takes place largely independently of conscious attempts to learn and largely in the absence of explicit knowledge about what was acquired”. Deliberative learning is placed on the opposite end of the continuum and refers to intentional, non-formal learning for which time has been set aside. In the centre of the continuum, we find reactive learning, which is explicit, taking place “spontaneously and in response to recent, current or imminent situations, but without any time being set aside for it” (Smith, 2008). According to Eraut (2004, p. 250), examples of these activities include “noting facts, ideas, opinions, impressions; asking questions; observing effects of actions”. Thus, the person is, to a certain extent, consciously aware of learning, but he or she is not deliberately trying to change any specific practice.

These continua coined by Eraut are based on Dewey’s (1933/1998) work on reflexivity and Schön’s (1983) concept of the reflective practitioner, with a focus on shedding light on the relationship between specific learning episodes and the experiences that triggered the learning process. Schön’s work on reflection-in-action provides this project with a starting point for understanding the reactive learning processes that occur in an online newsroom. Reflection-in-action is instantaneous reflection that produces immediate changes in current actions (Schön, 1983, 1987). According to Schön (1983, p. 145), reflection-in-action involves experimenting, which means “[acting] in order to see what the action leads to”. Schön describes three types of experiments related to reflection-in-action:

- (1) *Exploratory experiments*: Invigorating an action to see what happens.
- (2) *Move-testing*: Invigorating specific actions to create intentional outcomes or outcomes that are appealing.
- (3) *Hypothesis-testing*: Testing hypotheses based on a need for intervention in a specific situation.

The latter connects to Schön’s concept of reframing: When a certain action or activity does not lead to the expected outcome, the person involved may be “seeing” one thing as something else. In this sense, reframing one’s own thinking about a specific subject gives room for alternative actions. The notion of reframing is borrowed from Schön to shed light on the stories the journalists told about situations in which they experienced changes in their perspectives on their own practice.

## Methodology

The empirical data in this article are based on qualitative, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews conducted with journalists working in an online newspaper in the western

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part of Norway. The qualitative interview served as a method for exploring the informants' experiences and interpretations and was shaped by the work of [Kvale and Brinkmann \(2009\)](#) on the interview process, [Mishler's \(1986\)](#) work on the importance of contextual information and [Spradley's \(1979\)](#) work on question types. The online journalist sample was composed of five informants, all of whom were Norwegian men between 24 and 34 years old with journalistic experience at *Bergen Today Online* – a small tabloid-style online newspaper based on the print version of *Bergen Today*. The informants were recruited through a formal inquiry to the chief editor, who provided a list of journalists with at least four years of journalism experience in total and who had worked for the last two years as online journalists. The interviewer (MK) had no relationships to the field of informants prior to the interviews or to the field of journalism. The second author (ME) of this paper has expertise in the field of journalism but was not involved in the work before the data were anonymized.

An interview guide containing four main sections was developed: background information about the respondents, understanding of one's own profession (role, mandate, etc.), understanding of learning and non-formal learning and reflections on previous action and knowledge. The sections were broken down into subheadings containing relevant questions. Examples of subheadings included new procedures, access to and use of resources, maintaining knowledge and reflection on learning and professional development. The categories were inspired by the conceptual framework for non-formal learning created by [Eraut](#). The semi-structured interview questions were piloted prior to administration. Based on the perspectives of [Lincoln and Guba \(1985\)](#), informants' responses were validated through member checking, which was conducted during and immediately following the interviews. The information from the informants was summarized, and the informants were questioned to increase the accuracy of the material. The interviews were conducted in Norwegian and then translated into English. [Table II](#) below provides an overview of the informants in this study.

The data were analysed according to standard techniques of data reduction ([Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995](#); [Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009](#)). In the initial stage of the

Name	Age	Education and experience
Tore	34	Tore has extensive experience from various media, including radio and newspapers, both printed and online. He does not have a formal journalism education, but has an undergraduate degree in political science
Anders	28	Anders has been working as a journalist since he finished high school at the age of 19. He has an undergraduate degree in history and some courses in web design, but no formal journalism education
Leif	28	Leif has been working in several newspapers, both online and written, since he graduated from journalism school five years ago
Terje	32	Terje has been a full-time journalist for the past five years. In the past, he studied political science and worked as freelancer. He works primarily as an online journalist in <i>Bergen Today Online</i> but also part-time as news journalist in <i>Bergen Today</i>
Steinar	24	Steinar holds a Bachelor's Degree in Journalism. He started his career in a local newspaper at the age of 17. During his studies, he worked as a journalist in the student newspaper

**Table II.**  
Informants—name,  
age, education and  
experience

analysis, all the material was read carefully to develop codes that would “define the action or experience described by the interviewee” (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, p. 202). The analysis at this stage addressed individual and experiential issues, along with the implications of practical enactment and time pressure. Reading the material in light of this analysis, the categories presented in this article were inspired by Eraut’s (2000b) conceptual framework for non-formal learning. Based on this framework, four subcategories were derived, as depicted in Table III.

The data are presented and discussed throughout the next section. The goal of the next section is to provide an understanding of two aspects of non-formal learning: reactive learning and deliberative learning.

### Discussion of the results

The aim is to describe the central aspects of self-directed, non-formal learning that takes place in an online newsroom.

#### *Reactive learning*

Reactive learning occurs in response to a situation with no time set aside for it (Smith, 2008). Time is a crucial factor in the work of online journalists. The informants report that speed influences online news production in several ways. The five journalists underline the fact that time is an important factor in all kinds of journalism, and it permeates online news production. An excerpt from the interview with Tore emphasizes this finding:

In online journalism, you encounter running deadlines and continuous pressure to a greater degree. When news is presented online, it is not static or cemented but [consists of] objects that can be changed and edited in seconds, as I obtain additional or new information. This demands a completely different perspective on the concept of deadlines.

Bearing in mind the importance of speed, the two subcategories of reactive learning are presented below.

*Reframing.* The journalists experienced a change in focus or perspective regarding certain situations; in this context, this is labelled *reframing*. This concept refers to new ways of thinking about beliefs, ideas or relationships:

After my formal journalism education, I felt that I had the skills necessary to be a good journalist, to ask the right questions, to use the right techniques and so on. I remember one of the first cases I was working on several years ago, in which I had information from different sources, such as a politician, a labour union leader and several employees. After talking to all of them, speaking with the politician first, and being supervised by my editor, I realized how easy it was to be caught up by rhetoric. I really had to put effort into learning how to interview in real life.

Leif

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Reactive learning

Deliberative learning

Reframing  
Monitoring

Alternatives of action  
Experimenting

**Table III.**  
Categories

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Leif tells a story that, on one hand, shows the barrier between theory and practice. More importantly, Leif had to reframe his view of the journalistic interview and his view of his own practice. In the conversations with Leif, he elaborated on how uncertain and troubling that experience was and how he saw his own practice as uncertain and puzzling. This led him to react, take a step back and, with help from the editor, analyse his own practice, which led to focusing on the means he needed to use to become a better interviewer, including supervision by his editor and peers and spending an increased amount of time preparing for interviews. What appeared to be happening in this particular situation was that based on the materials, Leif constructed a problem based on a situation that he perceived as “puzzling, troubling and uncertain” (Schön, 1983, p. 40). In this sense, he considered and named the issues he chose to attend to and (re-)framed the situation. This type of reflection is, in this sense, reflection-on-action, and it fits into Van Manen’s (1995) retrospective dimension, which is a common type of reflection that most of us experience, e.g. trying and failing to apply a theory in practice.

Terje presents an episode that reframed the way he thought of his writing style: “My writing style has changed over the years, especially in relation the use of figurative language like metaphors.” Here, Terje pinpoints when he started reflecting more deeply on how he used language in his texts. He refers to an episode in which he used the metaphor “*bjørnetjeneste*”[1], which was meant to describe someone doing another person a great favour. However, this metaphor has the opposite meaning, describing a situation in which one is actually doing someone a disservice. Before this critical incident, Terje assumed that his use of figurative language enriched his writing. In Terje’s descriptions of this particular episode, he explains that he published a story about a driver lending a hand to an elderly man and referred to the service as “*bjørnetjeneste*”. He received immediate feedback from a reader and from a fellow colleague, who pointed out his misuse of the word. Terje claims that this particular episode made him more aware of his own writing style and the words he used, and in his opinion, the experience made him a better journalist. Relatedly, Schön (1983, pp. 131-132) states that “[t]he situation talks back, the practitioner listens, and as he appreciates what he hears, he reframes the situation once again”. Although Terje is not, strictly speaking, framing or reframing the problem, this situation is an example of reframing one’s practice based on an immediate situation to take advantage of an incidental learning opportunity. The result of this incident can be characterized as a framework with implications for Terje’s awareness of and attention to written language. In this sense, the experience may facilitate on-the-spot reflection, or what Van Manen (1995) calls “contemporaneous reflection”, in which the practitioner is able to release himself from fixed views and “consider new approaches” (Terje).

*Monitoring.* Monitoring is an ongoing activity among the journalists and refers to what Terje calls their “daily routine”. This entails screening news websites, social networks, Internet forums and other relevant sources for information without any specific motivation. All the journalists report monitoring on a regular basis as a way of orienting themselves regarding what is happening. One potential side effect of this is encouraging the learning process. As Leif states:

I often find myself delving into material that I did not deliberately plan to investigate. The outcome is often not relevant to any specific cases or something to write about, but now and then, I stumble into valuable sources that reward me with a story and new knowledge. The



latter is the motivation behind this work, and I find it especially rewarding to understand and learn about subjects that require some effort to understand.

Anders has similar perspectives related to monitoring, but he also mentions that:

Over the years, I have developed certain strategies when I plow through information. I try to find the main theme of the information I'm writing about and organize it into categories that I have physically made in the shape of Favourites folders in the browser. These categories are constantly revised due to the new information I find as I learn more about certain topics.

This monitoring process is characterized by an awareness that involves certain strategies, as shown by Anders, and a motivation to learn, as referred to by Leif. The awareness seems to be connected to online journalists' understanding of what is considered to be important, either as a personal matter, as a possible case or both. They must be able to regulate their learning behaviour and adjust their efforts based on the information at hand. Monitoring is an active process in itself, but it does not necessarily involve learning until the online journalist stumbles across material of interest. What the informants report is a reflection on the potential of monitoring. In this sense, learning is more than the subconscious transformation of our orientations. It is also a reflection upon our actions. [Hodkinson et al. \(2008, p. 40\)](#) claim that:

[t]ennis players do not acquire their habitus and feel for the game without some conscious monitoring of their actions. They need motivation and concentration not only to get their skills right but also to understand the point of the game of tennis.

Monitoring may be considered a deliberative process in itself, but it is clearly incidental and reactive when one stumbles across information that sparks the learning process. The monitoring process may be strategic or less structured, primarily a way of finding relevant information and not necessarily a learning process. However, recognizing learning opportunities is part of the monitoring process and is considered to be a reactive learning process. This corresponds with the findings from [Hoekstra et al.'s \(2007\)](#) study of teachers who taught pre-university education classes. The findings indicated that monitoring happened "on a less conscious level than theory on self-regulated learning maintains [...] [and that the teachers] [...] were not always monitoring in the sense of active observation" (p. 203).

### *Deliberative learning*

*Alternatives of action.* The *alternatives of action* category refers to how the journalists weigh and think about the alternatives of action and how they should proceed.

To a great extent, online journalism expertise is determined by the way in which journalists must be able to think in the midst of busy situations. In these situations, deliberative problem-solving is the default strategy because journalists' "expertise is constructed [so as] to enable them to short circuit such time-consuming responses" ([Eraut, 2005, p. 60](#)). However, time and efficiency are not the only factors central to the journalists' expertise. The ability to make correct decisions is also the key. An example of this is Tore's perspective on how he relates to alternatives of action:

Making decisions regarding what angles to use, whether to use pictures or videos or both, who to interview for more information on the matter at hand and what to publish and when are examples of the decisions I have to make during the day. I think better decisions come with work-related experience and not from formal study.

Thus, reflections on their own professional and personal knowledge and emotional commitment saturate the journalists' practice and show that the relationship between knowledge and the individual journalist seems to be a close one and that knowledge is perceived as highly personal. The emotional commitment to their practice is clear from the interviews with the five journalists; they are deeply involved in developing online journalism and online news production. In this sense, online journalism is not only about making decisions based on rational thinking but also about involving one's emotions. The role of emotions is not thoroughly investigated in journalism, but emotions play an important role in the teaching profession (see [Hargreaves, 1998](#)) and have been undervalued in research on teaching ([Sutton and Wheatley, 2003](#)).

As shown in the interviews, this emotional and physical engagement with the material reveals that the process of developing the material and solving problems is based on forethought about how to proceed. In contrast to past-oriented reflection, anticipatory reflection, the prospective reflection on future-oriented practices, is present among online journalists. "Anticipatory reflection", a term coined by [van Manen \(1991\)](#), precedes reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action ([Schön, 1983](#)). Anders, for example, states the following:

I happen to get stuck and need to find other ways to angle a case. In relation to the extensive construction work in the city, we have had a series of cases. Yesterday, I was tipped about a case in which construction workers were not following the safety regulations on a roof. The dilemma in this case was whether to spend time getting a photo of the situation, call relevant sources for more information or just publish it and update the case later. I chose the last option, primarily because of the time aspect but also based on the fact that the workers were not secured and posed a danger to themselves and others. I then notified the relevant officials about the occurrence.

Anders chose to inform the readers by first publishing the story and later contacting the labour inspection authorities. This is, first and foremost, an ethical issue, but it is also an example of a work-based, goal-directed action reflecting a deliberate choice between alternatives.

Planning, seeking feedback, motivational control and dealing with emotions are activities that are described in the literature on self-regulated learning ([Pintrich, 2004](#); [Vermunt and Verloop, 1999](#)). These activities are used in learning-based goal-directed action in much the same way as they are in work-based goal-directed action. However, the practises that involve the alignment of behaviour with a plan are not described in the literature on learning activities and self-regulated learning.

When Anders was asked on what grounds he had made this decision, he explained that experiences with similar problems and the ways in which he had addressed them had provided him with experience regarding what seemed to be "smart" choices. An emerging question related to this situation is what a "smart" choice is. From an ethical perspective, ensuring the workers' security by informing the authorities would probably be the first priority, but Anders chose to inform the readers first and the authorities later. This experiential knowledge on the part of journalists seems to be based on a complex taxonomy that is not necessarily based on general principles defining causal mechanisms ([Patel and Kaufman, 2000](#)). In relation to the typology presented earlier, Anders's explanations refer to engaging in decision-making in the former excerpt and to past experiences in the latter.

*Experimenting.* All informants mentioned examples of experimenting with, for example, new technologies or alternative ways of doing their work. As Leif states:

I'm not only dealing with the journalistic profession in a traditional sense, where you simply do your interviews, digging out information, writing up your material and so on. We add another dimension to it that is closely intertwined with the technology we have at hand. The goals of traditional journalism apply to us and are not changing; we are still committed to informing the public about the truth. However, we are more technology-driven and dependent on finding new ways of developing online journalism, and we are working under constant time pressure.

Anders claims that working with online news production provides the informants and the readers with new information and knowledge. They seem to learn what does or does not work from experimenting with various modes and sometimes through immediate feedback from the readers. Anders provides an illustrative example of experimentation as a deliberative activity based on a specific need:

As an online journalist, I don't have to be a computer geek, but it helps to have basic knowledge about programming and writing HTML code manually, at least before we had more user-friendly GUIs[2]. The pressure was and is still today related to finding the solutions that fit the purpose, e.g. finding and using the right and relevant codes. That has triggered stress in me and sometimes still does, despite the fact that I consider myself a competent ICT user. You must find a solution on the spot. Your colleagues may help you, but most likely, I would use the web to solve it and learn on the go. I tried to create animations using Java a couple of years ago as a spontaneous attempt to spice up a case I was working on. The feedback from my colleagues was good, the hit rate was ok and I received some very useful feedback from people familiar with Java programming, which in one sense, taught me to not underestimate visual methods of online journalism.

The informants claim that technology leads to a continual reconceptualization of their understanding of "how to do" online news production. Technology, in this sense, fuels the development of online journalism and provides the journalists with new perspectives and ultimately new knowledge about online journalism. This relationship between technological artefacts and each of the five journalists can be understood as an objectual practice (see Knorr, 2001; Nerland and Jensen, 2010), in which the interaction between the artefacts and the subject is the primary relationship in a process in which knowledge and new perspectives are continuously developed (Wertsch, 1993). One example of this process appears when Leif explains the development of his use of hyperlinks in the news material he publishes:

A hyperlink is a connection to another source in the mode the reader is currently reading or viewing. In the beginning, I simply used hyperlinks by marking specific words that led to other relevant cases or pages. Linking from static pictures by marking an area that the reader could click to go to other cases or pages followed this. Today, we use hyperlinks in videos; they are placed in specific places in the video. We are not the inventors of this technique, but we have utilized it and made it relevant in our practice.

The informants revealed their struggle to decide how to deal with cases that are not suited for the Internet but are too important not to publish. Their non-formal solution is to throw around ideas, mainly by e-mail or phone, and choose those that seem most likely to work out. These cases might include, for example, technical matters, such as the use of visual or auditory media, or choosing which angle to use. This process is described as experimental, and the informants emphasize their inability to predict the

exact outcome or response in such cases. They publish the material and wait for the response. This feedback takes a variety of forms, from specific comments to more general indicators, such as number of hits, which suggest what does and does not work. As Steinar points out:

This being, for example, technical issues or problems related to design. Considering the time pressure involved, I don't usually have much time at my disposal to solve the challenges. Besides the obvious fact that I'm chasing the ultimate news story, the daily challenges keep me going and develop me as a professional online news journalist. The solution is often found via having to experiment or simply being creative.

This creativity Steinar mentions is closely intertwined with Gynnild's (2006, p. 92) concept of creative processing as a "prerequisite for the journalistic shaping of new knowledge". Thus, creative processing is a fundamental concept for knowledge development within journalistic practice, which is also applicable in this context.

A relevant issue in relation to several of the subcategories is time pressure and the running deadlines that are part of online journalists' daily practice. Speed seems to fuel and structure the process of learning and developing expert knowledge, instead of restraining it. Time pressure seems to be a trigger for learning on the part of online journalists and their increased understanding of online news production. Not only are the news and ways of presenting it changing, but journalists' entire understanding of their own profession is also shifting as new representations are discovered and used in their practice. When time is, according to Eraut (1994, p. 145), "[...] extremely short, decisions have to be rapid, and the scope for reflection is extremely limited". This excerpt refers to a criticism of Schön's concept of reflection-in-action, but this study is an example of a context in which time pressure, decision-making and reflection go hand in hand. The temporality of online news creates temporal "pockets" in which the journalists can experiment with various ways of representing the news, either by using strong visual means or plain text. Online journalists find solutions to the problems and challenges they face during their day-to-day work by experimenting with the variety of technologies at hand and their base of knowledge, which they have accumulated through learning and experiences with online news production. The consequence of having a dynamic and exploratory relationship with learning and knowledge seems to be closely intertwined with the personal commitment that the five journalists show to developing online news production and knowledge related to it.

### Conclusion

The aim of this study has been to explore how online journalists learn within a non-formal context. Several activities have been described in relation to two of Eraut's (2000b) categories of non-formal learning: deliberative and reactive learning. Based on empirical evidence and theoretical perspectives, the *alternatives of action*, *experimenting*, *monitoring* and *reframing* subcategories have been accounted for. The level of conscious awareness of learning is illustrated through the stories told about practice and activities. *Reframing* and *monitoring* are activities that occur on a less conscious level than the use of *alternatives of action* and *experimenting*.

The quotations from interviews show that the informants regard knowledge as a significant aspect of online journalism, both as a driving agent in their practice and

as an important area of professional competence. The knowledge base of each individual journalist seems to fuel the looping process from the person to the knowledge object and back, providing the journalists with experiences in working with online news production and at the same time utilizing the knowledge created from these experiences.

The findings indicate that a theory of online journalists' workplace learning should take into account the fact that learning, in this context, takes place at various levels of conscious awareness that encompass cognitive, behavioural, motivational and emotional factors. These factors have also been found in a similar study on teachers by Hoekstra *et al.* (2007). However, the practices of online journalists can be characterized as more object-oriented, both in terms of their practice and professional development.

It can be concluded that non-formal learning is present and important in the professional development of online journalists, despite the fact that there is no explicit awareness of non-formal workplace learning. The results explain aspects of how the journalists create and use opportunities for their professional growth. This study may inform the practice of online journalists because it clarifies the notable impact non-formal learning has on professional development. By channelling the knowledge acquired through non-formal learning into reflective activities, some of this knowledge can be captured and recorded.

The limitations of this study were primarily related to its small sample size, consisting of five informants, and the fact that the participants would ideally have been more evenly distributed in terms of gender. Furthermore, the informants represented a relatively narrow range of ages. Methodological limitations constrain the conclusions to be drawn from the interviews. However, it should be emphasized that the intention was to illustrate the framework conditions for action and learning in relation to the environment online journalists interact with.

In general, further research is needed to provide more empirical evidence regarding how learning in this and other contexts takes place at various levels of conscious awareness and how the social and cultural environment in which learning takes place has the potential to influence how learning occurs. Our ambition in the present article has been to emphasize the role of framework conditions in workplace learning. A better understanding of relevant structures and arrangements is vital to understanding journalists' workplace learning.

### Notes

1. "Bjørnetjeneste" refers to a service that has unintended negative consequences for the recipient. The term originated from the French poet Jean de La Fontaine's fable about the bear and the gardener, "L'Ours et l'Amateur Des Jardins", published in 1678. He tells the tale of a tame bear who tries to kill a fly on his sleeping owner's face with a rock and kills the owner.
2. GUI refers to a "graphical user interface", which provides a more user-friendly, visual interface, rather than a text-based interface.

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