

Why the General Dental Council should incorporate informal learning into continuing professional development

John Stanfield¹

Key points

Informal learning needs to be recognised by the regulator.

Outlines the benefits of informal learning and hybrid social learning networks.

Suggests a need to move to outcomes-based continuing professional development.

Abstract

Continuing professional development (CPD) is essential for maintaining competence and ensuring high standards in the dental profession. The General Dental Council (GDC) in the UK currently emphasises formal learning within its CPD framework. However, this article argues that informal learning – particularly through hybrid social learning networks – plays a vital role in the ongoing professional development of dental practitioners. Drawing on key studies, including Stanfield (2024), Bullock *et al.* (2023) and Cowpe *et al.* (2019), as well as the work of Evans (2019) and Greenhow and Lewin (2016), this article explores the significance of informal learning and how it complements formal CPD.

Informal learning, driven by peer-to-peer interaction, online networks and reflective practice, allows dental professionals to acquire real-time, context-specific knowledge, bridging the gap between theoretical learning and clinical application. This form of learning promotes lifelong professional growth and helps practitioners remain agile in adapting to technological advances. Moreover, informal learning is cost-effective and accessible, offering a practical solution for overcoming barriers to traditional CPD, such as time and financial constraints.

Recognising informal learning within the GDC's CPD framework would create a more flexible, inclusive and effective system of professional development. Recommendations include incorporating reflective practice, developing mechanisms to validate informal learning and promoting the use of digital platforms for CPD.

By acknowledging the value of informal learning, the GDC can ensure that dental professionals are not merely complying with CPD requirements but are actively engaged in a continuous process of improvement, better prepared to meet the evolving demands of the profession.

Introduction

The General Dental Council (GDC) plays a critical role in maintaining high professional standards in the UK dental profession. A key component of this responsibility is the requirement for dental professionals to engage in continuing professional development (CPD) to remain competent, up-to-date and fit to practise.¹ However, the GDC's current CPD structure is primarily focused on formal

learning activities, which, while important, may not fully reflect the complexity and dynamism of modern dental practice. This article argues that the GDC should expand its definition of CPD to include informal learning, which is increasingly recognised as an essential component of professional development in many sectors.

Drawing on key studies such as Stanfield (2024), Bullock *et al.* (2023) and Cowpe *et al.* (2019),^{2,3,4} alongside the work of scholars such as Evans (2019), Greenhow and Lewin (2016), and Schön (1983),^{5,6,7} this article will explore how informal learning, particularly through hybrid social learning networks and other informal channels, can significantly enhance professional growth and development among dental professionals. The article will also discuss how the recognition of informal learning within the GDC's CPD framework

could lead to a more holistic, accessible and effective system of professional development.

Defining informal learning in CPD

Informal learning is an unstructured, often spontaneous process that occurs outside traditional educational settings. It can involve peer-to-peer learning, discussions in online forums, interactions on social media, mentoring, journals and personal reflection. Unlike formal learning, which is typically planned, structured and assessed, informal learning is fluid, self-directed and context-dependent.

In the field of dentistry, informal learning often takes place in response to specific clinical challenges. Stanfield notes that dental professionals regularly engage in informal learning through interactions with

¹PhD Researcher, Department of Educational Research, Lancaster University, UK.
Correspondence to: John Stanfield
Email address: john@hygienist.co.uk

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colleagues, participation in online networks and reflection on their own experiences.² This form of learning is highly relevant in clinical practice, where dental professionals may seek advice or knowledge on particular treatments, techniques, or patient cases in real-time, without waiting for formal CPD courses.

While informal learning is a core element of how professionals develop their skills in practice, it is not currently recognised by the GDC as part of the official CPD requirements as it once was. This creates a gap between the CPD framework and the realities of daily professional development, particularly in an era where technology and social learning platforms play a significant role in shaping how knowledge is acquired.

The role of hybrid social learning networks

Hybrid social learning networks combine both formal and informal learning, allowing dental professionals to engage in collaborative, peer-to-peer learning in both digital and physical spaces. These networks often include online forums, social media groups and professional networks where practitioners can share insights, ask questions and learn from one another.

Stanfield argues that these hybrid networks are a powerful tool for CPD in dentistry as they enable professionals to engage in real-time learning that is directly relevant to their clinical practice.² This view is supported by Greenhow and Lewin, who discuss how social media and digital platforms are increasingly blurring the boundaries between formal and informal learning in educational settings.⁶ These platforms enable professionals to engage in discussions, seek advice and access new information in ways that are flexible and context-sensitive.

Bullock *et al.* found that dental professionals who actively participate in online learning communities and hybrid social learning networks are more likely to stay current with new technologies and treatments.³ By enabling professionals to learn from their peers and experts worldwide, these networks can foster a more collaborative and supportive learning environment than traditional CPD alone. Cowpe *et al.* also emphasise the importance of these networks in complementing formal learning methods, suggesting that the GDC should consider how to integrate these valuable forms of learning into its CPD framework.⁴

However, they need to remain mindful of the importance of validating the information or opinions they encounter on social media, particularly due to the phenomenon of 'loud voices' or influencers. Such influential figures can inadvertently disrupt the validity of information due to potential biases or lack of an evidence base.²

Bridging the gap between theory and practice

One of the main limitations of formal CPD is that it often, but not always, focuses on theoretical knowledge, which can sometimes feel disconnected from the practical challenges faced in daily dental practice. Bullock *et al.* identified this as a significant issue, suggesting that while formal learning is essential for understanding core principles and updates, it may not always address the real-time needs of practitioners.³

Informal learning, particularly through hybrid social learning networks, provides a way to bridge this gap by offering a platform where practitioners can immediately apply new knowledge to solve clinical problems. This type of learning is highly contextual and problem-based, making it more relevant to the practical realities of dental practice. Evans discusses how informal professional development often occurs implicitly in everyday problem-solving and reflection, and suggests that recognising these informal processes is crucial for a more accurate understanding of professional growth.⁵

Moreover, Schön's concept of 'reflection-in-action' is particularly relevant in the context of informal learning.⁷ Dental professionals are often required to make quick decisions based on complex information in real-time and Schön's framework of reflective practice offers a way for practitioners to continually adapt and improve their techniques. Informal learning allows professionals to engage in this reflective practice by providing immediate feedback

from peers and mentors, helping to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Encouraging lifelong learning

The primary goal of CPD is to foster lifelong learning among professionals, ensuring that they continuously improve their knowledge and skills throughout their careers. However, there is a risk that formal CPD requirements can create a 'tick-box' mentality, where professionals engage in learning activities solely to meet regulatory requirements rather than out of a genuine desire for professional growth.

Bullock *et al.* argue that the traditional CPD system, which often focuses on counting hours or earning credits, may not fully capture the complexity of professional development.⁸ Their study highlights a global, cross-professional shift away from simply counting hours towards a more outcomes-based approach to CPD. This shift recognises the importance of informal learning and reflective practice as key components of professional growth.

In contrast to formal learning, where the learning needs to be planned ahead of time, informal learning is often driven by an immediate need. Professionals engage in informal learning when they encounter challenges or questions in their practice and they seek out new knowledge or insights to address these issues. As Stanfield observes, dental professionals who participate in hybrid social learning networks often view learning as an ongoing, integrated part of their daily practice, rather than something that occurs in isolated, formal CPD sessions.² This aligns with Evans' argument that informal professional development is often implicit and embedded in everyday professional activities and that recognising these processes is essential for fostering a culture of lifelong learning.⁵

Stanfield found that dental professionals prefer to determine their own learning needs (Table 1).² In total, there were 327 responses

Table 1 Preference to determine learning needs. Reproduced from J. Stanfield, *Informal learning using hybrid social learning networks for continuing professional development amongst dental professionals in the UK, Lancaster University, 2024*²

I prefer to determine my own learning needs		
	Count	Percentage
Disagree	14	4.3%
Agree	282	86.2%
Neither	31	9.5%

to the question. The majority of respondents (86.2%) agreed that they preferred to determine their own learning needs. This high level of agreement suggests a shared belief among the surveyed individuals regarding the importance of personal autonomy in shaping their learning journey. This emergent behaviour indicates a degree of coherence within the professional community, potentially influenced by the recognition of the value of self-directed learning and individual agency.²

Stanfield also found that their learning was determined by what they needed at the time (Table 2).² The majority of respondents (89.0%) agreed that their learning is determined by what they need to know at a particular time. This high level of agreement suggests a shared belief among the surveyed individuals regarding the importance of contextual relevance in shaping their learning. This emergent behaviour indicates a degree of coherence within the professional community, potentially influenced by the recognition of the practicality and efficiency of focusing on current learning needs.

Adapting to technological advances

Technological advancements in dentistry, such as digital dentistry, 3D printing and AI-driven diagnostic tools, are rapidly transforming the profession. While formal CPD courses are essential for understanding these technologies, they may not always keep pace with the rate of innovation. Formal CPD programmes take time to develop, accredit and implement, which can result in a lag between the introduction of new technologies and their incorporation into CPD.

Informal learning facilitated through hybrid social learning networks offers a more agile and responsive way for professionals to stay current with the latest technological advancements. Bullock *et al.* found that dental professionals who engage in informal learning through online platforms and peer networks are often early adopters of new technologies, as they can quickly access advice, training and peer support.³

Cowpe *et al.* highlights the importance of online platforms and digital learning environments in maintaining up-to-date knowledge, particularly in a rapidly evolving field like dentistry.⁴ They argue that the GDC should explore ways to incorporate these platforms into its CPD framework, recognising that informal learning through digital channels

Table 2 Learning determined by need at the time. Reproduced from J. Stanfield, *Informal learning using hybrid social learning networks for continuing professional development amongst dental professionals in the UK*, Lancaster University, 2024²

My learning is determined by what I need to know at that particular time

	Count	Percentage
Agree	291	89.0%
Neither	31	9.5%
Disagree	5	1.5%

is becoming an increasingly important part of professional development.

Cost-effectiveness and accessibility

Formal CPD courses can be expensive and time-consuming, making it difficult for some dental professionals, particularly those in smaller practices or remote locations, to participate fully in CPD. Bullock *et al.* identified cost and accessibility as major barriers to effective CPD participation, particularly for dental professionals who may struggle to afford the time or money required to attend formal courses.³

Informal learning, particularly through online and hybrid social learning networks, offers a more cost-effective and accessible solution. Stanfield notes that these networks allow dental professionals to engage in learning and professional development without the financial and logistical constraints associated with traditional CPD.² This not only makes CPD more affordable but also ensures that all dental professionals, regardless of their location or financial situation, have access to valuable learning opportunities.

Challenges in recognising informal learning

While the benefits of informal learning are clear, there are significant challenges associated with incorporating it into the GDC's CPD framework. One of the primary challenges is how to assess and validate informal learning. Unlike formal learning, which is often assessed through exams, credits, or certificates, informal learning is more difficult to quantify.

Evans discusses the importance of understanding the implicit and informal aspects of professional development but also highlights the difficulty in measuring these forms of learning.⁵ Stanfield suggests that reflective practice could be a solution to this problem. Dental professionals could be encouraged

to maintain reflective journals or portfolios, where they document their informal learning experiences and reflect on how these have influenced their professional practice.²

Bullock *et al.* also emphasises the importance of reflection in CPD and suggests that reflective elements could be incorporated into the GDC's CPD framework to formalise informal learning experiences.³ Peer verification, facilitated through hybrid social learning networks, could also be a valuable tool for validating informal learning. By sharing knowledge and insights with peers, dental professionals can ensure their learning is relevant and credible.

Recommendations for the GDC

To create a more inclusive, flexible and effective CPD system, the GDC should consider the following recommendations:

- **Recognise informal learning** – the GDC should acknowledge the role of informal learning, particularly through hybrid social learning networks, as a legitimate form of CPD. This could involve allowing dental professionals to include reflective journals and peer verification as part of their CPD portfolios
- **Incorporate reflective practice** – the GDC should encourage dental professionals to engage in reflective practice, documenting how informal learning has influenced their professional development. Reflective portfolios could become a formal part of the CPD framework as other healthcare regulators have⁶
- **Support technological adaptation** – the GDC should recognise the importance of informal learning in keeping up with technological advances in the dental field. By encouraging participation in online learning communities and hybrid social learning networks, the GDC can ensure that dental professionals remain at the cutting edge of innovation.

Conclusion

The GDC's current CPD framework, while essential for maintaining high standards in the dental profession, is predominantly focused on formal learning. However, as the studies by Stanfield, Bullock *et al.* and Cowpe *et al.* demonstrate, informal learning through hybrid social learning networks plays an increasingly important role in professional development among dental professionals.^{2,3,4}

By recognising and incorporating informal learning into its CPD structure, the GDC can create a more flexible, inclusive and effective system of professional development. This would better reflect the realities of modern dental practice and promote a culture of

lifelong learning, where dental professionals are continuously growing and improving, both formally and informally.

Ultimately, adopting a more holistic approach to CPD will enable dental professionals to go beyond simply fulfilling regulatory obligations, fostering active engagement in continuous professional growth and better preparing them to navigate the challenges and opportunities of an ever-evolving profession.

Ethics declaration

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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