Informal Learning

Report on a Search Conference
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Summary
The Learning from Experience Trust (LET), in partnership with NIACE, received funding support from the Lifelong Learning Foundation to explore informal learning. We convened a search conference bringing together researchers, practitioners and policy people involved with informal learning in different domains (work, community, family and independent learning). The goal was to take stock of what we know about informal learning, its policy implications, and what needs to be done.

Informal learning defies neat definitions. In the literature it is usually approached as a residual category -- everything that is not formal education -- but the term contains a much more complex, varied and rich array of modes of learning that should be teased out. Informal learning fulfils people's own life purposes (rather than the purposes of government, the education system or social agencies) and takes place in forms that are chosen by the learner.

From the perspective of the educational system, informal learning has generally been valued mainly as a pathway into formal education. The search conference revealed the articulation between informal learning and the formal education sector as more complex. Informal learning can precede formal education, but it can also accompany it (in the 'spaces' within institutions) and follow-on from it (as people apply their learning and extend it). We noted the value of 'free spaces' (the coffee break, gathering places, time for thought) that allow informal learning to happen.

Outcomes of this project include:
• foregrounding an often ignored topic and highlighting its significance in a wide array of contexts;
• identifying important dimensions of informal learning through bringing a diversity of experience, research and perspectives to bear on the task;
• identifying next steps in terms of research and development work to further the goals of lifelong learning;
• identifying opportunities within current policy developments in education and regeneration that should allow informal learning activities to be taken forward.

Our key recommendation is to 'design for' learning (rather than trying to design learning) -- that is, create infrastructures and processes that provide opportunities and support for learning in many different ways and contexts. To maximise the 'learning society' there is a need for further research and development:
⇒ Research: Canadian studies indicate the scale of the importance of informal learning. Similar research to quantify the real breadth of lifelong learning needs to be conducted in the UK. Qualitative and ethnographic research is needed to expand our understanding of learning pathways through life, and how informal and formal learning intersect. Researchers at several institutions have made a good start on this, but there is need for a more extensive research effort that maps learning over time, informal and formal learning relationships, and what resources, skills and dispositions are needed.
⇒ Development work is needed to establish good practice that enhances and amplifies informal learning in community, family and work-related settings, supports informal and experiential learning within educational institutions, and creates more permeable boundaries between informal and formal learning.
1. Overview

Introduction
For most of us, the most significant learning in our lives comes outside of formal educational provision. But for something so important we know rather little about informal learning. We know from research that over 95 percent of Canadians had been involved in some form of informal learning activities during the previous year. They spent an average of 15 hours a week on learning defined as significant in the contexts of their lives - community, workplace, family and home. Those with least schooling engaged in informal learning activities as much as those with most education. There is no comparable research in the UK. Research in lifelong learning focuses primarily on learning within the narrow range of education.

However, interest in informal learning is increasing, and in the last year there have been studies for DfEE by the Tavistock Institute (Cullen et al, 2000), and by Coffield and others in the ESRC Learning Society programme (Coffield, 2000). As a result, we know more about informal learning in the workplace, and the range of ways in which it can happen (Eraut and others). We know something of informal learning in community settings, and the importance of local voluntary groups as learning sites (Elsdon and others). We know least about informal learning within home and family.

There are limits to what we know. We do not know what are the preconditions or dispositions that lead to informal learning, or whether some people do more of it or are better at it than others. We do not know whether it is important to have a degree of self-consciousness about learning, or how non-verbalised observation may play a role. We do not know how much formal education provides skills that can support subsequent informal learning (like literacy for example) or how much it sets up expectations that get in the way of informal learning (by narrowing our capacity for memorisation for example).

This project was not intended to carry out original research but to clarify the questions. We initiated conversations and explored issues in terms of research, policy and practice. The search conference had four aims:
1. To share what we know from different fields about the nature and extent of informal learning;
2. To explore the relationship between informal learning and formal education;
3. To discuss the implications for lifelong learning policy and practice;
4. To see what need exists for further work to document informal learning, demonstrate its value and make effective links with formal education.

Background literature
Our review of the literature on informal learning and discussions before and during the search conference revealed both the importance and the complexity of informal learning. Two recent reports in England, and one in Canada are particularly important.

The Tavistock Institute was commissioned by the Department for Education and Employment to research informal learning outside the workplace (Cullen et al, 2000). Its remit was to add to existing knowledge about and identify examples of innovation in informal learning. The report explores the way localised informal learning settings are embedded and constrained by broader socio-cultural practices. It argues that
dissonance between existing policies and the realities of informal learning networks can be reduced if new policies echo the flexibility and responsiveness of informal learning itself. The research included case studies of informal learning in a variety of domains, from Surfers Against Sewage to a youth group in SE London. These suggest that informal learning is embedded in the locality in which it takes place, and can generate new forms of political and social participation. This has implications for policy focussed on regeneration and social capital formation.

The final report from the ESRC-funded Learning Society research programme argues that formal education and training represent only a small part of all learning. Frank Coffield states in his introduction that formal training is often dispensable whilst informal learning, although routinely ignored, is much more necessary. The report explores informal learning in contexts including Northern Ireland's social capital and educational participation rates, and an historical analysis of the role of informal learning in the development of skills and knowledge in Welsh coal mines in the early 20th century. Eraut offers a typology of ‘non-formal learning’ and a critique of definitions of situated learning.

The New Approaches to Lifelong Learning (NALL) initiative in Canada is carrying out a variety of research on aspects of informal learning, both quantitative and qualitative. With significant funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, and with the collaboration of a wide variety of private, public and non-profit organisations, NALL's first thorough survey of informal learning practices has astonishing results (Livingstone, 1999). Over 95% of Canadians were involved in some form of informal learning in the last year, at an average of around 15 hours per week. This vastly outscores the proportion in formal adult education (c. 40%) and the time on formal education (c. 4 hours per week). Moreover, those with least schooling engage as readily in informal learning as those with higher qualifications. The survey explores connections between the two forms of learning, and interactions between work and informal learning.

A discussion paper for search conference participants (in Section 2 of this report) gives a brief overview of key literature. Research on learning from both cognitive psychology and anthropology, as well as education, shows that layers of learning interact within changing social contexts and individual needs and choices. The boundary between what is regarded as informal and what formal is variable over time and in importance for individuals. Our focus should be on learning, to include the many ways and contexts in which it takes place.

♦ Learning is purposeful: people undertake learning to fulfil purposes in their everyday lives that carry meaning within their community (Scribner, 1984).
♦ Changing social contexts affect what is learned, by whom and in what ways.
♦ Research on 'situated learning' suggests that learning is related to particular contexts and does not necessarily or readily transfer into different ones (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Experienced workers demonstrate 'practical intelligence' through their sophisticated problem-solving methods but aren't necessarily able to demonstrate this with pencil and paper (Scribner, 1984).
♦ Participating in social organisations and groups is a process of learning and knowing (Wenger, 1998).
♦ Learning apprenticeships provide a supportive 'scaffolding' for a process of slowly developing participation (Bruner, 1983 and Lave and Wenger, 1991).
Learning is a process of interpreting experience; the brain organises knowledge into patterns around key concepts, and processes new knowledge in relation to existing patterns (Bransford et al, 1999). Dewey (1938) argued that experience could also be mis-educative: that is, it has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience.

**The Search Conference**

The search conference in July 2000 created a space to articulate diverse perspectives in order to explore more fully informal learning across domains and look for common threads and differences. 34 people participated over the two days of the conference. They came from a wide range of experiences and organisations: community development and regeneration, housing, education, arts and environment, workplace and trade union training and education, libraries, local and national government. Participants had a variety of roles including researchers, policy makers and practitioners (who support and facilitate informal learning).

Diversity was the great strength of the gathering: it brought together people across contexts, who usually have few opportunities for conversation. While that inevitably created challenges (without our accustomed shared language and assumptions, with widely differing concerns and approaches) it also made the event exciting and thought provoking. A report of discussion at the search conference is in Section 3.

**Understanding informal learning**

Informal learning defies neat definitions. In the literature it is usually approached as a residual category -- everything that is not formal education. This is not very useful in conceptual terms -- the term contains a much more complex, varied and rich array of 'learnings' that should be teased out. Perhaps the closest to a definition we can make for informal learning at this point is that it is learning that fulfils people's own purposes (rather than the purposes of government, the education system or social agencies) and takes place in forms that are chosen by the learner.

Some of the dimensions for a more nuanced way of conceptualising informal learning began to emerge from this project. One dimension is the degree of intention involved in the learning. David Barton pointed out that learning is similar to literacy -- in ethnographic research on literacy they found that most people do not read for the sake of reading, but to accomplish purposes in their lives. Similarly, learning is often an unsought accompaniment to accomplishing purposes, as well as planned and intended. The scale might run from:

⇒ Learning from action (trial and error, learning from mistakes and successes)
⇒ Learning from participation in groups (including local voluntary organisations as well as less formal groups)
⇒ Learning from peers (asking for help, how to do it, watching others)
⇒ Learning in community based and nonformal education (learning for fun and pleasure, to accomplish purposes in our life -- learning French to go on holiday).

Another dimension within informal learning is the extent to which it is (or can be) recognised. At one extreme, we could view socialisation as a learning activity. In socialisation children are brought into alignment with cultures and processes of the adult world. Based on our socialisation we make what Jarvis (1987) calls 'presumptions' -- assumptions that the world operates in a particular way. But
socialisation is probably not useful to include within the concept of informal learning because it is not easily recognised (except in times of social change and challenge). We can, however, look back at an action and recognise what we learned from it, even though we don’t routinely recognise that learning. At the other extreme, formal education is recognised as 'learning' whether or not learning actually takes place.

The boundary between recognised and unrecognised learning is highly variable. In a workplace setting, for example, individuals may be seen by peers as 'experts' in particular areas, who can be approached for advice and help, but they may not be recognised in the same way by their supervisors. Individuals may recognise their own skills in some contexts but not others (e.g. skilled workers who are made redundant may see themselves as unskilled or deskilled). Educational institutions are often reluctant to recognise learning that happens elsewhere.

Informal learning happens within and across all the different domains of our lives. Search conference participants argued that these are not separate, but there is much transfer across and indeed integration between the domains of work, home life and community. Informal learning can even characterise 'spaces' within educational institutions (in coffee breaks, networking, mentoring, celebrating). However the locus of learning is important in terms of how it is recognised by others -- learning in educational institutions is privileged above learning in the home.

We also discussed positive and negative learning. They emphasised the importance of play in learning, not just for children but for adults. On the other hand, some things that are learned (from drug dealing or crime for example) are viewed as negative because of the context in which they were learned. Can there be positive outcomes for these? We can also learn negativity -- perhaps that we cannot do things, that we are not valuable, that participation is pointless. Overcoming a lifetime of negative learning is difficult.

Learning technologies can shape how we learn as well as what and when, but they are also shaped by learner purposes. Learning on the internet, for example, includes not just e-learning (the transposition of formal education courses onto the web or CD-ROM) but also the web as a means of accessing knowledge, email and discussion groups for sharing ideas and experiences, and the creation of virtual communities of interest. Learning to use ICT itself is often a site for informal, self-directed learning. How the rapid changes in technology and its social spread will shape informal learning in the future is yet unknown.

**Articulation between informal learning and formal education**

Educators often regard informal learning as simply a pathway into the kind of learning that really matters -- formal education leading to a qualification. Search conference participants felt strongly that this is too narrow a view. Informal learning comes before, during and after formal education: the different forms of learning co-exist and intersect in varied ways. Informal learning has much to 'teach' formal learning in terms of its direct links with learner purposes, its creative use of different strategies, its embedded nature. Formal learning may provide additional tools and opportunities that people can use to pursue informal learning (literacy is perhaps the most obvious example, along with knowledge of where to get information).
Learning comes from experience, but neither the learning nor the experience itself are given – both are socially constructed and re-constructed. What an experience means and how we portray it to ourselves and others shifts over time and in different contexts. Critical reflection can be an important element in re-constructing and representing experience and learning from it. Formal and nonformal education can provide such opportunities and link experience and education.

Learning is not simply acquisition of knowledge and skills but being able to (and having opportunities to) use them. David Livingstone pointed out that the NALL research shows we already live in the 'learning society' but that we do not live in a 'knowledge society' – people often do not have opportunities either in the workplace or other contexts to apply and use what they know. The formal education sector can build in opportunities to apply and use knowledge, but at the same time we need the creation of work and community roles that allow people to use what they know.

**Policy implications**

Does informal learning matter? If it is so widespread, should we just leave people to get on with it? It is useful to remember Wenger's comment that learning cannot be designed, but we can design for learning – that is, create infrastructures and processes that support, encourage and facilitate learning. Designing for informal learning does not mean taking resources away from the formal sector, but rather building these infrastructures and processes into workplaces, community development and formal education. More work is needed to document ways of working that support such embedded learning effectively, though we are not starting from scratch – adult educators, community and workplace educators already have effective practices that support informal as well as formal learning.

Designing for learning is a chancy process because the designer cannot determine what is learned – people have their own purposes and intentions, their own meanings, and if informal learning tries to shape these it would have to be re-classed as formal education. As Wenger says, it 'moves on its own terms', 'slips through cracks' – 'Learning happens, design or no design'.

Rethinking what we mean by learning and how best to support it is particularly important now. Policy developments in post-16 education (including the new Learning and Skills Councils, the ending of the division between certificated and non-certificated learning), community development (neighbourhood regeneration and renewal initiatives), and work-based learning (learning companies, union learning representatives) mean that there are opportunities for a broader interpretation of lifelong learning, and design of infrastructures for informal learning.

**Where do we go from here?**

It is clear that informal learning is an important and useful concept in trying to understand how and why people learn, and the importance of learning in their lives. Our discussions have demonstrated the far-reaching nature and value of informal learning. Much remains to be understood: informal learning needs now to be taken beyond its 'residual' status and analysed more thoroughly across domains.
There are several potentially fruitful areas of further research that would allow us to
gauge the significance of informal learning, and understand better how it takes place
and under what conditions:

⇒ Existing research in Canada indicates the scale of the importance of informal
   learning. Such research to quantify the real breadth of lifelong learning
   should be conducted in the UK. The search conference recommended that
   future National Adult Learning Surveys should address informal as well as
   formal learning.

⇒ Qualitative and ethnographic research is also needed to expand our
   understanding of learning pathways through life, and the intersection of
   informal and formal learning. A good start on this research has already been
   made in the Tavistock Institute's research and case studies (Cullen et al.), in
   the work arena (by Eraut and others), and among local voluntary
   organisations (by Elsdon et al.). Other aspects of worklife, family life and
   community involvement need exploration, along with life history and other
   research that maps learning over time, and how informal and formal learning
   relate to each other.

⇒ There are potential areas for brain scientists to take further, including
   exploring the roles in informal learning of watching others, copying, listening
   and trial and error problem solving (Merrifield et al's earlier research with
   people with varying literacy difficulties suggest all these are important learning
   strategies).

⇒ Applied research is needed to explore the means through which informal
   learning may be enhanced and amplified. What are the resources needed for
   informal learning (and how do knowledge bases in libraries and the internet
   play a role)? What abilities and dispositions are required and how could
   these be developed? How can organisational processes support informal
   learning (e.g. in community groups, employers and trade unions)

In parallel work there is a need to develop practical approaches (design for learning)
that support and recognise informal learning, embedded within different institutions,
groups and initiatives. There is a loss of memory about how to do such work, and
past experiences need to be brought into clearer focus.

⇒ Enhancing and amplifying learning outside educational institutions
   (volunteering in the community, work-related learning, using new
   technologies, libraries, museums and other community resources).

⇒ Supporting informal learning within educational institutions (extending the
   good practice within some existing ones).

⇒ Creating more permeable boundaries between informal and formal learning
   (through APEL, embedding experiential learning in formal education, creating
   more flexible and responsive, 'just-in-time' formal provision).
Perhaps the central recommendation emerging from the project is the value of continuing and extending the conversations. These provide the chance to unravel some of the complex interrelationships evident within informal learning, and to identify ways to support and recognise it. Informal learning should become part of the conversation of those engaged in community regeneration, developing workplace and union learning initiatives, the voluntary and community sector. The conversations need to engage people at all levels: policy-makers, researchers, educators, practitioners and members. Out of such conversations will come concrete policies and practice that would enable lifelong learning to become more inclusive and engaged in life.

References


2. Informal Learning Discussion paper

'Learning' is increasingly at the forefront of a range of government policies -- not only policies for 'lifelong learning' but also for community development and regeneration, combating social exclusion and regional development. However, the concept of learning contained in much of these focuses rather narrowly on participation in more or less formal courses and programmes.

It is the premise of this project that the wider policy agendas require us to go beyond such a conception of learning and to acknowledge and support learning that takes place beyond the boundaries of educational provision. There are signs of openness to this broader notion of learning in the workplace, with development of 'learning organisations', and in regeneration efforts that encourage community participation.

Educators' usual stance is that informal learning only has value when it leads to formal. A broader notion of learning might lead to consideration of how best to encourage and support informal learning where it happens (in communities, in workplaces and in the home).

In this discussion document we have not attempted to review exhaustively every aspect of informal learning. Instead we have sought to highlight aspects of informal learning research in order to stimulate thinking in preparation for the work of the search conference.

What do we mean by Informal Learning?
Attempts at a definition of informal learning tend to focus on it as a 'residual category' -- everything that isn’t formal.

• The Tavistock Institute's research for DfEE on informal learning (see enclosed summary) describes it as ‘an ill-defined and messy concept', arguing that there is no clear consensus in the literature. It is the contexts of practice (where it happens) that define informal learning.

• Veronica McGivney in *Informal Learning in the Community* defines informal learning as learning that takes place outside of ‘dedicated learning environments’. It may not be recognised as learning, but is facilitated in response to expressed needs. She acknowledges the difficulty in making a clear distinction between informal and formal learning as there is often a cross-over. Setting is not necessarily a defining factor.

• In *Life at the Margins* Juliet Merrifield, analysing language and literacy in everyday life, states that ‘in informal learning, the learner dictates the methods, the content and the goals.’

• David Livingstone's Canadian research (see enclosed summary) defines informal learning as that 'which we undertake individually or collectively on our own without externally imposed criteria or the presence of an institutionally authorised instructor'. He found nearly all Canadians are involved in some form of informal learning activities that they define as significant in the contexts of their lives -

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1 With thanks to all those with whom we have discussed this research. In particular, Keith Forrester and John Payne's unpublished paper on adult learning helped to clarify our thinking on the sociology of knowledge in relation to informal learning.
community, workplace, family and home. Those with least schooling engaged in informal learning activities as much as those with most education.

- Clifford Geertz offers an ethnographic explanation of what informal learning could be as opposed to what it is not. His exploration of the concept of common sense in *Local Knowledge* looks at how we organise and make sense of our culturally contextualised surroundings, stating that ‘common sense is […] an interpretation of the immediacies of experience’.

- Barton and Hamilton in ‘Local Literacies’ use the term informal ‘vernacular practices’ which draw upon and contribute to ‘vernacular knowledge’, paralleling Luis Moll’s idea of ‘funds of knowledge’ in communities. These are practical exchanges and responses to people’s need for information across family and neighbourhood networks.

We acknowledge the Tavistock Institute’s view that informal learning is an inherently messy concept. As a working definition, for the purposes of this search conference, we describe it as ‘learning that occurs outside of organised teaching-learning situations’. We note that it takes place within particular social contexts, is closely related to purpose and use, and that learners decide the content, methods and goals of their own learning.

*Mapping Informal Learning within different contexts*

**Work**

We know more about informal learning in the workplace than in other contexts perhaps in part because of long-standing work within organisation theory and development. Concepts of the ‘learning organisation’, action learning, even Kolb’s experiential learning cycle were all developed first in relation to workplaces (and in particular to managers).

- Michael Eraut et al. in research for the ESRC Learning Society programme found that formal training accounts for only a small part of learning at work. Far more significant were ‘all types of informal learning which were neither specified nor planned’. Much of the learning arose from challenges posed by work and social interactions.

- Etienne Wenger in *Communities of Practice* describes how medical claims processors learn their job. What they learn cannot be easily broken down into discrete units of knowledge and includes learning ‘how not to learn and how to live with the ignorance they deem appropriate’.

- Recent work on ‘learning ecologies’ (from training and organisation theory) focuses the environment needed to encourage development of new skills in the workplace -- a space that is ‘conducive’ to the sharing of ideas and information, where the social and emotional aspects of learning have an opportunity to develop.

**Communities**

Despite all the consternation instigated by Putnam’s ‘bowling alone’ research that participation in the community is declining, there is evidence that community organisations remain a significant site for learning.

- Konrad Elsdon’s research into local voluntary organisations (LVOs) demonstrates that although people join for purposes other than learning, when asked to reflect on their participation they acknowledge the importance of their learning.
particular they describe changes in self-confidence, tolerance, and interpersonal skills. His work demonstrates the different impacts on men and women.

- Griff Foley’s analysis of radical adult education, *Learning in Social Action*, explores learning dimensions of social life and how informal learning occurring in such situations might produce insights into ways ‘people develop critical consciousness’ and influence the life of their community.

**Family and Home**

We have not found a great deal of research directly on informal learning in the home but there are hints in studies of literacy practices and other areas.

- A MORI survey carried out this year for the Campaign for Learning interviewed young people at school (11-16 years old). 66% stated they learnt most from their mothers (57% from teachers and 55% from fathers.

- *Life at the Margins*, a US study of literacy and language in everyday life, identifies a range of learning and literacy strategies that people draw on, including learning from others. For example, Oliver, a 17 year old Nicaraguan high school student living in San Francisco, describes how he learned to play video games and operate a computer by watching a friend.

- Barton and Hamilton, studying ‘everyday literacy practices’, explore the relationship between different domains and the literacy learned and used within these different contexts. They examine the ‘borderlands’ between home, work, school and public life, a permeable zone where literacy practices cross in both directions, where the distinctions between formal and informal learning, home and work become blurred. They note that literacy learning in the home is rarely separated from use, but integrated into everyday activities.

**Forces that influence learning**

- There is a large and growing literature on situated learning (Lave, Chailkin and others). It is clear that learning is social -- minds develop in social situations that in turn shape our thinking and interactions with others. We also learn from others and learning in everyday life develops and becomes patterned through practice.

- Wenger argues that ‘learning cannot be designed’. It ‘moves on its own terms’, it ‘slips through cracks’, ‘Learning happens, design or no design’. But there is a need to develop infrastructures to foster learning, and he proposes ‘learning architectures’ that do this.

- Eraut et al, describe four main approaches to facilitation of learning at work. Integration emphasises socialisation through which people learn the purpose and goals of the organisation and how their work and roles are ‘embedded’. Peripheral participation through observing and listening is how people work out what they need to know. Self-directed learning assumes that workers will take the initiative in finding out what they need to know. Structured support might involve mentoring, but the research suggested that most positive examples were informally initiated.

- Elsdon found that membership of voluntary organisations led to a ‘surprising amount and quality’ of organisational and management skills amongst the 50% or more of the population involved in them. This research suggests that membership of successful and healthy LVOs might also offer models for the development of active and democratic citizenship as well as positively influence community regeneration programmes.
• Among other things the learning ecologists look at provision of space for learning -- physical, time, social -- as an important part of learning support. For example, management at Siemens, concerned at the 'inappropriate socialising' taking place in the company cafeteria, reduced its size to make it less convenient to linger in. However, three-quarters of the workers interviewed by researchers reported that they used the cafeteria as a meeting space to discuss work as well as keep in touch socially. It was functioning as an important 'informal learning opportunity'.

The articulation of informal with formal learning
Educators' main interest in informal learning for a long time has been as a pathway or precursor to engagement in formal education rather than as something valuable in its own right.
- Veronica McGivney's work on widening participation argues that education providers wanting to base their programmes in the community need to consult their target groups about the sort of programme they want, where it should run and the forms it might take. Providers need also to be aware that learning starting points need to be flexible and their response to expressed learning needs have to be prompt.
- In 1971, Michael Young argued that ‘education is not a product like cars or bread, but a selection and organisation from the available knowledge at a particular time which involve conscious or unconscious choices’. He questioned the power relations between schools and their communities and the focus of the knowledge base that formed the curriculum. Informal learning may be shaped by some of the same forces as formal education, but may also follow divergent purposes.
- In a critical look at self-directed learning in the workplace Colin Lankshear in Changing Literacies asks who controls learning discourses. He analyses the ways such discourses are constructed and policed and who determines learning goals, methods and materials. The implication of his analysis is that ‘self-directed’ learning can be as coercive as more openly prescriptive forms of learning.

Implications for lifelong learning policies
- In an unpublished paper for SCUTREA Payne and Forrester challenge the way in which participation and non-participation in learning is measured. They argue that the dynamic movement of people in and out of education of various sorts is more significant than participation at a single point of time. They argue that we should explore the terms of people's inclusion in learning.
- The Tavistock Institute report on informal learning explores the way localised informal learning settings are embedded and constrained by broader socio-cultural practices, a key point in exploring how and if policy intervention in informal learning setting should occur and what might result. The report argues that dissonance between existing policies and the realities of informal learning networks can be reduced if new policies echoed the flexibility and responsiveness of informal learning itself.
- Frank Coffield, in Speaking Truth to Power', one of the reports on the ESRC Learning Society research programme, points to the mismatch between qualifications and job requirements: the UK doesn't have an under-supply of qualified labour but 'rather [a] low level of demand for it'. Despite this the overall pattern emerging from the research was of rising skills levels with most jobs becoming more demanding. Support for learning from employers was primarily
focused on formal qualifications. These were seen by employees to do little to improve practice although they represented valuable currency in the job market. Coffield argues that this has clear policy implications in relation to the selection of managers, the creation of 'micro climates' which promote informal learning, and the development of 'the collective capabilities' of work teams.

Similar policy implications could be deduced in terms of informal learning in other domains, and how 'micro climates' or infrastructures could be developed to support and promote informal learning in communities, families and homes.

**Bibliography**


3. Informal Learning Search Conference Report

The Learning from Experience Trust and NIACE planned the search conference on informal learning with the following aims:

5. To share what we know from different fields about the nature and extent of informal learning;
6. To explore the relationship between informal learning and formal education;
7. To discuss the implications for lifelong learning policy and practice;
8. To see what need exists for further work to document informal learning, demonstrate its value and make effective links with formal education.

The search conference brought together people with an interest in informal learning across a range of contexts and with a variety of roles. Participants included researchers, policy representatives and practitioners (engaged in supporting and facilitating informal learning in a variety of contexts). By articulating diverse perspectives our aim was to clarify informal learning across domains and look for common threads and differences.

34 people participated over the two days of the conference. The range of experiences and organisations was wide. Participants came from community development and regeneration groups (like the Hull Participatory Appraisal Network and People for Action), education and arts organisations (like Second Wave Centre for youth arts in London and KLEAR adult education centre in Dublin). Educators and trainers came from management (Peter Honey, Roffey Park Management Institute) and trade union settings (Iron and Steel Trades Confederation). Other organisations with wider interests in informal learning included the Black Environmental Network, Institute of Development Studies and Ultralab. Researchers came from the research centre on wider benefits of learning (Birkbeck College), Lancaster University Department of Linguistics, Goldsmiths College Centre for Urban and Community Research, Leeds University School of Continuing Education and the Tavistock Institute. Librarians came from the BBC Libraries Project and Norfolk County Libraries. A policy focus was brought by participants from the Department for Education and Employment, Further Education Funding Council, Derbyshire County Council, London Borough of Islington, Lifelong Learning Foundation, Campaign for Learning, Ufi and NIACE.

The search conference's diversity made it both exciting and challenging. Within our own disciplines or practices we have a notion of what to expect when people gather together and make assumptions about a shared language. The diversity created unknown territory. However, much of the process of the conference happened in smaller groups and allowed opportunities for people to develop conversation strands informally over the two days. Meals, tea and coffee breaks and the bar were valuable sites of informal learning.

Diversity was the strength. Bringing together policy people with practitioners and researchers helped us identify opportunities to reshape and broaden notions of learning. The 'open space' being created by some national policy changes will not stay open for long. If we are to build on the search conference we need to keep momentum going.
**Working Groups to map informal learning**
The conference divided into working groups to map informal learning in its social contexts: family/home-based learning, work-based and community-based learning. All three groups experienced difficulties in agreeing on their focus and felt the boundaries were constraining given the inter-linked nature of contexts for informal learning. Nevertheless, some useful points emerged.

**Family/home-based informal learning:**
This produced a bit of hotel corridor theatre to demonstrate the contrast between formal and informal learning. The group also represented this contrast graphically by an irregular shape as background (informal learning) with an angular grid superimposed upon it (formal leaning).

The group critiqued the idea of play being just for children, arguing that adult learning can also be for play, i.e. conducted for sheer enjoyment, outside of structured activities. Both structured and playful activities provide (different) learning experiences. Much learning to be a person takes place outside of formal situations -- one group member cited his 10 year old son, all of whose major learning experiences were obtained outside school.

**Work-based informal learning:**
This group pointed to the bias towards paid work outside the home, so that housework or volunteer work is not valued as highly as paid work. What we recognise as learning depends in part on what society values as learning, and this is primarily formal learning to an economic agenda. David Livingstone referred to informal learning as the hidden part of the learning iceberg identified some years ago by his colleague Alan Tough.

The boundary between recognised and unrecognised learning may be variable -- different people may see it in different ways. The group noted that workers often do not recognise their own informal learning, or do not value it, but that other workers may recognise it informally, making them shopfloor or peer 'experts'. APEL, the accreditation of prior experiential learning, is one of the routes for recognition of informal learning, but has drawbacks. It regulates by defining learning in terms of
what the institution regards as appropriate -- institutions usually do not recognise as learning what happens outside their space. It also defines learning in individual terms (not within communities of practice).

**Community-based informal learning:**
Community as a site of informal learning was difficult to pin down. This group pointed to its multi-layered nature. Communities could be both geographically located (as defined through housing) but could also exist within wider distributed networks with a social or ethnic focus. People move in and out of different interest groups over time. The group tried to illustrate the interlinked and multi-layered nature of community-based informal learning through a diamond with points representing the different dimensions of interaction: public, private, collective and individual, although they felt that it should really be a three-dimensional spiral!

The group wondered whether learning can transfer from one group to another, or should we be talking about the community (however defined) having learnt as opposed to the individual? Learning is often triggered by conflict or crisis, but only if the means to learn is available when needed. It was pointed out that time was needed in informal learning settings to enable people to make more sense of their world. The suggestion was that top-down programmes might kill off bottom-up initiatives and create inequality in who learns, who is chosen or meets ‘outside’ criteria. This raised issues that the group couldn’t resolve.

**Report back and discussion:**
The discussion questioned the usefulness of dividing the three contexts of informal learning. It was suggested that informal learning might develop over time to alter our notion of these divisions and of the distinction between formal and informal learning. An example was the way people learn through ICT, which is quite different from traditional learning.

There was discussion of whether it is useful to distinguish between formal and informal learning, or whether the latter is too diffuse a concept. It was also suggested that ‘non-formal’ could be something in between, loosely structured, with aspects open to accreditation, but leaving elements that were intuitive.

There was some question of whether learning is necessarily always good, particularly in relation to negative learning that could be socially dysfunctional e.g. drug dealing and crime. Are there positive aspects to this kind of learning?

Recognising informal learning through accreditation routes was seen by some as problematic because it regulates and formalises. Is it the case therefore that informal learning can’t be recognised through accreditation and remain as a dynamic force? Self-assessment was also a possible alternative path to accreditation.

**Working Groups on Emerging Issues**
In the light of discussion in the morning session it was decided to change the proposed format of the afternoon (barriers and facilitators of informal learning) and to explore instead some of the issues that had emerged from the three groups. Four new working groups were formed, each focusing on a specific theme but within the context of barriers and facilitators of informal learning.
Application of learning: ‘Use it or Lose it’:

This group based its discussion around a series of questions about work and learning, centred on the idea that learning isn’t just acquiring but having the ability to use knowledge, develop and hone it through use.

A key issue was the conditions that facilitate the application of learning. Regardless of context, new forms of knowledge can emerge from informal learning by going to the places where there is most to be learned. The group explored the way a failing organisation can be renewed by using its existing knowledge and re-directing it. When there are no answers to be had from that place you have to look outside, be innovative. For example, the ISTC could have been a failing union as the industry it was based on went into decline. By building new membership and branches through work in the community it re-directed its efforts. Informal learning has sustained its activities. But there seems also to be an inverse relationship between the concept of ‘authority’ at work or in a community organisation and the amount of learning people report as happening there.

In questioning the conditions that make for the application of learning the group used the phrase ‘a confident society’, one in which people have self-esteem and confidence. Group members thought that much ‘training’ doesn’t begin to address issues of low self-esteem and poor confidence, and so fails. This led to the important question: is the ideology of management contrary to good workplace learning? Human Resource Development in many cases is a very mechanical process that doesn’t always begin where workers are ‘at’, or relate to what and how they want to learn, and how to refine what they’ve learned.

The group suggested that schemes to train and support union learning representatives could engage the enthusiasm and interest of workers in lifelong learning, support them in learning and the ‘application’ of learning and offer the opportunity to use their new skills. Learning reps can raise as an issue the way in which workers go on courses, often in their own time, but are then not given the chance to practice their new skills. They can also act as workplace mentors and supporters themselves. One of the saddest parts about being a redundant ‘skilled’ worker is the way you become ‘deskilled’ or ‘unskilled’ again. The group contrasted this with informal learning in the family where women often learn skills such as time-management, handling interpersonal issues (squabbling kids, ailing parents) which can be readily transferred to other situations.

Future learning:

This group focused on the influences of new technologies on learning. The Internet is likely to change everything about learning that we have now. There was some discussion about e-learning and worry about the loss of the human element as well as the issue of inequality in access to facilities, particularly by Adult Education users. The group noted that in addition to more organised courses offered electronically, the internet is a site for informal learning through accessing and exploring knowledge, sharing ideas and experiences with others, and indeed through developing ICT skills by using the technology.

Email has the potential to be egalitarian and democratic since bureaucracies can’t control it. However there are attempts at controlling it, which can lead to drying up of
creativity. There is a divide in the community between those who have IT and those who don't. Community access to ICT can be a compensatory measure but has the danger of setting up first and second class access. There was speculation that in the future the economy might be divided between those who can afford face to face communication and those who have to use ICT.

Lifelong learning itself could become divisive, with mass training online for routine work, and only those who can afford it accessing human-led learning. It was suggested that there could be an analogy with public transport and private cars -- public transport, like formal education, is rigidly structured, provides limited fixed routes. Private cars, like informal learning, provide a great deal of flexibility and individual choice.

The group discussed how individual users can shape and be creative with the web. The BBC website, for example, has message boards where viewers can talk about programmes. The Gormenghast message board was still active a month after end of programme, although not advertised on TV. It became a virtual reading group in which viewers discussed gothic fiction in general. In contrast, LearnDirect offers on-line tutoring like MacDonalds -- 600,000 courses will be offered but these will be fixed learning products that largely ignore the learning people do in their lives. There is also the difficulty in developing interpersonal skills through these media.

Positive versus negative aspects of learning:
The ways in which informal learning is valued are affected by the way it links into (or not) the economic agenda. Acquisition of (job-related) skills is still influential. Some skills are not valued because they are seen as morally beyond the pale -- can we think of their potential in different ways? Power relations are evident in the way women's work and learning is deemed not valuable (e.g. housework). The group pointed out however, that housework is more than work, it is 'emotional labour', the essential glue within human relationships. Jane Rowland Martin, an American educational philosopher, talks in her book 'Reclaiming the Conversation' about the 3Cs -- Care, Concern and Connection, instead of the 3Rs. She argues that schools have to become much more like (functional) homes. The home contribution to developmental learning is undervalued.

One group member pointed to the contradiction between the current focus on building 'social capital' and the effort to get women outside the home and community and into paid work and training. Having undermined women's skill in networking and other 'emotional labour' tasks, programmes to build social capital were having to struggle to replace and rebuild these.

This group also discussed the need for research on informal learning in this country, and the benefit of parallel study with the Canadian NALL research. It was suggested that the UK could stretch the methodology of the existing NALS adult learning survey to incorporate informal learning and principles of participation. This would provide a valuable model of research and body of information, and could help place informal learning on the policy agenda.
The group felt that research should relate particularly to 'unreachable' groups that do not participate in formal education. There is also a need for training in Participatory Action Research to enable people to find out needs in their own community.

**Learning to learn:**
This group struggled with the concept of learning, trying to disentangle the multiplicity of understandings. Learning and knowing facts and information is only one model, but there is no true account of learning, rather a variety. The group argued that we need a two-level analysis of the learning process -- we need to understand the relationship between how we learn with what we learn and why.

At the most general level learning to learn is learning to engage in different settings. However, we need to be aware of different learning styles and how people can learn how to demonstrate their knowledge (this relates to the ‘use it or lose it’ discussion). The group asked whether learning how to learn is really about having a choice and having an underlying purpose. Critical questioning is also necessary for learning to become useful, being able to ask and answer the question 'Why am I learning this?' This enables learners to formulate their own learning needs, articulate, question and critically reflect on them.

However, some learning isn't around articulated learning needs but is a by-product. Reference librarians are trained to do "the reference interview," to talk through with people what they want to know (because you don't know what you don't know, so may not be able to articulate clearly what you are looking for). The group suggested there should be a 'learning interview' of the same kind, helping people identify possible learning they have done or might want to do.

Learning to learn depends on feedback and reflection. Peer assessment can provide a supportive learning experience. Feedback is usually encouraged at an individual level but on its own this can reinforce an unequal power relationship. Communal, joint learning and peer assessment, working together to explore the learning process, is very different.

**Panel on Articulation of informal learning with formal education provision**

**Chris Jude -- Director of Lifelong Learning, London Borough of Islington**

Chris drew on her FE college experience in Lewisham to demonstrate how informal learning can be facilitated within formal education settings. The students had pride but low self-esteem, there were high exclusion rates, discipline issues, no sense of identity or belonging to a community. The College organised focus groups about men’s work, men as carers, as parents, as partners. They introduced Study Buddies, brought people in from outside to act as employment volunteers to offer mentoring about what work is like, know-how, information about networking. Events were organised such as Health Week and a Midsummer Fair where everyone in the College had a contribution to celebrate. By bringing people into the College to learn and share activities it facilitated the development of a community and gave students and staff a chance to bring something of themselves into learning. It created a 'hidden curriculum' of informal learning alongside the formal taught courses.
As Director of Lifelong Learning in Islington Chris has committed a third of the adult education budget to innovations and risk, and again has been supporting informal learning alongside formal education. She organised a citizens' conference to involve people in planning inputs for the Borough's Lifelong Learning Plan. Older people have been doing research, and there has been a group of housing estate residents doing work on Agenda 21 environmental policy in the Borough. She tries to source solutions with the people involved, and to use the intelligence they already have.

**David Barton -- Professor of Linguistics, Lancaster University**  
The research on ‘Local Literacies’ in Lancaster explored what people were doing in their lives and how literacy was involved. Researchers found that it was rare for people to read in order to read. Rather reading was used by people to help get on with their lives. People used literacy to communicate, organise their lives, as part of leisure pursuits, to document and record their lives. They use it to make sense of their lives, and there was a lot of deliberate researching going on which was submerged. The research mapped areas of vernacular knowledge in the community and explored examples of local organisations that people belong to, and found this involvement was imbued with reading and writing.

David said there were parallels between literacy and learning in that people for the most part are not learning for the sake of learning, but have real problems that they are trying to solve. Essentially you can't separate learning from use -- an ‘act of use is an act of learning’. However, he pointed to problems with the word 'learning' similar to problems with those with 'literacy'. He also suggested that we shouldn’t make guesses about who are the people who are left out, and what they think or are capable of doing.

David criticised the way in which official statistics on literacy levels are used and manipulated for political reasons, pointing out that their use in this way is not helpful because forms of literacy are so various. He argued that learning to learn is knowing how to get around a new change in life, and that people talking to each other in a community is often learning.

**John Payne -- Senior Research Fellow, University of Leeds**  
John concentrated on the relationship between the formal and informal in work-based learning situations. He stated that between a third and half of all firms do no formal training of employees, there being no compulsory framework to make it happen. However, even with this, most would be wasting money on training because they don't know how to put the learning into effect to make a difference to the firm's business performance. With this situation the recognition of informal learning would create greater problems because the majority of firms are small and their managers are unlikely to recognise or encourage informal learning, although it undoubtedly happens in those firms.

He used the example from a Trade Union Learning Fund project with printers. In one firm he visited there was a physical separation between IT and traditional methods of print technology, which meant that the printers who had been on a training course in use of IT in printing processes weren’t able to pass on their

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2 Should we talk about multiple learning(s) in the same way we now talk about multiple literacies?
knowledge easily to colleagues. When a new manager joined the firm he immediately recognised the fact, and reorganised the department to allow all the pre-press workers to practice and refine their new IT skills.

John argued that the workplace is part of society and that there is a problem in separating work out from the rest of society in isolation. Democracy and openness can create the conditions at work in which both formal and informal learning can flourish. Trade Unions are the key to developing and improving the interface between formal and informal learning but a major barrier is the lack of a legal framework for education between unions and employers.

**Discussion**

Marta Forresti pointed out that the DfEE research project conducted by the Tavistock Institute had begun on the premise that there was potential for informal learning to link and lead to formal education. Having listened to the working groups she now felt that actually it is the other way around -- informal learning has a lot to ‘teach’ the formal education system particularly around the ‘initiating circumstances’ for learning.

Sue Boden talked about learning being focused around critical episodes. She said that in Norfolk they have a system of ‘barefoot’ guidance workers -- people who work in rural areas, chatting in village conversations, offering advice when people need it, being available. It was suggested that a lot of creative work is possible in the spaces within institutions, while some educational institutions are using the flexibility of 'informal' learning to break through their boundaries.

**Friday Overview and Review**

**David Livingstone -- Director of NALL, OISE, University of Ontario**

David pointed out that informal learning is like love: if you try to measure it too tightly it will elude you. His research in Canada on the New Approaches to Lifelong Learning (NALL) project started with ethnographic studies, which led on to conducting surveys. Their focus is on explicit, self-recognised informal learning, but this is only one of a range of types of learning including:

- Formal schooling,
- Non-formal education,
- Explicit informal learning,
- Tacit informal learning
- General socialisation
- Continuing environmental perception and response.

Both explicitly recognised informal learning and tacit informal learning can be researched. In the NALL survey they studied learning in relation to three spheres of work: paid work, domestic work/caring, and community voluntary work. He found nearly all Canadians are involved in some form of informal learning activities that they define as significant in the contexts of their live. On average 15 hours per week were spent in informal learning and all this happens underneath, in the background to, and expands the effectiveness of formal learning and training. Those with the least schooling engaged in informal learning activities as much as those with most education (unlike participation in adult education). He argued from these findings
that a learning society already exists but we do not live in a knowledge-based economy. Few people have opportunities to use their knowledge and this represents under-employment.  

Marta Foresti -- Tavistock Institute

The DfEE brief was about informal learning pathways into more formal education and training; the researchers at the Tavistock argued it should be broader, more holistic. They were interested in the route between informal and formal learning and why formal education is not meeting people's needs. There has been a lot of work on either the processes or outcomes of informal learning but not on the bridge between process and outcome, how processes lead to outcomes.

Marta pointed out that social exclusion can be difficult to tackle through top-down initiatives as the socially excluded can still be excluded -- e.g. residents on peripheral housing estates prefer to direct their own informal learning activities. Equally people who may not see themselves as learners do engage with the process when you talk about it with them.

The key barriers to informal learning identified by the research were:

• negative previous experience of learning,
• financial constraints,
• social and physical access,
• inertia, either by the individual or in the community.

Marta used the case study of Downham Youth to demonstrate the way participation can lead to involvement and positive attitudes in a community, while also pointing out the participation cannot be imposed from outside. The young people on an estate in SE London did a survey of the needs on their estate and presented it to the local council. The Tavistock research indicates that boundaries between formal and informal learning are flexible.

Working Groups on Barriers and Facilitators

The remainder of the morning was spent in working groups analysing barriers and facilitators to informal learning, connections across contexts and the implications for regeneration and lifelong learning policies.

The barriers and facilitators to informal learning identified across all groups is included in the tables below. Barriers included a variety of factors:

⇒ personal and social factors (like lack of time, isolation)
⇒ contextual factors (like shiftwork, rigid job demarcations)
⇒ the perceptions of employers and professionals that restrict the recognition and valuing of informal learning (like pre-set agendas)
⇒ policies that do not allow space for recognition and valuing of informal learning (like narrowly defined economic agendas, tight outcome definitions)

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3 This echoes Frank Coffield’s point in his introduction to ‘Speaking Truth to Power’, one of the reports on the ESRC Learning Society research programme, where he points to the mismatch between qualifications and job requirements: the UK doesn’t have an under-supply of qualified labour but ‘rather [a] low level of demand for it’.
Groups noted that barriers to informal learning can also be barriers to other sorts of participation. Many policies have pre-set agendas and are too outcome oriented; e.g. they might measure the rate of entering employment but wouldn't look at wider benefits as justifiable outcomes. The assumption is always that learning equals formal training and that learning is an individual activity. They do not consider the community as the arena for that learning, either geographic communities or communities of practice.

Facilitating factors for informal learning included:
⇒ supportive processes for learning (like creating a safe space, ongoing support for participation)
⇒ situational factors (like access to IT)
⇒ institutional factors, especially around attitudes to recognising informal learning (like a broader view of economic and social gain, training for participation and research)
⇒ personal and social factors (like valuing community and communication)

The key facilitators of informal learning are shared ownership and a sense of belonging. Efforts to break the isolation of individuals are important, although the question was raised whether learning aimed at individuals could lead to participation in the community as well. Participatory appraisal was suggested as a means of facilitating involvement in community, through training local people as researchers and facilitators, as they can reach people the researchers can't reach. It is important to acknowledge local people as experts. Metacognitive skills can be developed as a result of involvement in the process of research. However continuing support and encouragement is needed to ensure the effort doesn't fail and people left feeling worse. ‘Community bullies’ can emerge who do not really represent the community but may effectively exclude others from participation or consultation, particularly the less articulate. When outside organisations do quick and superficial consultations they will often attract such people, and assume that they represent the community. Only in-depth and ongoing participation can get beyond this.
## Barriers to Informal Learning

### Personal and social factors that inhibit informal learning:
- prior school experience
- low self-esteem
- lack of time
- lack of critical literacy
- social exclusion
- alienation → ‘not for the likes of us’
- social, personal & geographic isolation, lack of belonging to community → community bully syndrome
- finance/poverty
- not knowing something is possible
- disbelief that learning can happen when you are older
- not knowing what resources exist locally
- experience of institutional racism & discrimination

### Contextual factors that inhibit informal learning:
- shiftwork
- older workers not ‘economic’
- job demarcation & specialisation
- lack of infrastructure
- loss of experienced staff → no community of practice
- lack of or inappropriate support/research
- who’s offering informal learning opportunities & how
- resources (expertise, money)
- disrespect for accrued knowledge of elders

### Employers’ and professionals’ perceptions and recognition of learning:
- value judgements
- failure to acknowledge cultural diversity
- concept of professionalism - only professionals know what should be taught or learnt
- pre-set agendas
- undervaluing informal learning skills
- lack of awareness of existence of informal learning
- informal learning rarely prioritised
- rigid definitions as to what learning is → focus on individual learning
- access → information/ networks/activities/know-how/physical location
- lack of wholism
- lack of indexing of knowledge & its usefulness & links

### Policies that do not allow space for recognition and valuing of informal learning:
- economic policies - directed at narrow interpretation of ‘learning’ outcomes
- outcome oriented projects → defining in advance, measuring outcomes
- multiple short-term funding & narrow short term focus on e.g. employment
- emphasis on training not learning
- quantity over quality in policy
Facilitators of Informal Learning

Processes of learning:
- safe space: psychological, physical, emotional, familiar location
- sense of belonging, shared authorship & ownership
- initiators, movers, shakers
- belonging to a support network + shared values
- negotiable agendas
- space for innovation & risk
- balance between insider research & outside objectivity
- ongoing support & encouragement for participation.
- learner-centred
- peer involvement
- reflective/listening management

Situational factors:
- equipment
- access to IT
- change in workplace environment
- unlike school (nurturing)

Institutional factors:
- change in messages → investment in training.
- organisational healthcheck → policy & culture change.
- training for participation & research
- checking constantly on community representation
- bigger & more inclusive & intelligent debate that makes a difference.
- broader view of economic & social gain → include measures of employability & well-being

Personal and social factors:
- creativity
- critical literacy
- knowing what you want, knowing what’s possible
- having time to learn
- validating & valuing different learning styles
- knowing & having the skills to learn
- valuing communication & community
- letting ideas grow
The groups identified a wide range of policy areas in which informal learning could play a role, including a large number of initiatives. The principal criticism was the inconsistencies between them. For example, Individual Learning Accounts were aimed to widen participation in learning but they are only currently useable for signing up to formal courses; they will only encourage participation if they can be used across a wide variety of both formal and informal learning opportunities.

**Panel on Policy Developments**

**Marcus Bell -- DfEE**

He stated that up to now public policy has been focused narrowly on learning that leads somewhere. But in the future (with the new Learning and Skills Councils) there would be more emphasis placed on learning that doesn’t lead to a qualification. There is public policy interest in addressing the problem of non-participation and social disadvantage, asking questions about the sort of learning opportunities that need to be made available to change this.

He noted that institutions are often seen as too remote and professionals generally are not trusted by the disadvantaged. Colleges need to learn from the informal sector but this would require training.

**Mary Heslop -- FEFC**

Mary stated that the new Learning and Skills Council will end the division between ‘Schedule 2’ and ‘Non-Schedule 2’ funding (distinguishing learning that leads to a qualification from learning that does not). However the issue would now be about what will be funded by public money (because there will not be enough for everything). One of the Learning and Skills Council’s objectives is ‘promoting learning’ but what sorts of learning or what characteristics of learners have yet to be clearly defined. It is possible that some courses may be funded for socially disadvantaged learners but not for those who can afford to pay.

The 47 local Learning and Skills Councils will need to address inconsistencies and uneven access to learning. This could be through fees policy and Individual Learning Accounts. There could be opportunities to support informal learning, and indeed some pilot projects are currently underway, through the non-schedule 2 pilot Initiative’ from the FEFC. These are being carefully evaluated. The current Government priority is for qualifications for adults. In response to criticisms of outcome-driven funding Mary argued that you cannot escape the issue of accountability.

**Sue Betts -- Ufi, Learn Direct Eastern Region**

Sue pointed to Ufi’s three key objectives: to drive up demand for all learning, to provide unbiased advice and guidance through their helpline, and to offer a range of products under the LearnDirect brand name. Five Learn Direct Centres or ‘learning hubs’ are being established in ‘Lifestyle locations’ in the Eastern Region. These include an old post office in Hertfordshire, Harlow sports centre, an e-commerce centre in Norwich, a tiny centre in an isolated, rural location in Suffolk, and a centre in Peterborough, next to the central library but with a different door. Although these are still in the development phase they are open for bite-sized chunks of learning (e.g. 15 minutes). By the launch date there should be 90 centres open.
During the evaluation of phases 1 and 2, satisfaction with locations was high, with user satisfaction from learner feedback about 85% in phase 1. Satisfaction with products being offered was not as high in the first phase but they didn't have their own LearnDirect products yet. One of Ufi’s main objectives is basic skills with a strong focus on e-learning. They are training learning facilitators and IT Navigators taken from people ‘outside’ the normal channels of education, ‘ex-learners’. Their aim is to ensure users don't realise they're learning while they're doing it.

Cheryl Turner -- NIACE

Cheryl commented on the complexity of issues that had emerged during the conference and the bewildering array of policy fields involved. There is a need to provide a framework for action for voluntary and community organisations. A number of key government policy documents including the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal and the Policy Action Team on Skills Report place the voluntary and community sector at the centre of the achievement of their objectives around widening participation and social and economic regeneration.

Cheryl had been involved in nine regional joint NIACE/WEA seminars to capture the voluntary and community sector’s perspectives on this and the Learning and Skills Council proposals. There were consistent messages coming from these meetings, some translatable to other policy fields. There was a broad welcome for the prominence and recognition of the voluntary and community sector and their good practice. There was an appreciation of the language within the articulation of policy with the emphasis on transparency. They welcomed the cultural shift that gives them direct access to funding but this requires organisational changes to ensure parity of esteem within partnerships. There was also concern about fatigue and where to place limited resources. Infrastructure was crucial, to draw together coherent and representative views, but staff development was also needed if groups were to maintain an understanding of developments. The issue of group identities was a clear strand of concern coupled with the fear that proposed changes will constrain the creativity, flexibility and responsiveness of the sector -- they feared being boxed in by conditions and accountability that came with the changes in policy.

Conclusions

What and where is informal learning?
People learn but not always what or how educators (and governments) intend. We know that the most effective learning is embedded in action, and informal learning situations represent some of the most effective scenarios for that socially situated action to occur. However, learning cannot be designed, though it can be ‘designed for’ (Wenger, 1998). We can provide the infrastructures and processes that facilitate learning, but people in their ‘communities’ have to determine how and what they wish to learn for themselves.

Informal learning happens everywhere. The diverse contexts from which people came signified the total immersion of informal learning in life -- even to the extent of emerging in spaces and free time within formal educational institutions. Nevertheless, the discussion of barriers and facilitators of informal learning suggest that it can be maximised or driven underground, unrecognised. The relationship
between informal and learning and use seems important -- like literacy, people don't necessary learn for the sake of learning, but in order to get something done.

**Articulation between informal and formal learning**

Educators tend to think about informal learning as an initiator, something that can lead people into 'real' learning, which is what educational institutions offer. The graphic developed by one of the working groups suggest that the articulation between the two is not linear -- informal learning permeates our lives, it can come before, during and after engagement in formal learning. The issue is more about recognition and value; there needs to be an acknowledgement that education can be used to support people's informal learning.

**Policy opportunities and issues**

As the Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs) are constructed (nationally and regionally) there will be opportunities to broaden their agenda beyond the current picture. Firstly, LSCs will be able to direct-fund organisations that currently can only be funded by FEFC through colleges (including community and voluntary groups). Secondly, the content of learning has potential to change. With the remove of the old divide between courses leading to qualifications and courses that do not will come opportunities for supporting informal (though planned and facilitated) learning. LSCs have a responsibility to promote learning, through creating partnerships and there is potential to impact and broaden the notion of learning that is used.

Although there is an opening for different interpretations of learning, there will still be constraints, most notably:

- Limits on what can be funded by the public purse (demands will exceed the £6b funding);
- Demands of outcome-driven funding -- as Mary Heslop told us there is no escape from accountability, so we need to work on mechanisms that support accountability in informal learning (different from the qualifications routes);
- There is ongoing concern about consistency and evenness of access to learning opportunities.

National policies for regeneration (including the New Deal for Communities, Single Regeneration Budget and Regional Development Agencies) place voluntary and community groups at the centre of strategy. To impact policy we talked about the need to increase the capacity of communities to influence policy, and to educate policy people about the realities of working with communities on the ground (for example through secondments).

**Possible Next Steps**

**Networking/e-networking**

It will be valuable to continue making connections across sectors and roles, maintaining contacts from the conference. This could be done through establishing a list serve or electronic network. The Wider Benefits of Learning research group at Birkbeck College/Institute of Education have offered to set up such a network.
Research
It is important to keep working across the practitioner/research divide -- paralleling and drawing on the rich array of NALL research in Canada, and building on the Tavistock Institute research for DfEE. There are several possible concrete steps:
• Adding questions to the National Adult Learning Survey (NALS) (drawing upon the Canadian survey).
• Finding funds to conduct participatory and ethnographic research on informal learning in this country (in workplaces, communities, families and homes).
• Extending the follow-up research to Local Literacies (Barton and Hamilton) to examine informal learning as well as literacies.

Policy input.
It is necessary to overcome a 'loss of memory' about how to do this kind of work. Experience developed on the ground over many years is not necessarily known about or learned from at the policy level. Consequently pilots and research are carried out when there is already a pool of knowledge and experience among practitioners about what needs to be done. How to tap into this more effectively is a challenge. The challenge overcome should translate into more effective and cost-effective policy development. Possible concrete steps include developing briefing documents for LSCs and neighbourhood renewal policies.