Tales from the margins: Learning beyond teaching

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1. Learning outside education

"In "cool action" teams engaged in a project, a deliberative mode is the established normal state; but when people interact in a more animated way, sparking each other off or arguing, rapid responses are likely to occur which lead to new insights. Participation in discussion of ten involved deliberative thinking about the topic, rapid comprehension of what others are saying, and rapid decision making about when to speak and what type of contribution to make." (Eraut, 2000: 25)

‘… they never came back to tell us what was happening, and we brought it up with the councillors in February about why we had not heard anything about the leisure centre and they were really surprised that young people were so abrupt … we all sat there, there must have been 20-27 of us, and we were all asking questions, and there was councillors on one side and all the young people on the other side, and we asked why have you not come back to us? We built a model, we've done all the research, we have gone out and surveyed people and why haven't you got back to us, and they could not say anything.' Member of Downham Youth, a group of young people in southeast London (quoted in Cullen et al, 1999: 36).

‘People become local experts on particular topics, whether it is an illness, their child’s difficulties, or a legal grievance. There can be a tenacious imperative to learn, to find out more, to solve a problem by trespassing into areas of expertise, and tackling literacies normally reserved for others’. (Barton and Hamilton, 1998: 250).

In a survey of children's views on learning, 66% of middle and secondary school children said that their mother helped them learn the most (57% cited teachers) (MORI, 2000).

These examples demonstrate learning outside educational institutions or programmes. As Coffield argues in the final report of the Learning Society project, it is becoming increasingly clear that the significance of informal learning is much greater than most of us involved in education acknowledge. Adult educators have tended to view informal learning mainly as a progression route into what seems to be regarded as the 'real thing' - formal learning. If we want to support lifelong learning, if we want to build a 'learning society', then adult educators have to go several steps further to recognise and support learning outside education. But there are questions about how to do this, about what informal learning really is and how it can articulate with more formal and organised learning experiences. This paper summarises a flurry of recent research activity on informal learning, and a search conference held in 2000 as a means of exploring the concept and examining implications for policy and practice.

2. Research on informal learning

Recent research on informal learning builds on a longer history of research on the social contexts of learning and apprenticeship (e.g. Lave and Wenger, 1991). In the last couple of years there have been several new studies on informal learning.

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
research included case studies of informal learning in a variety of domains, from Surfers Against Sewage to Downham Youth in London. These studies suggest that informal learning is embedded in the locality in which it takes place, and is defined by the contexts of practice which, in turn, can generate new forms of political and social participation. This has implications for policy focused on regeneration and social capital formation. The authors argue 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.

In the final report from the Learning Society research programme Coffield (2000) argues that formal education and training represent only a small part of all learning: 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. Earlier Learning Society reports explore the nature and processes of learning and knowledge development within workplace teams (Eraut, 1998). In the 2000 report Eraut identifies a typology of informal learning based on intention to learn. At one extreme is implicit learning -- there is no intention to learn and no awareness at the time that learning has taken place (Eraut, 2000: 12). At the other extreme is deliberative learning in time specifically set aside for that purpose. Between the two extremes lies reactive learning, where learning takes place almost spontaneously in response to situations -- the learner is aware of it but has not planned or set aside time for it. His research suggests that the tacit knowledge acquired through implicit and reactive learning can be made explicit, and that there are good reasons for doing so in terms of increasing workplace performance, communicating knowledge to others, critical control and accountability.

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 collaboration from a wide variety of private, public, and non-profit organisations. In their national survey, over 95 percent of Canadians said they had been involved in some form of informal learning activities during the previous year (Livingstone, 1999). 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. They were learning about plumbing and gardening, sports and leisure interests, community issues and gaining skills that they regarded as important for work (especially computers). In remarkable contrast to adult education generally, people with least schooling engaged in informal learning activities as much as people with most education.

Foley (1999) describes the learning that emerged from women’s involvement in neighbourhood centres (houses) in Australia. Established during the 1970s and 80s they provided a venue for the establishment of community playgroups and women’s education. Foley demonstrates how the original reason for participation led women to other activities. Women might get involved in a playgroup for their children but then might begin to ask for something for themselves. The experience of participation in the activities of a ‘house’ is an important learning process where much of the learning is embedded, informal and incidental, as well as not being articulated as learning by those participating. This research supports and extends Elsdon’s earlier research (1995) on local voluntary organisations in the UK as significant sites for learning.

Despite this flurry of research, informal learning remains, as the Tavistock report describes it, ‘an ill-defined and messy concept’. The NALL research 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'. Others emphasise more the contextualised nature of informal learning. McGivney (1999) 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 crossover.

3. The informal learning search conference

The Learning from Experience Trust (LET), in partnership with NIACE, received funding support from the Lifelong Learning Foundation for a search conference to explore informal learning. In July 2000 we brought 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, and explore the implications for policy, practice and future research.

We recognised that informal learning defies neat definitions. Simply defining it as a residual category -- everything that is not formal education -- is not very useful in conceptual terms. The concept contains a much more complex, varied, and rich array of 'learnings' that should be teased out. In the search conference, we began to recognise some of these dimensions.

Intention

One dimension is the degree of intention involved in the learning (see Eraut, 2000 for further discussion of this dimension). Learning is often an unsought accompaniment to accomplishing purposes, although it may also be planned and intended. We might see different degrees of intention in these incidents of learning:

- Learning from action (trial and error, learning from mistakes and successes)
- Learning from peers (asking for help, how to do it, watching others)
- Learning through participation in groups (which might include local voluntary organisations, less formal groups in the community, work teams and other teams)
- Self-directed learning (whether for work or fun, planned but done independently whether through reading or other means)

Recognition

The extent to which learning is (or can be) recognised is a different dimension. Intended learning does not always or only lead to learning that is recognised. Unintended learning can be recognised later. At one extreme, socialisation is a learning activity that is usually recognised as such only in times of social and challenge (for example post-war socialisation around women's roles, which were challenged in the subsequent women's movement). 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. We can unlearn these presumptions and learn others, but the original ones are powerful and hard to change.

On an everyday basis we take part in activities that we would not recognise as learning at the time, but we can look back and recognise what we learned. Eraut's workplace teams, Elsdon's local voluntary organisations and Foley's social action groups all involve learning that is not immediately recognised as such, but can be recognised through some reflection.

Locus

The locus of learning often affects how it is recognised by ourselves and others -- learning in educational institutions is usually privileged above learning in the home. Formal education is
recognised as 'learning' whether or not learning actually takes place. However, 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). 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 colonise 'spaces' within educational institutions (in coffee breaks, networking, mentoring, celebrating).

4. Permeable boundaries

The distinctions between formal and informal learning, home and work become blurred in what Barton and Hamilton (1998) describe as the ‘borderlands’ between home and work, school and public life, a permeable zone where literacy practices cross in both directions. They also note that literacy learning in the home is rarely separated from use, but integrated into everyday activities. Barton and Hamilton’s research looked at sense making through mapping areas of vernacular knowledge in the community and exploring examples of local organisations that people belong to. They found local community involvement was permeated with reading and writing. Just as people engaged in literacy practices in order to accomplish a purpose or solve a problem, so it is with informal learning in such settings. Learning cannot be separated from use. People have their own purposes and intentions, their own meanings: as Wenger asserts, learning ‘cannot be designed. Ultimately it belongs to the realm of experience and practice. It follows the negotiation of meaning: it moves on its own terms. It slips through the cracks; it creates its own cracks.’ (1998: 225)

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, while formal learning may provide additional tools and opportunities for people to use in their informal learning activities. The permeability of the boundaries between formal and informal spheres of learning was illustrated by two case studies at the search conference.

Chris Jude (Director of Lifelong Learning for the London Borough of Islington) described her experience in a further education college in London 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, and 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.

John Payne (Senior Research Fellow at the University of Leeds) gave a case study 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 weren’t able to pass on their knowledge easily to colleagues. When a new manager joined the firm, he immediately
recognised the fact, and reorganised the department to allow informal learning to spread the new knowledge, and all the pre-press workers to practice and refine their new IT skills.

A recent action research project conducted by the Learning from Experience Trust with the Elfrida Society® involved independent living workers supporting people with mild to moderate learning difficulties to live in their own homes. The project demonstrated the possibility of supporting structured opportunities for informal learning within everyday living contexts. This was a purposive and holistic approach to the encouragement of learning in context. Sara, an Elfrida Society service user, learnt basic coin values and became confident about paying for things herself instead of handing over her purse to her support worker. Fiona, her support worker discovered that encouraging Sara to develop the basic skills she needed for shopping independently required a re-think of her whole approach to working with adults. She became aware of how much learning is embedded in everyday life contexts – abstract concepts were meaningless until needed within a concrete life situation. The project demonstrated the complexity and centrality of informal learning to sense making in everyday life.

5. Conclusions -- why does informal learning matter?
Wenger (1998) argues that learning cannot be designed, but that we can design 'for' learning. He proposes a 'learning architecture' of 'enabling infrastructures' that would support and nurture learning. To design for informal learning would be to build infrastructures and processes into the contexts of peoples' lives. We think there are several reasons why adult educators should pay attention to informal learning:

• Recognising learners as being learned increases our respect for them, their abilities and their intentions;
• Understanding learners as having learned much already makes a 'banking' approach to teaching impossible -- no more filling empty vessels with new knowledge;
• Taking account of existing knowledge, understanding and intentions challenges us to make new learning connect with prior learning, and to be more relevant to learner purposes.

But for all our good intentions, the reality of most adult education is that it is designed by institutions, much of it for institutional purposes. How can we build on what we know about informal learning to create change at the level of policy and practices? Several possibilities have emerged from our exploration of informal learning.

1. Recognition of Prior Learning (known as RPL in some parts of the world, Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) and Recognition (PLAR) in others, and in the UK as Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL). This has evolved over the last 20 years as a technique for giving credit for learning that matches institutional definitions of learning. It has thereby limited itself to a narrow range of applications, but more radical applications are developing (see Harris, 2000) that challenge institutional power and its managerial discourses. RPL is potentially a tool for broadening learning agendas and opening questions of who defines learning.

2. 'Just in time' learning -- in which there are more permeable boundaries between informal and formal learning that allow people to move across and 'grab' learning in the form of teaching, as they need it. For example, community activists may want to learn particular skills -- running committees, book-keeping -- that could be offered by educational institutions in collaboration with community development work. Parents may want to learn advocacy skills and to understand the working of schools in order to speak out for their children. Any of these could lead on to other educational enterprises, if the participants so wish, but do not have to. Within informal learning contexts (whether at work or at home) the potential impacts and outcomes of learning are diffuse.
3. Learning support workers -- like community development workers -- can support learning wherever it happens. They could be trade union based (like the UK's trade union Learning Representatives), based in local voluntary groups or neighbourhoods. They can also be based within educational institutions, like the further education college described above, encouraging and supporting a culture of learning to spill across the boundaries between formal and informal, public and private, individuals and groups.

Rethinking what we mean by learning and how best to support it is a discussion that is particularly important to have now in the UK at this juncture. Policy developments in post-16 education (Learning and Skills Councils), community development (neighbourhood regeneration and renewal initiatives), and work-based learning (learning companies, union learning representatives) mean that there are opportunities to design and embed processes and infrastructures for learning. Only when we really understand and value what people are learning on their own can we as educators learn to support those processes. Lifelong learning can become more inclusive and embedded in life if the tales from the margins are listened to and acted on.

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ii Final report is available from Learning from Experience Trust, Goldsmiths College, Deptford Town Hall, London SE14 6AE for £6.50.
iii This project was part of the NIACE/Learning & Skills Development Agency managed ‘Basic Skills for Adults with Learning Difficulties or Disabilities’ programme funded through the DfEE. An article exploring the approach used in this project is published in the edition of Adults Learning