Part 3
Learning sites
22

Informal learning
Everyday living

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Introduction and overview

This chapter aims to outline the wide and diverse scope of informal learning. It is argued that this is an important kind of learning that hitherto has been unjustly neglected. Informal learning is defined and its scope outlined in the first major section. Following that, key characteristic features of informal learning are considered in some detail. It is argued that recent theorizing of learning serves to highlight the significance of informal learning. The last main section discusses some examples of rich informal learning from everyday living.

Definition of informal learning and the scope of informal learning from living

Any attempts to define ‘informal learning’ are shaped necessarily by its intimate connection to the concept of ‘formal learning’. As the very term ‘informal’ indicates, informal learning is usually thought of as lacking important features that distinguish its more illustrious cousin, ‘formal learning’. For a learning situation to count as formal, it typically must exhibit three essential features. Formal learning situations involve:

- a specific curriculum
- teachers who are responsible for teaching the curriculum
- an assessment system that assesses and certifies the learning attainments of the individual learners.

If we accept that these three features mark off formal learning, then we can define informal learning as covering all of the myriads of other situations in which people learn (Hager and Halliday, 2006: 30).

This definition entails, of course, that informal learning encompasses an extraordinarily wide and diverse range of instances of learning. For example, most learning situations in the so-called non-formal education sector count as informal learning according to the above definition. This is so because non-formal educational offerings usually exhibit only two of the three essential features of formal learning. Typical examples here are adult education courses that follow a specific curriculum taught by designated teachers, but do not involve formal assessment of student learning. Thus, except for its small number of courses that meet the three essential features of formal learning, the vast bulk of educational provision in the non-formal sector counts as informal learning according to the above definition. This usage conforms with much of the
literature, which views the terms ‘informal learning’ and ‘non-formal learning’ as interchangeable. It is also reflected in major policy documents (e.g. Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills 2009). However, there are other writers who view non-formal learning as being halfway between formal and informal learning (for detailed discussion of these matters see Colley, Hodkinson and Malcolm, 2003; and Hager and Halliday, 2006. The latter also provide the full case for favouring the definition of informal learning employed in this chapter).

But the non-formal component of informal learning is dwarfed by other much bigger components. For instance, informal learning from everyday living, from life experiences of all kinds, is an extremely large category within the overall realm of informal learning. Informal learning at and from work is a major sub-category within this very large category. This major sub-category expands rapidly if, quite reasonably, work is thought of as including both paid and unpaid labour. Large amounts of rich informal learning occur as people plan and prepare to carry out work projects, and as they carry out and complete such projects, both large and small. In doing so, they extend their own capabilities, whilst expanding the range and level of the work tasks that they are able to perform. Some idea of the diversity, complexity and sheer size of the learning from work sub-category can be gained from a consideration of Table 22.1, in which Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2004) propose a six-fold classification of the different types of workplace learning.

The first thing to note about Table 22.1 is that, although it is focused on workplace learning, each of its categories can be easily adapted to cover the different types of learning from everyday living. The second thing to note about Table 22.1 is that the large bulk of the informal learning at and from work, as discussed above, seems to be captured in the unintentional/unplanned column, whereas, at first sight, the intentional/planned column represents more formal training or workplace learning situations. However, these two columns definitely do not provide such a sharp division between formal and informal learning. This becomes clear from a consideration of examples. For instance, a new employee in a workplace might be assigned a mentor who is responsible for seeing that they ‘learn the ropes’. Although this would be a clear example of ‘planned learning of that which others know’, it is unlikely to include all three essential features of formal learning as defined above. Hence, this would be an informal learning situation as understood in this chapter. Clearly, this would be true of many cases of workplace learning that belong in the intentional/planned column.

Given, then, that informal learning of different kinds fills both of its columns, Table 22.1 is useful for understanding some of the key features that lie behind the diversity and complexity of the learning from work sub-category. It is uncontroversial that some learning from work is planned, whilst much of it is unplanned. However, the exact senses in which learning from work is intentional or unintentional is a bit trickier. Work itself is the main focus of intentions in the workplace. Typically, people are focused on completing work tasks well, and not on engaging in learning. That is, unlike in formal learning situations, learning from work is parasitic on something else. Whilst this point is obvious in the case of unplanned/

<table>
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<th>Table 22.1 Types of workplace learning</th>
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<td>Learning that which is already known to others</td>
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<td>Development of existing capability</td>
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<td>Learning that which is new in the workplace (or treated as such)</td>
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Source: Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2004).
unintentional learning from work, it can also apply to planned/intentional cases. Partly, it depends on whose intentions they are. For instance, in the mentoring example in the previous paragraph, the mentor intends that the new employee will ‘learn the ropes’. But the new employee’s intentions are likely to be closely focussed on satisfactorily completing the immediate work tasks, whilst being oblivious of the broader situational learning that is simultaneously happening. However, it is also true that good learners intentionally seek out opportunities in the contingent circumstances of work practice to extend their knowledge and capabilities. Hager and Halliday (2006) presents many examples of such opportunistic and contingent informal learning. A further aspect of the complexity of learning from work is that much of it is tacit in several distinct senses (see, e.g. Eraut, 2000; Winch, 2010). Overall, then, learning from work is a major category of learning from everyday living.

But informal learning from everyday living extends well beyond work to include the full range of life experiences not usually thought of as work. It includes informal learning through leisure activities such as hobbies, crafts and sports. As well, it includes informal learning that assists people to survive in stressful situations, e.g. unemployment, incarceration and dead-end jobs. Also, activism of all kinds promotes major informal learning by those engaging in the various kinds of activist activities. There is also the learning that accrues from the full spectrum of interactions with other people – from our most intimate relationships, to day-to-day interactions and transactions with people of all kinds. The list continues, for further kinds of informal learning not captured in these categories. These considerations prompt the question: Is all living learning? On this question, Hager and Halliday (2006: 48) observe:

> It is not necessarily helpful to draw a distinction between learning and living. It has been normal to learn in the course of living long before there were even institutions concerned with formal learning such as schools. Moreover it has been normal to assess our learning and that of others in the course of living. It is worth remembering that people did all kinds of imaginative, useful and beautiful things long before there was talk of the sort referred to above. Great bridges, churches, houses, songs and so on came into existence long before it was fashionable to distinguish between work, living and learning in so sharp a way as is the case now. It is also worth remembering that such enduring creations were not products of the applications of courses of formal learning.

Despite this, the answer to the question, Is all living learning?, is doubtless, No. For one thing, there are some people who never learn or are poor learners. Nevertheless, it does seem to be universally true that all living offers opportunities for significant learning. It is differences between people that account for whether or not these opportunities for learning are taken up, and for the extent and depth of the learning that does occur in a given instance.

### Characteristic features of informal learning

A major obstacle to informal learning being taken seriously as a component of a person’s overall education is the way that it differs on very many criteria from activities that have traditionally been thought of as ‘real education’. This is most obvious in the vast differences between informal learning and the learning that typically takes place in formal educational institutions. However, it may not be widely appreciated that informal learning at work is also very different from formal on-the-job training. These differences can be appreciated by considering the cumulative effect of the following series of contrasts (for more detailed discussion see Beckett and Hager, 2002; Hager and Halliday, 2006).

- Planned learning vs contingent and opportunistic learning: teachers/trainers are in control of the planning, delivery and (usually) assessment of both formal learning in educational institutions and of formal on-the-job training. Whereas, for informal learning, whether at work or from life experiences
generally, it is the learner who is in control (if anyone is). That is, formal learning of all kinds is planned, but informal learning is typically unplanned. It arises contingently and opportunistically as events unfold within a particular environment.

- **Pre-specification vs emergence:** learning that occurs within formal educational institutions and in on-the-job training situations is largely predictable. It is formally prescribed in curricula documents, competency standards, learning outcomes, etc. Whereas, informal learning, whether from work or from life experiences generally, is much less predictable. It emerges from the often unexpected kinds of events that unfold in workplaces or in other everyday environments. This emergent character of informal learning precludes a prior curriculum or prescribed outcomes.

- **Explicit vs tacit:** in both educational institutions and formal on-the-job training, learning is largely explicit. Learners are expected to be able to articulate publicly what they have learnt, e.g. in written examinations, in answers to oral questioning, or in performances of appropriate activities following training. Whereas, for informal learning, whether from work or from life experiences generally, it is often the case that aspects of the learning are implicit or tacit. For one thing, learners are commonly unaware of the extent of their own informal learning. This is so even when learners are well aware of the outcomes of such learning, e.g. that they are able to perform their job much better. But also, as noted above, some aspects of informal learning appear to be, in principle, tacit. Hence, there is the well-known phenomenon of practitioners being able to identify readily those who are the superior performers amongst them, whilst being unable to provide a satisfactory account of the underpinnings of superior performance.

- **Focus on teaching/training and content vs focus on the learner and their learning:** learning both in formal settings and in on-the-job training is marked by an emphasis on teaching/training and on the content and structure of what is taught/trained. In short, the focus is on teaching/training rather than on learning (largely as a consequence of the three previous points). Whereas, for informal learning, whether from work or from life experiences generally, the focus is squarely on the learner and on their learning.

- **Focus on individuals vs focus on both groups and individuals:** learning both in formal settings and in on-the-job training centres on learners as individuals. In general, it is exclusively individual learning/training that is assessed and certified. Whereas, in the case of informal learning, whether from work or from life experiences generally, the learning often is collaborative and/or collegial. Whilst learning by individuals is still important, learning by groups or teams, that is not reducible individual learning, constitutes an important dimension of much informal learning.

- **Context-free learning vs contextualized learning:** learning in formal courses is typically decontextualized. Generally, there is a focus on general principles, rather than on their specific applications. For instance, it is common for school students to dislike their compulsory study of mathematics, whilst being totally unaware that mathematical understanding is essential in their preferred future vocational field. While formal on-the-job training is typically somewhat contextualized, even here there is normally some emphasis on the general, for instance the training being aimed at achieving general industry standards. However, informal learning, whether from work or from life experiences generally, is by its nature highly contextualized. This, of course, contributes to features of unpredictability and emergence noted above.

- **Knowledge and its application vs seamless know-how:** The learning that occurs in both formal educational institutions and in on-the-job training typically is conceptualized in terms of theory (or knowledge) and practice (application of theory and knowledge). Whereas, informal learning, whether from work or from life experiences generally, is characteristically more holistic. It seems to be most appropriately thought of holistically as seamless know-how.

Considering these trends as a whole, it is hardly surprising that formal learning/education has been seen as being much more valuable than informal learning. Informal learning, whether from work or from life
experiences generally, is a paradigm case of informal education. Hence, it tends to be undervalued, parti-
cularly by those with a stake in the formal education system, at whatever level. Historically, training has been 
viewed as the antithesis of education. It is only a slight caricature to say that training has been thought of as 
aimed at mindless, mechanical, routine activity. By contrast, education is understood to aim for development 
of the mind via completion of intellectually challenging tasks. Despite this ‘chalk and cheese’ conception of 
education and training, the trends just noted above show that, in many key respects, the two have more in 
common with one another than either one does with informal learning, whether from work or from life 
experiences generally.

Interestingly, although the above discussion shows that informal learning has been the ‘black sheep’ 
amongst the varieties of learning, having features that make it distinctly different from its siblings, recent 
developments in the theorizing of learning have the potential to make informal learning a much more 
mainstream phenomenon. This will become evident from a brief consideration of theories of learning, 
particularly as they relate to informal learning. (For a more detailed discussion, see Hager, 2011). Here I 
will distinguish three sequential categories of theories of learning:

- early theories (mainly influenced by psychological theories)
- socio-cultural theories
- postmodern theories.

It will be argued that the features of informal learning that distinguish it from formal learning, have actually 
become more prominent in recent theorizing of learning in general.

For over a century, theorizing of learning has been largely dominated by psychological theories such as 
behaviourism, cognitivism and constructivism (for a good overview see Kalantzis and Cope, 2009). Early 
theories of informal learning were largely centred on understanding learning at work and from work (e.g. 
1992). Thus, these authors were essentially developing theories of workplace learning. However, their 
theoretical principles were easily extended beyond paid work to capture learning from life more generally. 
Some common themes in these early theories are:

- The focus is on individual learners.
- The rational, cognitive aspects of workplace performance are stressed.
- Performance of work is represented as thinking (or reflection), followed by the application of this 
thinking or reflection. (This theme is especially evident in Schön’s work).
- The concept of learning is simply assumed to be unproblematic. Learning is treated as a ‘thing’. As 
Elkjaer (2003) noted, the effect of this is that these theories tend to treat workplace learning as akin to 
formal learning. Amongst others things, this means that they also employ the acquisition and transfer 
metaphors unproblematically.
- The significant role of social, cultural, and organizational factors in workplace learning is under-
estimated. Though some of the theorists discussed above do allow a role for such factors, they serve as a 
backdrop against which workplace learning occurs. Later theories of workplace learning provide much 
more decisive roles for social, organizational and cultural factors in shaping workplace learning and 
performance.

(Hager, 2011: 19)

It is readily apparent that these themes align more closely with those features shared by formal learning and 
training, rather than with the features of informal learning, as set out in the above series of seven contrasts. 
Indeed, two themes (a focus on individuals and role of social cultural and organizational factors) have direct 
equivalents. Other themes (a stress on the rational, cognitive aspects of performance, and performance
viewed as thinking, followed by application of thinking) are closely implicated in the features shared by formal learning and training in the second, third and seventh contrasts. Finally, the theme of learning as a ‘thing’ to be acquired and transferred can be seen to underpin virtually all the features shared by formal learning and training in the seven contrasts. Thus, we can conclude that the early theories of informal learning were emphatically aligned with presuppositions that characterized understandings of formal learning. In hindsight, this meant that this work had limited success in explaining informal learning, whether from work or from life experiences generally.

The last 20 years have seen a rise to prominence of a very different approach to theorizing learning. These so-called socio-cultural theories have been significantly shaped by work in sociology and social anthropology. Major contributors include Lave and Wenger (1991), Wenger (1998), Engeström (1999, 2001, 2008), Tuomi-Gröhn and Engeström (2003), Fuller and Unwin (2003, 2004): and Guile and Young (2003). These socio-cultural theories reject major assumptions that characterized psychological approaches to understanding learning. Though they seek to understand learning in general, their main theses align very well with key features of informal learning, as set out in the above series of seven contrasts. Hence, they have provided a major stimulus to the theorizing of work-related learning in its various forms, and of informal learning more generally.

Socio-cultural theories of learning directly contradict three of the themes that characterized psychological approaches to understanding learning. First, they elevate the various social aspects of learning to a new prominence. In so doing, they reject all notions that individual learners should be the focus of analysis. In some of these newer theories, attention is directed exclusively onto the social. In other cases, both individual and social learning are part of the analysis. Thus, some socio-cultural learning theories challenge the assumption that learning has to be exclusively either individual or social. Hence, for understanding the phenomenon of informal learning, whether from work or from life experiences generally, these socio-cultural theories suggest that both individual and social learning are important dimensions of it (see, e.g. Hodkinson, Biesta and James 2008).

Second, these socio-cultural theories view learning as an ongoing process of participation in appropriate activities. They thereby reject the primacy of learning as a ‘thing’ or a product. They portray learning as occurring when learners actively participate in suitable practices. For socio-cultural theories, the metaphor of participation replaces the acquisition and transfer metaphors for the purposes of describing learning.

Third, these socio-cultural theories totally reject any suggestion that learning can be independent of its context. They insist that all learning is significantly shaped by social, organizational, cultural and other contextual factors.

Other key themes that are broadly common to socio-cultural theories of learning are:

- an emphasis on learning as an embodied phenomenon, thereby rejecting mind–body dualism and related dichotomies;
- a recognition that learning seamlessly integrates a range of human attributes that include much more than just rationality. As well, context becomes the significant causal background of the learning.

The net effect of these socio-cultural themes is to problematize the concept of learning as traditionally understood. It is also apparent that these themes have the effect of making informal learning a central case of learning. One might be tempted to conclude that they proclaim informal learning to be a paradigm case of learning.

More recently, a noticeable postmodern approach to theorizing learning has become apparent. Significant contributors include Fenwick (2009), Edwards and Nicoll (2004), Fenwick and Edwards (2010), Usher and Edwards (2007), Gherardi (2006); and Shotter (2008). It is still too soon to judge what their overall impact on our understandings of learning will be. Indeed, it is somewhat dubious to suggest that there
might be a postmodern theorization of learning. However, taken together, the work of these writers suggests that not only should learning be viewed as an ongoing process exhibiting temporal change (as the socio-cultural theories maintain), but that the changes are, in principle, not fully decidable in advance. The suggestion is that learning is emergent from its context in unanticipated and unpredictable ways. Learning is transformed by context in an ongoing creative process. Modernist hopes of decidability and predictability, beloved of policymakers, are unrealistic according to these theories. So, the directions of workplace learning can only be characterized in broad, general terms. It was earlier suggested that informal learning of all kinds is marked by opportunism and contingency. Thus, this recently emerging understanding of learning serves to reinforce the idea that informal learning, whether from work or from life experiences generally, is a paradigmatic, if also under-appreciated, kind of learning.

One of the implications of the key features of informal learning increasingly being viewed as being typical of learning in general is that, in practice, it is often difficult to disentangle different categories of learning. For instance, formal learning is virtually always accompanied by some informal learning (the so-called ‘hidden curriculum’). Likewise supposedly different kinds of informal learning can be inextricably entwined, e.g. the learning involved in handling successfully a difficult situation at work might be closely entwined with the learning that resulted from a breakfast-table discussion earlier that same day. The ‘holism’ feature of informal learning reflects this trend.

Overall, it can be concluded that recent developments in the theorization of learning have drawn attention to the crucial significance of informal learning in its many guises. However, most educational writing is so single-mindedly centred on formal schooling and education that socio-cultural and more recent theories of learning are analysed almost exclusively for what insights they might contain for thinking about teaching and assessment of individual learners in time-honoured educational arrangements. In the process, the fact that important learning extends well beyond formal learning escapes notice.

Some typical examples of informal learning from everyday living

1 Informal learning in leisure – hobbies, crafts, sports, etc.

Hobbies, crafts, sports and other recreational activities provide important learning opportunities, both formal and informal. But, even where such activities are part of formal learning situations, they inevitably involve substantial informal learning as well, for instance in the learner becoming directly acquainted with the work of fellow practitioners or devotees. A person’s identity as a practitioner of the hobby, craft, sport, etc. will be significantly shaped and reshaped by such learning, whether formal or informal. Because hobbies, crafts, sports and the like are often pursued for their own sake, at their best, they provide rich opportunities to develop and refine skills, know-how and other capacities that underpin excellent performance in the given activity. Even where they are engaged in for extrinsic reasons, e.g. as compulsory school activities or to fill in time, there is the possibility of worthwhile informal learning taking place.

It is evident that the informal learning associated with hobbies, crafts, sports and other recreational activities exhibits key features of informal learning discussed above. Opportunism and contingency will be hallmarks of much of this learning. It will be unpredictable in various ways. Its context will include the particular ways that those significant others, who happen to stimulate the learner’s initial interest and involvement, engage with the hobby, craft, or sport. Their ways of engaging in the hobby, craft, or sport will very likely be nested in, for example, local traditions relating to its practice. As the learner becomes more involved and experienced as a practitioner, they will likely change their goals and ambitions, for instance, as they become aware of new and different possibilities. Thus, serious engagement with the hobby, craft, or sport can be seen as a continually evolving process in which, over time, new understandings and know-how, much of them tacit, will be developed.
Informal learning and surviving

Significant informal learning is likely to result from the experiences of surviving difficult circumstances of all kinds. Such survival learning situations include:

- dead-end jobs
- oppressive social circumstances, (e.g. unemployment, drug addiction)
- incarceration (e.g. prison)
- internment (e.g. prisoner of war, illegal immigrant).

In all these instances, there are accounts available of people surviving and, even, flourishing within them, even though the circumstances are sometimes horrific. Survivors of such circumstances invariably describe strategies that they developed, applied and modified through experience, thereby enabling them to adjust to and survive the difficult circumstances. A further common element in these survival stories is the survivors reporting that they developed an inner mental life, often based on significant memories, but also developing over time into fantasies. This inner mental life appears to offer a sphere of freedom and release from the restrictive and oppressive physical circumstances in which the survivors are immersed. As well as providing a refuge from the physical hardship, this rich inner mental life gives the survivors a more enhanced sense of their own personal identity. This richer sense of personal identity is closely connected to the developing and implementing of suitable strategies to alleviate the harsh and oppressive physical circumstances.

Once again, the various characteristics of informal learning discussed above are clearly present in cases of surviving oppressive circumstances. Survival learning is indeterminate in several senses. First, it is highly contextual, including being intimately bound up in the survivor’s own personal life history. It also involves trial-and-error learning, as the survivor finds out what works best for them in their own particular circumstances. This trial-and-error learning is obviously opportunistic and contingent, making use of whatever resources are available, such as friendship with and support from like-minded persons who are also intent on surviving. Personal integrity, self-respect, and particular survival goals, both short term and longer term, seem to be common features of survival stories. The ongoing informal learning process experienced by survivors develops in them a strong sense of personal identity, of continuously becoming the kind of person who can survive. Once freedom or relief from the oppressive circumstances is obtained, it becomes evident that the survivor has become a very different person from the one who was first placed in the oppressive circumstances. The improved circumstances provide the survivor with a new challenge – to adopt an identity suited to freedom. In doing so, there will be no going back to earlier identity phases.

Conclusion

This chapter has contrasted informal learning with its more illustrious sibling, formal learning. As Hager and Halliday (2006) argue in detail, the time is ripe for the richness of informal learning to be appreciated and a better balance of the two siblings achieved. The wide definition of informal learning adopted in this chapter has the advantage of bringing to attention the remarkable diversity and complexity of the various types of informal learning. This also serves to signal how key characteristics of informal learning align it strongly with recent theorizations of learning. Informal learning should no longer be largely ignored, as it has been up till now.

References

Informal learning – everyday living


