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THE INTERRELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN INFORMAL AND FORMAL LEARNING

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THE RESEARCH

This paper summarises the results of research commissioned by the Learning and Skills Development Agency of England, to map the conceptual terrain around non-formal learning. The remit was to investigate relevant literature, and clarify the meanings and uses of terms like informal, non-formal and formal learning. Because of Conference length restrictions, what follows is under-referenced (we consulted in excess of 250 texts, some of which were themselves reviews of further literatures). References, together with the full analysis and the detailed evidence that supports our argument, are in Colley et al (2003).

The subject of this research is topical. Current EU policies in lifelong learning are raising the profile of informal and non-formal learning. The recognition and enhancement of such learning is seen as vital in improving social inclusion, and increasing economic productivity. This presents a problem and a paradox. The problem is a complete lack of agreement in the literature about what informal, non-formal and formal learning are, or what the boundaries between them might be. The paradox is that there are strong tendencies to formalise the informal – for example through externally prescribed objectives, curriculum structures, assessments and funding. Yet, at least in the UK, there are parallel pressures to informalise formal learning – through the use of less structured approaches to student support, provided by a rapidly growing army of classroom assistants, learning advisers, learning mentors and the like, who lack full teaching qualifications. These trends seem to represent two arms of a concerted movement to integrate informal and formal learning.

Methodology

Three parallel lines of analysis were developed. Firstly, we did a major literature trawl, and then selected from within that trawl literature which we already knew or could easily identify, which set out to classify learning as informal, non-formal or formal. We examined a wide range of different positions, looking for criteria used to identify differences. We moved on from this approach when subsequent attempts seemed to reveal no new criteria – that is, we had achieved conceptual saturation. The second approach was to conduct a detailed investigation of a diverse range of learning situations – in work, in Further Education, in adult and community education and in mentoring. Thirdly, we researched the historical development of ideas through the literature. Our work was also informed by widespread consultation, focused on an interim report (Colley et al., 2002).

THE MAIN ARGUMENT

Two Dimensions of the Discourse

The development of debates around informal, formal and non-formal learning can be traced over time, through two overlapping dimensions. The first focuses on theoretical and empirical issues within the research community, concerned primarily with learning outside educational institutions: everyday learning. There is a parallel and overlapping strand, which focuses upon perceived differences between associated types of knowledge: what Bernstein (2000) terms the horizontal or everyday, as opposed to the vertical or academic. This dimension focused largely upon workplace learning, drawing on socio-cultural theories of learning, within a broadly participatory perspective (Sfard, 1998). The emphasis is primarily upon the ubiquity and efficiency of everyday or informal learning, defined in opposition to formal education. There is a strong tendency to see informal and formal learning as separate. This often results in a polarisation between them, with advocates of the informal denigrating the formal, and vice versa. Superficially, this sometimes reads as if there are two separate paradigms – informal (learning through everyday embodied practices; horizontal knowledge; non-educational settings) and formal (acquisitional and individual learning; vertical or propositional knowledge; within educational institutions). A more subtle reading sees informal and formal learning as essentially different, but capable of greater combination – even if that combination is partly problematic.

The second dimension in the discourse is political. Adult educators promoted what was termed non-formal education or non-formal learning, to empower underprivileged learners, in advanced capitalist and under-developed countries. There was a countervailing more instrumental movement, often driven by governments in the name of economic competitiveness or social cohesion, within advanced capitalism. The latter has become dominant in recent times, associated with the spread of the audit culture, emphasising the measurement of and accountability for learning.

Though writers within the first dimension are more likely to use the term 'informal' and those in the second 'non-formal', in practice we could discern no difference between informal and non-formal provision or activity. Rather, the terms informal and non-formal appeared interchangeable, each being primarily defined in opposition to the dominant formal education system, and the largely individualist and acquisitional conceptualisations of learning developed in relation to such educational contexts.

Attributes and Aspects of Formality/Informality in Learning

We located a range of attempts to classify the differences between informal, non-formal and formal learning within those two dimensions in the discourse. Based upon the analysis of 10 of these, we concluded that it is not possible to clearly define separate ideal-types of formal and informal learning, which bear any relation to actual learning experiences. Superficially, this was because the criteria for establishing such separate categories were too numerous, contested and varied for this purpose. The range of criteria encountered are summarised, below:

- Education or non-education
- Location (e.g. educational or community premises, workplaces)
- Learner/teacher intentionality/activity (voluntarism)
- Extent of planning or intentional structuring
- Nature and extent of assessment & accreditation
- The time-frames of learning
- The extent to which learning is tacit or explicit
- The extent to which learning is context-specific or generalisable/transferable
- External determination or not
- Whether learning is seen as embodied or just 'head stuff'
- Part of a course or not
- Whether outcomes can be measured
- Whether learning is collective/collaborative or individual
- The status of the knowledge & learning
- The nature of knowledge
- Teacher – learner relations
- Pedagogical approaches
- The mediation of learning – by whom and how
- Purposes and interests to meet needs of dominant or marginalised groups
- Location within wider power relations
- The locus of control within learning processes

More fundamentally, when we examined a range of different contexts in which learning took place, against the issues that different writers claimed distinguished formal/non-formal from formal learning, we discovered that what we term 'attributes' of formality/informality were present in all of them. We chose this term after much deliberation. It signifies both characteristics of learning in a wide variety of situations, and also the fact that is people who attribute labels like formal, non-formal and informal to such characteristics. Our analysis strongly suggests that such attributes of formality/informality are present in all learning situations, but that the inter-relationships between such informal and formal attributes vary from situation to situation. It is important not to see informal and formal attributes as somehow separate, waiting to be integrated. This is the dominant view in the literature, and it is mistaken. Thus, the challenge is not to, somehow, combine informal and formal learning, for informal and formal attributes are present and inter-related, whether we will it so or not. The challenge is to recognise and identify them, and understand the implications. For this reason, the concept of non-formal learning, at least when seen as a middle state between formal and informal, is redundant.

Within the 'politics' dimension, there are frequent claims about the superior emancipatory potential of non-formal learning. This is dangerously misleading. Our literature trawl made it apparent that all learning situations contain significant power inequalities, and that what are commonly termed

informal/non-formal and formal learning can both be emancipatory or oppressive, often at the same time. Power differentials and issues of learner inequality need to be taken seriously in all contexts. Furthermore, the extent to which learning is emancipatory or oppressive depends at least as much if not more upon the wider organisational, social, cultural, economic and political contexts in which the learning is situated, as upon the actual learning practices and pedagogies involved.

When we examine particular learning situations, we need ways of analysing these attributes of formality/informality. We suggest four aspects of formality/informality, as a heuristic device for doing this. They are:

Process. Where learning processes are incidental to everyday activity, many writers term them 'informal', whilst engagement in tasks structured by a teacher is often regarded as formal. Similarly, more didactic, teacher-controlled pedagogic approaches are labelled formal, whilst more democratic, negotiated or student-led pedagogies are often described as informal. For some, there is an issue about the pedagogue. Is it a teacher (formal) an industrial trainer, trained mentor or guidance counsellor (less formal) or a friend or work colleague (informal)? Another process issue is assessment. Is there none (informal) is it predominantly formative and negotiated (relatively informal) or mainly summative (formal)? Process issues are significant in both dimensions. Some theoretical concerns focus upon the authentic nature of informal learning activities. Radicals within the political dimension are more concerned about pedagogic power relations, between teacher and taught.

Location and setting. An obvious starting point here is the physical location of the learning. Is it in a school or college (formal), the workplace, local community or family (informal)? But the setting of learning matters in other ways, too. Informal learning is often described as open-ended, with few time restrictions, no specified curriculum no predetermined learning objectives no external certification, etc. Formal learning is seen as the opposite of all these things. For those with a radical political perspective, many of the things that characterise formal learning are seen as repressive. On the other hand, more instrumental governmental approaches are seeking ways of introducing these 'formal' features to the informal or non-formal learning which they want to enhance and support. From the theoretical perspective, location and setting are key parts of authentic practice. It is the synergy between practices and setting that ensures successful learning. The assumption is that such synergies are mainly attained in informal settings using informal processes. However, our approach raises the possibility of searching for such synergies in more formal learning settings as well, and examples were given in the full Report. Billett (2002) reminds us that non-educational settings have strongly formalised dimensions, which should not be overlooked.

Purposes. The extent to which learning has formal/informal attributes related to purposes depends upon the dimension concerned. One theoretical concern relates to the extent to which learning is the prime and deliberate focus of activity, or whether the activity has another prime purpose, such as workplace productivity, and learning is a largely unintended outcome. Within the political dimension, the concern is much more with whose purposes lie behind the learning. Is it learner determined and initiated (informal) or is the learning designed to meet the externally determined needs of others with more power – a dominant teacher, an examination board, an employer, the government, etc (formal).

Content. This covers the nature of what is being learned. Is this the acquisition of established expert knowledge/understanding/practices (formal), or the development of something new (informal)? Is the focus on propositional or vertical knowledge (formal), everyday practice (informal) or workplace competence (informal)? Is the focus on high status knowledge or not? From the political perspective, content is also seen as a manifestation of power relations.

In the full report, we analyse a number of contrasting learning situations, to further advance our argument. Here, we take one workplace example.

Informal and Formal Workplace Learning: the example of Secondary School Teachers

When Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2003) studied the workplace learning of experienced schoolteachers, many attributes of the teacher learning process and content were informal, the purposes were partly informal, in so far as the teachers learned for voluntary reasons, often largely unaware that they were actually learning, and the location/setting was partly informal. But there were more formal attributes also. Planned and externally led courses, short and long, played significant if

relatively minor roles in the learning of most of the teachers in the research. Such learning was not separate from their everyday learning. Rather the two were interrelated, as when one teacher took ideas from a short course and integrated them not only into his own teaching, but also into the discussions and practices of his departmental colleagues. It was then, as he claimed, that the learning really happened. On other occasions, this sort of synergy was absent. During the fieldwork, all English secondary school teachers had to undergo training in the use of computers in the classroom. For many, this was counterproductive. Not only did they not have access to the equipment necessary to implement these approaches but, for some, the content and mode of training clashed with their customary ways of teaching and learning through practice.

The more obviously informal learning was strongly inter-penetrated by more formal attributes. There were external pressures to increase the formalisation of the teachers' learning, for example through a performance management scheme, where each teacher had to identify annual learning targets, which fitted with the school strategic plan and government policy priorities, and where the outcomes could be clearly identified, and ideally measured. Also, the learning teachers engaged in was deeply structured by the ways the schools were organised. For example, teachers were located in separate subject departments. These formal work organisation structures facilitated certain types of learning, whilst impeding others. We can examine these interrelationships, against the four aspects of formality/informality.

Process. Most of the learning processes were informal, resulting from everyday working practices. Teachers changed and improved their ways of working, and learning was part of that process. In two of the departments, this was supplemented by continual sharing of ideas and approaches, through discussion and through watching what colleagues did or, for example, looking at the art work someone else's class produced. But there were more formal processes too, as when teachers had to agree objectives with a line manager, and demonstrate their eventual achievement, as part of the performance management scheme.

Location and Setting. Most learning took place in the teachers' own workplace, but with occasional short courses elsewhere. There was no external qualification structure, but a combination of government directives and school development plans provided a tight frame into which any learning requiring external support was regulated. Some learning, such as that prescribed through the performance management scheme, had specified time frames around its completion. Other learning was much less controlled or constrained.

Purposes. Much learning, being an on-going part of teachers' practice, was focused on their personal professional interests. However, the constraints of teaching timetables, limited resources and of the government and school development priorities, meant that much professionally relevant learning that teachers wanted for their personal development proved impossible to access. School and government purposes, rather than those of the teachers, were dominant. Teachers were often forced to learn things that the government required them to do: teach numeracy and literacy through art lessons, use computers in the classroom, or meet the needs of a new curriculum and assessment structure for post –16 students.

Content. The main emphasis was on the improvement of teaching skills and/or the acquisition of new ones. There was a very limited engagement with propositional knowledge. There was some learning from experts, either in short courses or more experienced colleagues. With regard to computer skills, often the novice teacher was the 'expert'. Learning was more a matter of sharing and exchanging ideas, rather than one-way transmission. There was also learning of completely new things – such as ways of coping with new curricula or assessment procedures.

There are deliberate government-inspired efforts being made to increase the formality of schoolteachers' learning in England. There was evidence that some of this formality risked undermining the strengths of more informal, well-established learning practices. These audit approaches emphasised a narrow, short-term and deficit view of teacher learning.

Thus, the learning of experienced teachers involves formal and informal attributes. The interrelationship between these attributes is important in determining the nature of the learning, and its success. Furthermore, wider organisational and political contexts for learning were highly significant, as the issues of governmental control demonstrate.

CONCLUSION

As a result of this research, we make the following claims:

- All (or almost all) learning situations contain attributes of formality/informality
- These attributes of formality and informality are interrelated in different ways in different learning situations.
- Those attributes and their interrelationships influence the nature and effectiveness of learning in any situation.
- Those interrelationships and effects can only be properly understood if learning is examined in relation to the wider contexts in which it takes place. This is particularly important when considering issues of empowerment and oppression.

As has been hinted at above, we further identified a recent trend whereby current audit cultures have significantly increased certain more formalising attributes to learning in a wide range of settings. We saw this in relation to the development of more formalised mentoring schemes, at work and with disadvantaged youths, and in relation to the spread of APEL (the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning). When managers and policy makers advocate and promote such schemes, they often appear to assume that the characteristics of more informal learning are unproblematically retained, being merely recognised, evidenced and encouraged through these procedures. But our analysis suggests that by increasing such formalising attributes, the nature of the learning is significantly altered, sometimes in ways that run counter to the intentions of those introducing the approaches, and which raise more substantial questions of unequal power relations in learning. This part of our analysis further supports the last two claims listed above.

Before concluding, it is important to avoid two possible misunderstandings. Firstly, we are not claiming that learning is the same in all situations. There are very real and significant differences between, say, learning at work and learning in college. Our claim is that such differences cannot be adequately addressed by classifying learning into two or three types – formal, non-formal and informal. As Billett (2002, p. p57) recently argued:

> 'Workplaces and educational institutions merely represent different instances of social practices in which learning occurs through participation. Learning in both kinds of social practice can be understood through a consideration of their respective participatory practices. Therefore, to distinguish between the two … [so that] one is formalised and the other informal … is not helpful'.

Secondly, we are not claiming that it is always inappropriate to use adjectives such as formal, informal and non-formal to describe learning. Rather, any such uses should be carefully developed for particular purposes, and authors should make clear how they are using the term(s) and why.

The ways of understanding informality and formality in learning advanced in this research have advantages over the more conventional arguments about two (or three) separate types of learning. These include:

- Avoiding misleading claims that either formal or informal/non-formal learning is inherently superior to the other.
- Avoiding unhelpful assumptions that different theories of learning apply only in informal or non-formal learning, and that different types of knowledge can be unproblematically linked with them.
- Making it easier to analyse the nature of learning in many situations, and to recognise changes to learning, as the balance between attributes of formality changes.
- Making more transparent the fact that audit approaches to learning change its nature, and analysing the benefits and costs of such changes.
- Aiding the understanding of inequalities in learning, provided wider contextual issues are carefully considered.

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