

Chapter 5: Lifelong Learning and the Contribution of Informal Learning

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INTRODUCTION

The burgeoning interest in lifelong learning during the 1990s has been influenced strongly by the scope and significance of the 1970s debate about lifelong education. This debate identified and clarified a continuum of understandings of the lifelong education concept. At one end of the continuum, a minimalist view of lifelong education envisaged a society in which there would be reasonably adequate provision of adult education for all of those who chose to patronise it. Arguably, there is already consensus about the desirability of a minimalist view of lifelong education, and, perhaps, many present industrialised countries are close to exemplifying it. However, many proponents of lifelong education were seeking much more than this. The other end of the continuum, a maximalist view of lifelong education, sought nothing less than a learning society. While learning societies can take various forms, proponents of lifelong education typically favoured one that was democratic, where the learning society was “a shared, pluralistic and participatory ‘form of life’ in Dewey’s sense ... rather than a simple set of institutions and constitutional guarantees” (Wain 1987, p. 202; Wain 1993, p.68). Certainly such a learning society is yet to be realised. Nor is there any sign of consensus about the desirability of this maximalist view of lifelong education.

Since learning is clearly a wider notion than education, it might be expected that, unlike the case of lifelong education, understandings of lifelong learning would tend towards a maximalist view. That is, that the favoured notion of lifelong learning would embrace learning in any type of setting ranging from formal educational systems of all kinds, through diverse sorts of non-formal educational provision, to the limitless situations and contexts in which informal learning can occur. Certainly, a maximalist view of this sort is implied in much of the policy literature on lifelong learning. However, this chapter cautions that a major obstacle to the valuation of learning in all types of settings comes from the hegemony exerted by the formal education system in deciding what learning is to be valued and how it is to be assessed and accredited. This poses a problem for proponents of lifelong learning in most of its forms.

The hegemonic influence of the formal education system on the relative valuation of different forms of learning is illustrated by the usual way in which the non-formal and informal educational sectors are defined. They are defined by what they are perceived to lack in relation to the formal sector, i.e. formal assessment of learning and/or the

awarding of formal credentials. Informal learning of most kinds is especially lacking in these kinds of characteristics that are valued in the formal education system.

Because informal learning covers such a huge diversity of settings the main arguments of this chapter will be given focus by concentrating on *informal learning at work*. This is an easy choice in that there is no doubt that informal learning at work accounts for the major share of research and writing on informal learning. However, while focusing the chapter on informal learning at work, the author believes that equivalent arguments can be developed for other types of informal learning.

Thus, the body of this chapter firstly examines critically major assumptions about learning that appear to weaken the claim of informal learning at work to be a main part of lifelong learning. Secondly, it discusses a range of research and literature that assist in a growing understanding of informal learning at work. Finally, the chapter draws together some themes that the discussion of informal learning at work suggests might be central to any plausible understanding of lifelong learning that approaches a maximal one.

It should be noted that the term 'informal learning at work' is used in the following discussion because the commonly employed alternative 'workplace learning' is ambiguous. The latter can refer to formal on-the-job training as well as the informal learning that occurs as people perform their work. In some cases it is used even to refer to formal training situations in vocational education institutions that involve simulated workplaces.

INHIBITING INFLUENCE OF TRADITIONAL ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT LEARNING ON THE RECOGNITION OF INFORMAL LEARNING

A major obstacle to informal learning at work 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 'education'. While this is most obvious in the vast differences between informal learning at work and the learning that typically takes place in formal educational institutions, it is also the case that informal learning at work is very different from formal on-the-job training. These differences can be described as follows:

- Teachers/trainers are in control in both formal learning in educational institutions and in formal on-the-job training, whereas it is the learner who is in control (if anyone is) in informal learning at work. That is, formal learning is planned, but informal learning at work is often unplanned.
- The learning that takes place in educational institutions and in on-the-job training is largely predictable as it is prescribed by formal curricula, competency standards, learning outcomes, etc. Informal learning at work is much less predictable as there is no formal curriculum or prescribed outcomes.
- In both educational institutions and formal on-the-job training, learning is largely explicit (the learner is expected to be able to articulate what has been learnt, e.g. in a written examination, in oral answers to instructor questioning, or in being

required to perform appropriate activities as a result of the training). In informal learning at work, the learning is often implicit or tacit (the learner is commonly unaware of the extent of their learning) even though the learner might be well aware of the outcomes of such learning, e.g. that they are able to perform their job much better.

- In both formal classrooms and on-the-job training the emphasis is on teaching/training and on the content and structure of what is taught/trained (largely as a consequence of the three previous points). Whereas in informal learning at work the emphasis is on learning and on the learner.
- In both formal classrooms and on-the-job training the focus is usually on learners as individuals and on individual learning. In informal learning at work, the learning is often collaborative and/or collegial.
- Learning in formal classrooms is uncontextualised, i.e. there is an emphasis on general principles rather than their specific applications. While formal on-the-job training is typically somewhat contextualised, even here there is some emphasis on the general e.g. the training might be aimed at general industry standards. However, informal learning at work is by its nature highly contextualised.
- The learning that takes place in educational institutions and in on-the-job training is conceptualised typically in terms of theory (or knowledge) and practice (application of theory and knowledge). The learning that comes from informal learning at work, on the other hand, seems to be most appropriately thought of as seamless know how.

Given these trends, it is hardly surprising that formal learning/education has been seen as being much more valuable than informal learning. Informal learning at work is a paradigm case of informal education and, hence, tends to be undervalued particularly 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 in contrast to education which aims 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 at work. One indicator of this is the rapid growth of formalised workplace training that incorporates externally accredited courses. This is occurring at all levels of the workforce from operatives through to senior managers. It is a trend that is expected to continue (Misko 1996) and will be discussed further later on in this chapter. In contrast, external accreditation of informal learning at work is still very rare.

One reaction to this situation would be to start from a minimalist lifelong learning option and use the characteristics of learning that are valued in formal education to seek to identify the best of informal learning, so that it could then be brought within the fold of learning that is recognised. This chapter rejects this approach, arguing not only for a more maximalist lifelong learning option, but proposing that a closer examination of informal learning has strong potential to enrich our understanding of learning in all settings. The lifelong learning concept provides an opportunity to move beyond narrow

understandings of learning that have flourished in formal educational systems and to question some little scrutinised assumptions about what learning is valued. It should be noted that, in adopting this strategy, this chapter is not arguing that all learning is equally valuable. Rather, the position is the more modest one that there are compelling reasons for looking to extend the range of learning that is valued.

PERSPECTIVES ON INFORMAL LEARNING AT WORK THAT CAN ENRICH OUR VIEW OF LIFELONG LEARNING

Traditional understandings of occupational practice have largely ignored informal learning as a significant component. For more routine aspects of work, learning has been viewed as acquisition of the required behaviours via mechanistic training. For less routine work, a theory/practice approach has been favoured. Here the role of vocational preparation courses has been seen as providing the theoretical basis that workers can be apply to deal with workplace situations as they arise.

Various writers, but most notably Schön (1983), have drawn attention to the inadequacy of these common assumptions about occupational practice. Focusing on the preparation of professionals, Schön vigorously rejected “technical rationality”, i.e. the view that professionals need to have command of a body of disciplinary knowledge, mostly scientific, which they then draw upon to analyse and solve the various problems that they encounter in their daily practice. Schön pointed out that this approach does not fit very well with what is known about the actual practice of professionals. For one thing, it is typical of real life practice that ready-made problems do not simply present themselves to the practitioner. A major role of professionals is to identify what the problems are in a given set of circumstances. Thus, according to Schön, it is a major mistake to locate professional education away from actual workplace practice. Conceptualising education and the workplace in this traditional dichotomous way inevitably divides theory from practice and creates the perennial problem of how to bring them together again when attempting to account for human action in the world. The research discussed in the remainder of this section signifies the wide recognition of the inability of theory/practice thinking to account for workplace practice. Even in cognitive psychology there has been a recognition of the need to “de-emphasise the spurious theory-and-practice connotations” that surround the declarative knowledge/procedural knowledge and similar distinctions because “they do not necessarily represent independent modes of functioning” (Yates & Chandler 1991, pp. 133–134).

This increasingly perceived inadequacy of theory/practice accounts of workplace performance has generated attempts in more recent work to think about these issues in different ways, ways that take more seriously the phenomenon of informal learning at work. A series of these newer approaches is now outlined and critically discussed.

One influential approach to taking informal learning at work seriously is to view it in terms of reflection on practice. For instance, Schön’s proposed epistemology of professional practice centres on the “reflective practitioner” who exhibits “knowing-in-action” and “reflecting-in-action”. Knowing-in-action is tacit knowledge in that though practitioners know it, they cannot express it. Thus it is akin to Polanyi’s (1958) “personal

knowledge" which refers to the type of know how that is displayed in skilful performances which can be seen to follow a set of rules that is not known as such to the performer. According to Schön, knowing-in-action is underpinned by "reflecting-in-action" or "reflecting-in-practice". This spontaneous reflecting is variously characterised by Schön as involving practitioners in "noticing", "seeing" or "feeling" features of their actions and learning from this by consciously or unconsciously altering their practice for the better.

Schön's proposals have been influential in many arenas of professional education. However there has also been increasing questioning of his work and its influence (see, e.g., Newman 1999). A major criticism is that it is much clearer what Schön is against than what he is for. His proposal for "reflecting-in-action" is variously charged with being too vague. Gilroy (1993) challenges it on general epistemological grounds. Beckett (1996) goes further and questions the existence of "reflecting-in-action", particularly in those occupations where the action is typically "hot". "Hot" action in an occupation refers to situations where the "pressure for action is immediate" (Eraut 1985, p.128). This includes much of the work of teachers, surgeons, lawyers, nurses, etc. By contrast the work of a lawyer preparing a brief, of an architect developing a design, or of a doctor in a consulting room is much "cooler". Beckett's point is that while Schön's "reflecting-in-action" might appear to have some plausibility as an account of these latter cases, this concept is simply inappropriate for "hot" action situations in occupational performance. He develops an argument for "anticipative action" being a more explanatory concept for these cases, though accepting that this too is not without its difficulties.

Likewise, while the concept of "reflecting-in-action" has become very influential in the education of professionals, it has tended too often to suffer the usual fate of single factor cures to complex problems and become a cliché recipe. In teacher education, for example, the problem, as Calderhead (1989, p.46) points out is that "[r]eflective teaching has become a slogan, disguising numerous practices and offering a variety of idealised models for the training of teachers." (See also Adler 1991 and Newman 1996). An illustration of the aptness of Calderhead's claim is provided by Tremmel (1993, p.439) who outlines examples of attempts in teacher education courses to circumscribe Schön's "reflecting-in-action" into standardised stepwise procedures to be learnt and applied by novices. The very technical rationality that Schön is attacking has been deployed as a means of reducing his ideas to a routine formula.

Of course, Schön's is not the only work that places reflection at the core of informal learning at work. In fact many recent theorists rely in one way or another on the notion of reflection. It is important to gain some grasp of the range of connotations for the term 'reflection' in this work. It is perhaps worth noting that the basic idea is found in Dewey's writings (see, e.g., Dewey 1916). For Dewey, the good life for humans is one in which they live in harmony with their environment. But because the environment is in a state of continuous flux, so humans need to grow and readjust constantly to it so as to remain in harmony with it. Thus, for Dewey, education must instil the lifelong capacity to grow and to readjust constantly to the environment. Since, argued Dewey, inquiry, democracy, problem solving, active learning, reflective thinking, experiential learning, etc. are methods that are necessary for humans to learn to readjust effectively to the environment, these are the teaching/learning methods that must feature in education. Dewey argues that reflection is central to effective inquiry and problem solving,

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