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## **THE FORMS OF INFORMAL LEARNING: TOWARDS A CONCEPTUALIZATION OF THE FIELD**

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### **What is informal learning anyways?**

As Livingstone (1999: 51) points out, informal learning can be defined as "any activity involving the pursuit of understanding, knowledge or skill which occurs outside the curricula of educational institutions, or the courses or workshops offered by educational or social agencies." Put it in other words, the category of informal learning includes all learning that occurs outside the curriculum of formal and non-formal educational institutions and programs. If we define informal learning as something that takes place outside formal education and non-formal education, a few words about these two concepts are needed.

Formal education refers to the institutional ladder that goes from preschool to graduate studies. This system has the following features:

a) it is highly institutionalized;

b) it includes a period called 'basic education' (which varies from country to country, and usually ranges from 6 to 12 years) which is compulsory, implements a prescribed curriculum --approved by the state-- with explicit goals and evaluation mechanisms, hires certified teachers, and institutional activities are highly regulated by the state.

c) it is propaedeutic in nature (in the sense that each level prepares learners for the next one, and that to enter into a certain level it is a prerequisite to satisfactorily complete the previous level)

d) it is a hierarchical system, usually with ministries of education at the top and students at the bottom

e) at the end of each level and grade, graduates are granted a diploma or certificate that allows them to be accepted into the next grade or level, or into the formal labour market.

Under this conceptualization, adult basic education programs that follow the prescribed curriculum and employ certified teachers can also be understood as part of formal education, although some people prefer to call them 'paraformal' (in the sense that they are in between the realm of the formal and the non-formal systems).

Non-formal education refers to all organized educational programs that take place outside the formal school system, and are usually short-term and voluntary. This includes a wide variety of programs such as tennis courses, second language programs, driving lessons, cooking classes, yoga classes, rehabilitation programs, painting courses, training programs, workshops, etc. As in formal education, there are teachers (instructors, facilitators) and a curriculum with various degrees of rigidity or flexibility. Unlike formal education, these programs do not normally demand prerequisites in terms of previous schooling. However, sometimes a diploma certifying competence or attendance is granted. Non-formal education is usually directed to adults, but children and adolescents may also participate in this sector (for instance, children going to Sunday school; boy-scouts and girl-scouts programs, second language courses, music lessons during the weekend, etc.).

Informal learning, then, takes place outside the curricula provided by formal and non-formal educational institutions and programs. In the concept of 'informal learning' it is important to note that we are deliberately using the word 'learning' and not 'education', because in the processes of informal learning there are not educational institutions, institutionally authorized instructors or prescribed curricula. It is also pertinent to note that we are saying 'outside the curricula of educational institutions' and not 'outside educational institutions', because informal learning can also take place inside formal and non-formal educational institutions. In that case, however, the learnings occur independently (and sometimes against) the intended goals of the explicit curriculum.

Historically, the learning acquired through informal means has not been recognized by formal educational institutions and by the workplace, although the recent emergence of systems of evaluations and accreditation like PLAR may change this.

Interestingly, if non-formal education is defined as a residual category (anything that is not formal education), informal learning becomes a residual category of a residual category (anything that it is neither formal nor non-formal). However, it is in this sphere, so disregarded and so under-researched, where most of the significant learnings that we apply to our everyday lives are learned.

Still, as an analytical category, if we use the concept of informal learning without distinguishing its internal forms, we may easily fall into conceptual confusion. The concept of informal learning is useful but still is too broad, as it encompasses different types of learnings which are usually conflated.

This leads to a question: is it possible to develop a taxonomy of informal learning?

I suggest that by using two main categories (intentionality and consciousness), it is possible to develop a taxonomy which identifies three forms (or types) of informal learning: self-directed learning, incidental learning and socialization (Table 1).

**Table 1: Three forms of informal learning**

<b>Form</b>	<b>Intentionality</b>	<b>Awareness (at the time of learning experience)</b>
Self-directed	yes	yes
Incidental	no	yes
Socialization	no	no

**The three forms of informal learning**

What follows is a brief conceptualization of each one of the three forms of informal learning, and five examples to illustrate each form. To show a variety of situations, the first example refers to a child, the second to a formal school environment, the third about historical/social issues, the fourth about the acquisition of a particular skill, and the fifth about local politics.

**1. Self-directed learning**

Self-directed learning refers to 'learning projects' undertaken by individuals (alone or as part of a group) without the assistance of an 'educator' (teacher, instructor, facilitator), but it can include the presence of a 'resource person' who does not regard herself or himself as an educator. It is both intentional and conscious. It is intentional because the individual has the purpose of learning something even before the learning process begins, and it is conscious, in the sense that the individual is aware that she or he has learned something.

Examples:

a) A toddler decides that she wants to start putting her socks on by herself, and after many attempts finally succeeds.

b) A group of high school students enrolled in a conservative school and living under a military regime organize themselves in a clandestine study group to learn about political economy, and meet regularly to discuss readings.

c) A person wants to learn more about a historical event, and to do so reads books and archival documents, watches movies and videos, goes to museums and talks to people who participated or witnessed those events.

d) A group of friends wants to make a special dish for dinner, and then looks for a recipe in a cookbook or on the internet, and calls the grandmother of one of them to clarify a doubt.

e) A group of neighbours wants to get their street paved, and then set out to learn collectively the different steps that they must take to influence municipal decision-

making, reading documents, talking with councillors, meeting with leaders of other neighbourhoods, etc.

## **2. Incidental learning**

Incidental learning refers to learning experiences that occur when the learner did not have any previous intention of learning something out of that experience, but after the experience she or he becomes aware that some learning has taken place. Thus, it is unintentional but conscious.

Examples:

a) A toddler touches a hot iron and immediately learns that it is not wise to do it again.

b) A teacher coming from a traditional teacher training program starts working in a progressive school and after enough exposure to this environment begins to challenge some of the initial assumptions about teaching, learning and the curriculum.

c) A person is watching the news and there is a documentary about the unfair treatment that an ethnic group received during a particular period, a historical fact that the viewer was unaware of before.

d) A group of friends are at a party and a child is choking. One of the parents applies first aids and the child stops choking. Members of the group ask some questions about the procedure and the physiological reasons behind it. They become immediately aware that they learned something new that they could apply if required.

e) A group of neighbours participate in local democracy, and through this process they learn about municipal politics; although they didn't join the process with a learning objective in mind, they realize that they have gained new skills and knowledge that allow them to participate more effectively in democratic deliberation and decision-making.

## **3. Socialization**

Socialization (also referred to as tacit learning) refers to the internalization of values, attitudes, behaviors, skills, etc. that occur during everyday life. Not only we have no a priori intention of acquiring them, but we are not aware that we learned something.

Examples:

a) A toddler learns to speak a first language, or a child acquires eating habits (e.g. not to eat insects), without being aware that those were learning processes in which imitation played an important role.

b) An elementary school teacher has different expectations of male and female students, and treats them differently, and neither the teacher nor the students are aware of the impact of the hidden curriculum in gender role socialization.

c) A person lives in a racist (or classist, sexist, homophobic, etc.) environment and has both a negative perception about people of colour and discriminatory attitudes, and assumes that perception as part of objective reality, not as a process of learned socialization.

d) A group of friends meet regularly to play a particular sport or game, and after many years become particularly skilful, without noticing that it was a long learning process.

e) Residents attend regular neighbourhood meetings in which the professional politician listens to demands and promises favors in exchange for votes; after many years of these practices, the culture of clientelism is rooted in both politicians and residents, but it is so ingrained in everyday practice that people assume that such is the only natural way to do politics.

It is pertinent to note that although learning through socialization is usually an unconscious process, we can become aware of that learning later on through a process of retrospective recognition, which could be internal and/or external. For instance, by being exposed to a different social environment, a person can be prompted to recognize that she or he has certain prejudices and biases that were the product of primary socialization. Likewise, some people may not be aware that they have learned something in a particular experience until they have a conversation with a person who asks questions about their learnings, eliciting retrospective recognition (by the way, this was the case in my research).

### **Final remarks: Ten points on the three forms of informal learning**

1. In summary, this mapping of informal learning identifies three main types of learning, using intentionality and awareness as the criteria to distinguish among them. In this map, self-directed learning is at one extreme of the spectrum of informal learning, socialization is at the other extreme, and incidental learning is somewhere in between.

2. Following the typology of Table 1, it could be argued that a fourth form of learning (a learning that is intentional but not conscious) may exist. However, I have difficulties conceptualizing it. So far, any example of intentional learning that I can think of, is also conscious.

3. Many of the informal learnings can occur individually or in a group situation.

4. Informal learning can take place in any space, such as the workplace, the family, a religious institution, the community and the like; like formal and non-formal learning, informal learning can occur at any age, from birth to death.

5. Learners can use a variety of sources for their learning, including books, newspapers, TV, the internet, museums, schools, universities, friends, relatives, their own experience, etc.

6. The awareness that an unintentional and unconscious learning experience took place (through socialization) could occur immediately after the learning experience or many years after it, and the process of retrospective recognition can be internally generated or externally led.

7. Informal learning, as any other type of learning, can be additive or transformative. Additive learning refers to the addition of knowledge, the improvement of skills and the development of values that expand and strengthen existing knowledge, skills and values. In other words, we continue operating within the same paradigm. Transformative learning refers to learning experiences that lead us to challenge our assumptions and values, and to radically change our existing prior knowledge and approaches.

8. Informal learning can complement and reinforce the learnings acquired in formal and non-formal education, but it can also contradict it. For instance, one can learn in school curriculum that the capitalist system is a great contribution to humanity, and learn through informal ways that such system is detrimental to humanity. Likewise, one can be socialized by the surrounding community into a bigot, and learn virtues of tolerance in the public school. Moreover, one can go to a school and be aware that through the formal curriculum she or he is learning A (e.g. math), without being aware that through the hidden curriculum she or he is learning B (e.g. homophobia).

9. In the same vein, the learnings acquired through any one of the three types of informal learning can reinforce or contradict the learnings acquired through the other two. Moreover, contradictory learning experiences may occur even within one of the three forms. For instance, a person can become a religious person through primary socialization and an agnostic through secondary socialization, and vice-versa.

10. This mapping of informal learning does not explain everything that goes on in informal learning. It simply asks whether there is an intention to learn and whether the learner is aware that some learning has taken place. It does not ask the type of intention, in the sense of the knowledge interests (e.g. technical, hermeneutic, emancipatory) pointed out by Habermas; it does not ask if the purpose of the learning is individual advancement or collective wellbeing, and it does not ask the implications of those learnings for social control and social change. However, I submit that this taxonomy does not preclude these types of analysis. In terms of awareness of the learning process, this taxonomy does not deal with issues such as subliminal learning, hypnosis and the like. That is another area to explore in the future.

### **Final remarks**

I hope this 'mapping' and these examples help in the conceptualization of the different areas of the wide field of informal education. In any case, three questions remain:

- a) What is missing in this mapping?
- b) What are the research and policy implications of it?
- c) How does it help to examine the existing and preferred relations between informal learning and the two other educational subsystems?

### **References**

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