

Informality and Formality in Learning

**A summary of the report to the
Learning and Skills Research Centre
from the Lifelong Learning Institute at the University of Leeds**

February 2004

Introduction

This is a summary of a research report, *Informality and Formality in Learning*, commissioned by the Learning and Skills Research Centre (LSRC) and undertaken by the Lifelong Learning Institute of the University of Leeds, by a team comprising Dr Helen Colley, Professor Phil Hodgkinson and Janice Malcolm. It represents the first stage of an LSRC research programme looking at the nature of informal learning, and its contribution to the pursuit of further learning and employment opportunities.

Contact details and further information

The full report can be found on the LSRC website at: <http://www.lsrc.ac.uk>. For hard copies and further information please contact Maggie Greenwood, quoting reference number LSRC 447:

Maggie Greenwood
Learning and Skills Development Agency
Regent Arcade House
19-25 Argyll Street
London
W1F 7LS
Tel: 020 7297 9103
E-mail: mgreenwood@lsda.org.uk

The authors can be contacted at:

The Lifelong Learning Institute
Continuing Education Building
The University of Leeds
Leeds
LS2 9JT

Email:

Helen Colley: h.colley@leeds.ac.uk
Phil Hodgkinson: p.m.hodkinson@leeds.ac.uk
Janice Malcolm: j.malcolm@leeds.ac.uk

Main findings

- The terms formal, non-formal and informal are attributed to learning by many writers. They are mainly used to distinguish some types of learning from others, but in ways that are contradictory and contested across the literature as a whole.
- There is no clear difference between informal and non-formal learning. The terms are used interchangeably, with different writers expressing preferences for each.
- It is more sensible to see *attributes of informality and formality* as present in all learning situations. Attributes of in/formality are interrelated differently in different situations.
- Those attributes and their interrelationships influence the nature and effectiveness of learning. Changing the balance between formal and informal attributes changes the nature of the learning.
- All forms of learning have the potential to be either emancipatory or oppressive. This depends partly upon the balance and interrelationships between attributes of in/formality. However, the wider contexts in which that learning takes place are crucial in determining its emancipatory potential.

Aims of the research

The literature review, *Informality and Formality in Learning* represents the first stage of an LSRC research programme looking at the nature of informal learning, and its contribution to the pursuit of further learning and employment opportunities.

With the aim of improving understanding of informality and formality in post 16 learning, the review examines:

- how learning is often classified as informal, non-formal or formal
- how ideas about formality and informality have developed over time.

This analysis is timely. Both European Union and British educational policy currently identify informal or non-formal learning as of increasing significance. Yet much of this policy making appears to be based upon the assumption that informal, non-formal and formal learning can be clearly differentiated from one another. This research suggests a radically different way of understanding these issues, seeing attributes of informality and formality in all learning situations.

Methods

The research was conducted between February 2002 and March 2003, using four overlapping lines of analysis:

- A major literature trawl was undertaken, and literature selected which set out to classify learning as informal, non-formal or formal. We examined a wide range of different approaches, looking for factors and criteria used to identify differences.
- A detailed investigation of a diverse range of learning situations was conducted – in the workplace, in further education, in adult and community education (ACE) and in mentoring.
- The historical development of ideas was analysed, identifying two overlapping dimensions.
- Preliminary findings were used as the basis for consultation, through the advisory group set up by the LSRC to support the research team, and three invitational workshops.

The report: section by section

Section 1 gives full details about the methodology adopted. It makes clear that the report does not attempt to review or describe all the available literature, focusing instead on developing conceptual clarification of the ways in which the terms informal, non-formal and formal learning have been used and should be used. The research focused on literature published in the English language, and makes no claim to be completely comprehensive in its coverage. It drew heavily on the diverse experiences and interests of the three researchers, which are described and explained.

Section 2 argues that the origins and development of debates around informal, formal and non-formal learning can be traced through two overlapping dimensions. The first of these focuses on theoretical and empirical issues concerned primarily with learning outside educational institutions: everyday learning. This dimension focuses largely upon workplace learning, drawing on socio-cultural theories of learning. The emphasis within this dimension is primarily upon the ubiquity and effectiveness of everyday or informal learning.

The second dimension is political, in the sense that adult educators in particular have promoted what was sometimes termed non-formal education and sometimes non-formal learning, with the intention of empowering underprivileged learners. There is another, very different, political imperative, as governments and the EU seek to promote policies focused on improving economic competitiveness and increasing social cohesion and inclusion. Since World War II, the pendulum has swung repeatedly between these two ideological strands of the political dimension, although the latter has always proved dominant.

Though writers located mainly within the theoretical dimension are more likely to use the term 'informal' learning, and those in the political dimension to talk of 'non-formal'

learning or education, it was not possible to discern a clear difference between informal and non-formal provision or activity. Rather, 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 that had developed mainly within such educational contexts. As a result, within both dimensions there has been an unhelpful tendency to see informal/non-formal learning and its formal counterpart as fundamentally distinct. This has resulted in exaggerated claims about the superior effectiveness and potential for empowerment of one or the other.

In **section 3**, the report analyses 10 different attempts to classify learning into informal, formal and non-formal types, which were traced back to the two dimensions. Based upon the analysis of these 10 attempts, the conclusion is drawn in **section 4** that it is not possible to clearly define separate types of formal and informal learning which bear any relation to actual learning experiences. Superficially, this is because the many criteria for establishing such separate categories were too numerous, too contested, and too varied for this purpose.

More fundamentally, when a range of different contexts in which learning took place was analysed against the issues that supposedly distinguished informal/non-formal from formal learning, it was discovered that what attributes of in/formality were present in all of them. The term 'attributes' was deliberately used to signify the diverse characteristics of learning in a wide variety of situations, and also the fact that it is people – often representing particular group, professional or political interests – who attribute labels like formal, non-formal and informal to that learning. The analysis strongly suggests that such attributes of formality and informality co-exist in most, if not all, learning situations, but that the interrelationships between informal and formal attributes vary from situation to situation.

It is important not to see informal and formal attributes as somehow separate and the task of policy and practice as being to integrate or hybridise them. This is a dominant view in the literature, and it is mistaken. The challenge is not to, somehow, combine informal and formal learning, for informal and formal attributes are present and interrelated, whether we will it so or not. The challenge is rather to recognise and identify these attributes, and understand the implications of the particular balance or interrelationship in each case. For this reason, the concept of non-formal learning is redundant, at least in the sense that it implies some sort of middle state, between informal on the one hand, and formal on the other.

Some further conceptual complications need to be teased out. First, because of the work done within theoretical dimension, certain ways of conceptualising learning have come to be associated with either formal or informal learning. This is also a mistake. In principle, any theory of learning can be used in any setting. However, if issues of in/formality are of prime concern, theories which take a broad view of learning as social practice are likely to offer more purchase than those more centrally focused on individual development/cognition, or the acquisition of knowledge.

Next, debates about the nature of knowledge are often interlocked with debates about formal and informal learning. Thus, there is an apparent synergy between formal learning and propositional or academic knowledge, and between informal

learning and everyday or practical knowledge. However, the Report argues that to see things in this way is also a mistake. Even if everyday and academic knowledge are completely different, and many argue that this is not the case, both can be learned in a variety of situations, each of which contains mixed attributes of formality and informality.

Within the political dimension, there are frequent claims about the superior emancipatory potential of informal/non-formal learning. This argument is also dangerously misleading. The literature trawl made it apparent that all learning situations contain significant power inequalities, and that what are commonly termed informal and formal learning can both be emancipatory or oppressive, often at the same time. In other words, 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 upon the wider organisational, social, cultural, economic and political contexts in which the learning is situated, as upon the actual learning practices, knowledge content and pedagogies involved.

When examining particular learning situations, the literature on informal, non-formal and formal learning contains many valuable insights and understandings that must not be lost in following through this analysis. Consequently, there is a need for ways of revealing and unpacking these attributes of in/formality. The Report tentatively suggests four aspects of in/formality, as a way of doing this. They are:

- Learning processes
- The contexts in which learning takes place
- The content of the learning
- The purposes of the learning, including whose purposes are dominant.

In **section 5**, the Report uses this approach to examine the relationships between in/formal attributes of learning in sample learning situations. These include the workplace, Further Education college courses, adult and continuing education, and different types of mentoring. As a result, the Report makes the following claims:

- All learning situations contain attributes of in/formality.
- 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.

In **Section 6**, the Report analyses trends towards the increasing formalisation of learning, through attempts to specify, assess and accredit learning which is often described as informal. It argues that increasing formality is neither inherently good nor inherently bad, but that it does change the nature of the learning. Using APEL as an exemplar, and drawing upon the earlier discussion of mentoring, it shows that by

increasing such audit-driven formalising attributes, the nature of the learning is changed in ways that may run counter to the intentions of those introducing these approaches. This raises more substantial questions of unequal power relations in learning, for example between more or less advantaged learners, and between learners and those who set the standards of performance against which learning is increasingly judged.

Practical implications

The Report does not claim that learning is just the same in all situations. There are very real and significant differences between, say, learning at work and learning in college; or learning in the family and learning through political action. However, such differences cannot be adequately addressed by classifying learning into two or three types – formal, non-formal and informal. It may well be much more helpful to analyse the attributes of in/formality in particular learning situations. This might usefully lead to a clearer understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of different sorts of modification to some of those attributes. It will certainly make clear the inherently complex nature of learning in all situations, such as family, local community, workplace, school or college. However, further research is needed to explore and test out the practical value of such an approach.

The Report does not claim that it is always and inevitably inappropriate to use adjectives such as formal, informal and non-formal to describe learning. Indeed, such terms are now well established in general use as well as in academic discourse, and it would be difficult to communicate without them. However, any such uses should be carefully developed for particular purposes, and authors or speakers should make clear in what senses they are using the term(s) and why.

Based upon this analysis, the ways of understanding informality and formality in learning advanced in this report have the following significant advantages over the more conventional arguments about separate types of learning:

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

Recommendations for further research

1. There should be further research into learning as social practice, addressing attributes of in/formality in relation to learning contexts, in a range of learning situations.
2. There should be further research into pedagogic practices in educational and non-educational settings, in relation to attributes of in/formality. Only then can sensible steps be taken to make the learning more effective.
3. There should be further research into the effects, positive or negative, of changes in the balance between formality and informality, in a range of learning situations.
4. There should be further research to improve understanding of power relations and inequalities in connection with learning, in all learning situations. There are urgent issues to be addressed around the spread of audit-dominated managerial procedures.
5. In order to address the needs identified in the previous four recommendations, there is a need for more high-quality case study research on learning. This is particularly valuable in addressing the complex interrelationships involved in learning.

Recommendations for policy and practice

6. It is advisable to relate policy and practice to the nature of particular learning situations.
7. Where use is made of the terms 'formal', 'non-formal' or 'informal' learning, it is important to specify the meanings, the purposes and the contexts of that use.
8. It is important to be aware of the limitations and effects of management tools such as measurement of learning outcomes, retention and achievement rates, and universal inspection criteria. They change the nature of the learning to which they are applied.