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at a glance

INTRODUCTION

This *at a glance* publication investigates the idea of 'informal learning', which has been described as an iceberg: 'mostly invisible at the surface and immense in its mostly submerged informal aspects' (Livingstone 2000). It does so in order to offer some definitional clarity for those needing to uncover that learning.

The publication also discusses when recognition and measurement of informal learning can be useful but cautions against giving *too much* structure to this learning, for this may stifle its incidental nature and the benefits that accrue from this very widespread way of learning.

Learning is no longer considered an activity confined to educational institutions; rather, it is recognised as happening in the workplace, in the home and during leisure time. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2005) makes a clear distinction between informal learning and learning which occurs in more prescribed settings, and has offered the following definitions.

FORMAL LEARNING

Learning through a program of instruction in an educational institution, adult training centre or in the workplace, which is generally recognised in a qualification or a certificate.

NON-FORMAL LEARNING

Learning through a program that it is not usually evaluated and does not lead to certification.

INFORMAL LEARNING

Learning resulting from daily work-related, family or leisure activities.

The contemporary understanding of informal learning is that it happens outside the formal education system or structured training and does not lead to a qualification (Richardson 2004). Conlon (2003) believes that informal learning tends to be the outcome of incidental learning through everyday experience.

There is no single, authoritative definition of informal learning, although it is usually considered to embrace activities such as:

- reading
- using computers or the internet
- watching television
- listening to the radio
- visiting libraries
- attending public lectures
- volunteering
- learning from family, friends and co-workers
- on-the-job learning
- engaging in workplace mentoring
- learning through trial and error.

Most people are involved in some type of informal learning, sometimes without even knowing it

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), '74% of 25 to 64-year-olds did some type of informal learning in the 12 months prior to interview in 2006–07' (2007). Using the internet and reading were identified as the most universal types of informal learning. Such learning may not even be recognised by the individual. For example, someone reading programs and times in a television guide may not realise they are actually interpreting a data table.

We know there are often good reasons for people wanting to acquire skills and build on their existing knowledge in informal ways. For some, learning informally may be a more efficient use of time and money; or offer a more attractive alternative to formal classroom-based learning, which may conjure up memories of negative school experiences. Informal learning may be less daunting because there are no tests or 'formal' assessment processes. Another benefit is that informal learning can be adapted to better suit the learner's goals (Becket & Hager 2002).

Livingstone, who conducted the first Canadian survey of informal learning practices (2000), used his iceberg analogy to illustrate the connection between work and learning, including in unpaid work such as volunteering, household duties and the general activities that contribute to a person's vocational skills set.

WHO BENEFITS?

While we are all informal learners, the following have been identified as groups for whom informal learning can be particularly important.

Older people make good candidates for informal learning as they prefer less structured training that draws on their previous work and life experience

OLDER WORKERS AND LEARNERS

Recent studies have shown a preference among older workers to engage with less formal methods of education and training. The ABS highlights that older people are more likely to participate in informal learning than any other type of learning (ABS 2008b). This can be explained by perceptions on the part of both employers and the workers themselves that older people have less capacity to learn. These misgivings are generally unfounded; what older workers need is training that is related to a context, is learner-centred and considers previous skills acquired, not only within the workforce, but also through life experience. Ferrier, Burke and Selby-Smith (2008) note that effective training for older workers is 'reactive' and, therefore, more likely to be informal in delivery.

> The amount of training undertaken by small-to-medium businesses maybe underestimated due to the informal nature of much learning in these enterprises

SMALL BUSINESS

Much discussion about enterprise learning has focused on the apparent lack of training occurring in small and medium-sized organisations. Ashton, Sung and Raddon (2005) suggest this shortfall in training may be exaggerated by the focus on collecting data on formal training courses, which is typically commissioned by larger businesses. They suggest that a very different picture would emerge if more attention was paid to skill formation, rather than training of individuals, by acknowledging that both informal *and* formal learning lead to knowledge transfer and the acquisition of skills.

Many small business owners (and managers) are likely to learn informally or incidentally—for example, through discussions with suppliers and customers, and at trade fairs—rather than by attending formal training courses. The 'other learning' that takes place can include problem-solving, observing and working with more experienced co-workers, informal chats and moving between jobs in the same organisation. This suggests that, in larger organisations, much of what was previously informal learning becomes structured, either through prescribed coaching or mentoring programs or specialised training activity. According to Dawe and Nguyen (2007), while small businesses are usually committed to training, they often lack the funds to undertake more formal approaches and are reliant on training via informal means.

> Informal learning, which has no testing or accreditation processes, and is therefore less threatening, can lead the disengaged learner back into education and training

DISENGAGED LEARNERS

People with minimal school education, poor literacy and numeracy skills, and low self-esteem often lack confidence in their ability to learn in formal settings and, consequently, they can become disengaged from learning. Disengaged learners may have useful skills but are unable to articulate them and build on them. Informal learning can be a potent means for *re-engaging* disengaged learners. For the disengaged learner and worker, less formal means of skills development can be an effective route back to education and training and can lead to building sustainable skills.

This is the experience of much successful community learning, and vocational trainers and adult educators should know when it is advantageous to encourage the learner to undertake the course of study at their own pace and without fear of testing. This might mean a less explicit approach to assessment and might well include the recognition of existing skills. Recent findings by Harris, Simons and Maher (forthcoming) suggest that attention needs to be paid to the learning that might occur in adult education settings that lie outside vocational education and training (VET), which can be used as the building blocks toward formal training and further learning.

We also need to be mindful of how 'the learner' defines *learning*. Many people, including employees and their managers, equate learning with formal courses and activities that take place in a classroom or in a training centre, which lead to certification. Informal training may be a credible alternative for the disengaged or reluctant learner, since the learning is often subliminal. For the reluctant learner, an informal approach to learning may be more beneficial, simply because there are no tests or accreditation processes that need to be overcome. However, where there is a case for engaging in a recognition process, the parameters need to be established.

> Informal learning can provide new migrants and refugees with important foundation skills to integrate into their new communities, upon which further learning can be built

MIGRANT GROUPS AND REFUGEES

Informal learning is beneficial to new migrants and refugees: a finding common across Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom. Miralles-Lombardo, Miralles and Golding (2008) looked at the informal learning which occurs in multicultural organisations. They reveal how such experiences create informal networks and comfortable learning spaces, which helps to connect people with refugee or non-English speaking backgrounds to the wider Australian community. These community-based organisations provide access to informal learning and practical tools for modern living, such as information and computer-based technologies.

Informal learning is an important component of cultural integration. Learning may occur in the language of the migrant group, and the most effective path for learning is an amalgamation of formal and informal learning methods. Placement in an accredited formal and vocational environment without the foundation skills that are built on and developed within a community-based environment can be 'too much, too soon'.
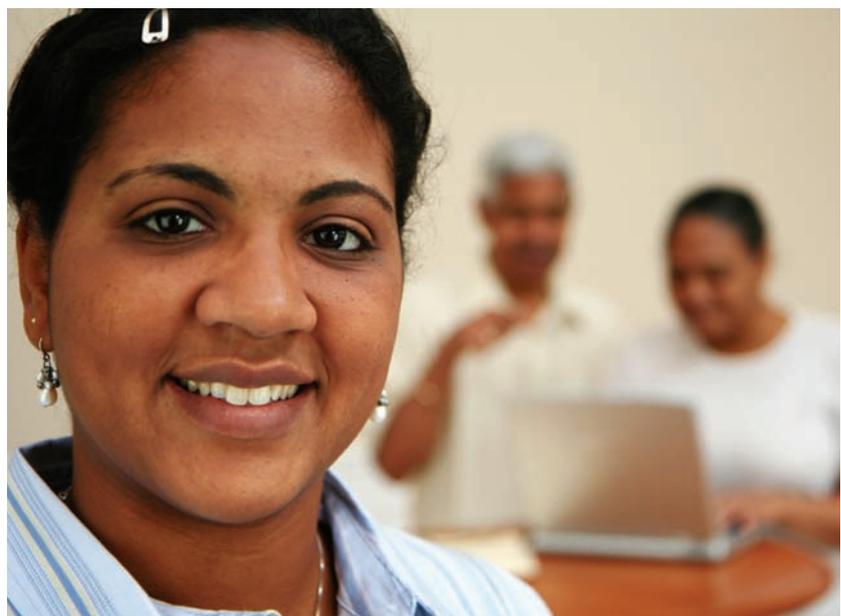
INFORMAL LEARNING AT WORK

With 75% of workplace learning identified as 'informal', workforce development policies should include this form of learning, with foundation skills of workers and the quality of informal skills transfer considered

Most (75%) workplace learning is informal, with little of that activity being recorded in official statistics of vocational training (Conner 2002; Richardson 2004). As Chappell and Hawke note (2005), informal learning at work is usually a social rather than an individual activity, with people working and learning in partnership. Thus informal learning becomes an important element in workforce development and something to be factored into broader polices concerning work-related training.

Informal learning—including learning from peers and colleagues, learning by trial and error, and individual reading—are important aspects of professional development (Stehlik et al. 2003). It gives employees the opportunity to learn and keep their skills up-to-date, while being part of the overall workplace culture rather than just its training regime; a necessary element of retaining employees (Smith, Ochzowski & Selby Smith 2008). Thus team leaders and managers play an important role in facilitating informal learning on the job. This approach may be part of an induction process, or an integral part of the coaching or mentoring supervisors give when the need arises, or may occur through new experiences in the workplace.

Billet articulated some years ago that both formal *and* informal learning are valuable to skill formation (2001). Other researchers have shown that strong foundation skills allow people to make the most of their informal learning (Nordman & Hayward 2006). Informal learning may not pay the same dividends to those without such a foundation, and who are also less likely to have access to training because of the part-time, casual and/or low-paid nature of their work (Masterman-Smith & Pocock 2008).

This has implications for trainers operating in the workplace. They need to understand how workers are exposed to informal learning, and will be called upon to judge whether this is good learning—not just the absorption of bad or out-of-date habits—and whether people would get more out of their informal learning if they had some targeted training. Chappell and Hawke (2005) have identified factors that contribute to effective workplace learning and put these into four distinct categories: the work environment, the context and objectives of the business, the nature of social interaction in the workplace and with external contacts, and the managerial attitudes to learning.

INFORMAL LEARNING OUTSIDE WORK

Museums, libraries and volunteer organisations provide the learner with a plethora of opportunities for informal learning. In some cases, this experience can be the stepping stone to formal qualifications

Informal learning offers a way to engage with many educational pursuits and, at the same time, allows learners to engage with learning solutions that would not be open to them through more formal avenues. It can be argued that it is almost impossible to determine all the outcomes of informal learning since, by its definition, it is ongoing and continuous. Also, much of this learning takes place beyond the conventional classroom or workplace.

A plethora of museum and gallery programs stimulate active engagement with their collections and most major voluntary organisations offer the chance to develop special interests. For example, the National Trust of Australia offers a wide range of informal learning opportunities for adults, including visiting historical buildings or getting involved in a community project and learning new skills. Volunteer organisations, and/or the learners themselves, see value in validating this learning by formally recognising the skills acquired or by using these experiences as the launching pad into accredited training.

Tighter regulatory requirements—for example, occupational health and safety—drive the trends towards formal learning. The skills required to fulfil the many and varied volunteer roles can be, and are, acquired informally and 'on the job'. Not all volunteers want their volunteer experience to count toward a formal qualification but many do once they know it is possible. From the organisation's perspective, it makes sense to have a volunteer workforce that sees itself, and is recognised by its clients, as being skilled.

Libraries have long been recognised as offering a non-threatening environment where people of all ages and abilities can gain free access to resources that support their learning. One-third of the Australian population accessed libraries during 2005–06 (ABS 2008a). Libraries usually offer free access to, and instruction about, the internet and other electronic resources, which is of particular use to people with low income, those without computers in the home or who are unfamiliar with technology.

Websites, blogs, social networking sites and other electronic media have a wide reach and facilitate informal learning which might be the hook for the learner to pursue more formal tuition—but the information may not always be reliable

INFORMAL LEARNING AND TECHNOLOGY

There is an enormous desire for knowledge and information in modern society. One of the easiest ways to access information is through online technology, including social networking sites. *Google*, the number one search engine in Australia, has over 9 million Australian users monthly. Up to May 2008, the social networking site *Facebook* had over 2.5 million members. Online social networking sites are being used as informal learning spaces but users must be aware that some of the sites can be of often questionable quality. Likewise, the scope of sites such as *YouTube* is constantly expanding and host 'how to' videos.

Another way to access informal learning is through the media. Free-to-air and pay-TV, and web-based news channels reach global markets and not only offer up-to-the-minute current affair stories, but also offer information on a variety of topics; from gardening, cookery and health to philosophy, religion and ethics. For example, over 1.6 million people in Australia have access to the Discovery Channel (see <http://www.mcn.com.au>). Electronic media could be a way of providing people with the stimulus to find out more and could be a hook to engage them with more formal avenues of learning. The mobile phone and mobile technologies are also being explored as a means of accessing and participating in informal learning. However, the myriad of places from where informal learning can be accessed means that significant quality issues arise.

The advent of new technologies means the space for informal learning is constantly developing; wikis, blogs and social networking sites can now be accessed through mobile phones and web access, thus connecting 'virtual and physical spaces'. The mass consumption of new technology suggests that the hidden iceberg of learning is greatly expanding. According to Chappell and Hawke (2005), this increase will create a new framework in which learning opportunities can be managed, provided and experienced. But there are risks associated with the variable quality of information and of instruction conveyed in this unregulated environment.

WHAT ARE THE DIFFICULTIES IN MEASURING INFORMAL LEARNING

The recognition of informal learning can avoid unnecessary training and provide portable qualifications. However, recognising and assessing skills learnt unofficially is not easy and can be expensive

Efforts are being made around the world to collect data on informal learning, particularly in those settings where recognition of that learning can be valuable; for example, to recognise experience, avoid unnecessary training and create portable qualifications. Recognising skills can be cost-effective when used to avoid the need for formal study and to ensure that the skills learned are relevant to the job (OECD 2005). However, recognising skills is not always a straightforward exercise. Considerable time and money can be spent locating and collecting evidence to allow recognition. It is especially difficult for people with few or no records to demonstrate learning.

The European Commission is making a concerted effort in the VET domain to develop a set of common principles for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. The European Qualifications Framework has adopted an unambiguous focus on outcomes, however they may be achieved. It is also explicit that the attainment of a qualification can be achieved through a combination of knowledge, skill and wider personal or professional competence.

A quandary: will recognising and measuring informal learning rob its essential 'informal' essence?

This push towards measuring informal learning presents us with a quandary: once there is an attempt to recognise and measure informal learning, does it lose its informal status? Is it worth doing?

Skills assessment can be expensive if, for example, it involves visits to observe practice in workplaces or onerous collection of documentation, and judgments need to be made about whether uncovering the mass of learning is necessary (Cameron 2004). In many instances, employers are prepared to recognise specific experience without the need for formal identification of skills. However, in other cases, the regulatory environment calls for certification of skills, or sometimes a worker will want to document their skills in order to seek promotion, higher wages or to move jobs. This requires the individual to articulate what knowledge and abilities they have gained from that experience. Such a process can involve formal assessment, although for many professionals and para-professionals this is the familiar process of compiling and updating curriculum vitae.

We should only recognise informal learning if it is of high quality

Clarke (2005) notes that, because of the difficulties in measuring informal learning, the focus of assessment shifts from measuring outcomes to assessing learning conditions or the opportunities for informal learning to take place. This diversion can mean that a significant issue is overlooked: the recognition of the quality of the learning taking place. In recognising informal learning, it is important that we know people are gaining the right knowledge and are applying it in a safe and effective way.

Virtual learning environments (VLEs), multimedia and social networking tools are giving people unprecedented opportunity to download resources, discuss their ideas (Hillier 2009) and record their learning. In 2007, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) carried out a project on the recognition of informal learning going on amongst VET teachers and trainers. It found that it was possible to make informal learning visible and to evaluate it by adopting a portfolio approach to gathering evidence. Technology is lending a hand, allowing learners to demonstrate the richness of their experience in pictures and film as well as the written word.

'Digital stories' or collections of evidence about learning and prior experience are becoming part of people's résumés. These are brought together in an electronic portfolio, which may include text, links to qualifications or competencies, images, sound and animation, and hyperlinks to associated websites. Such an 'e-portfolio' can be seen as a type of learning record that provides evidence of achievement, as well as facilitating students' reflections on their own learning (Jay & Connors 2005).

RECOGNISING INFORMAL LEARNING IN AUSTRALIA

While government and educators are committed to recognising prior learning, there are challenges in doing this, with the skills of assessors critical

In Australia, governments and educators are committed to making recognition of prior learning (RPL) a viable option for learners. There are, however, challenges associated with the practical processes of recognising informal learning, including those relating to lack of awareness and understanding of the system (Hargreaves 2006). This has led to criticism that RPL is difficult to access and implement. According to Harris, Simons and Maher (forthcoming), RPL is under-used, and Smith and Clayton (2009) show that this stems from the confusion about how to engage with the process of revealing learning gained through work and life.

Learners seeking recognition for prior learning require considerable assistance

Expansion of RPL demands flexible teaching and sophisticated assessment practices, where the focus is less on the definitions of types of learning and more on the results of the learning and the capacity for effective action (Smith & Blake 2005). This approach applies particularly to adults who already have experiences to build on and preferences for the way in which they learn. Some will want to engage in more self-directed learning rather than be guided by a teacher. Others will prefer a hands-on approach rather than learning through listening and reading.

Effective RPL is also dependent on qualified and competent assessors. Smith and Clayton (2009) suggest that 'guided reflection … significantly improves learner confidence'. They also argue that the complexity of the current system means that RPL is not meeting the requirements of employers and remains a relatively hidden option. They suggest that clearer information about the benefits of RPL and how to negotiate its processes is needed.

Assessors also have to meet the increasing demand for the recognition of skills and knowledge gained outside the formal education system (that is, on the job or in the community). This type of assessment may be for accountability purposes or to determine a student's level of performance but can double as a tool to shape the teaching and learning process. This dual role reflects the reality that adults today should be able to continuously adapt to changing circumstances and therefore need to be able to learn new things all the time.

FINAL THOUGHTS …

Teachers now have to 'facilitate learning' in all sorts of places beyond classrooms and workplaces, including cyberspace

The expanse of informal learning, and its recognition as an important element in workforce development and in encouraging disadvantaged learners back into training, has implications for vocational education practitioners. Educators now have a plethora of educational tools at their disposal, including formal classroom instruction, group discussion, information and communication technologies, technology-assisted learning and workplace interactions. In most cases, a combination of all of these styles of learning will yield the best results. Here lies the challenge for 'teachers', now asked to facilitate learning in the classroom, the workplace and further afield—for example, on the soccer field, in the museum and the library, as well as in cyberspace. This is also a challenge for the system, which needs to decide when there is a good reason to recognise informal learning and how then to assess it. It calls for good judgment about the learner's capacity to maximise the benefits from informal approaches, and whether the student would gain from being channelled toward more formal training—for their own sake or to ensure quality of learning.

Most informal learning will, quite rightly, remain invisible

Although it would seem that more of the iceberg of informal learning is likely to become visible if adequate resources are devoted to its recognition, informal learning will probably, and quite rightly, remain mostly submerged.

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