

What is informal education

[Profession](#), [Teacher](#)



What Is Informal Education? Introduction Finding a concise definition of informal education that is acceptable to all is an insurmountable task, since the likelihood of dissension would be substantial (Seale, 2008). Nevertheless, in this short study we will look at the principles and values, theoretical practice and practical application of informal education. To better understand the concept and ambition of the discipline, we will concurrently explore examples drawn from my own experience. Definitions If we look at the notion [or concept] of informal with education we can see more clearly what our aim [ambition] is. Putting these two parts of the equation together gives us a better position in which to think about our work (Mahoney, 2001) As suggested by the above quote, in order to describe informal education we should look at the two words informal and education. A relatively modern definition of education is: " the act or process of imparting or acquiring general knowledge, developing the powers of reasoning and judgment, and generally of preparing oneself or others intellectually for mature life; " (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2011). This takes into account alternative approaches to the delivery of education which may neither be viewed as ' systematic' nor based on ' instruction', as described in older definitions such as in the Oxford Dictionary (OED, 1995) " the process of receiving or giving systematic instruction. " My preferred definition also uses the word ' process', which is of primary focus for many theorists of informal education; " traditionally, informal education has focused on relationships and thus on the process by which learning happens. " (Doyle, 2001). The word informal is defined as: " casual, easy, unceremonious, or relaxed, " (Wiley, 2010). The definition of the words combined give us a degree of understanding as to the

aims (ambition) of informal education; ' education in a casual, relaxed manner, [atmosphere]". But in order to get a deeper understanding we will look at the concept present in the values and principles of prominent theorists of informal education. Principles & Values Informal education is not classified as an occupational group; as such there is no professional body to present a concrete list of values or principles that informal educators must adhere to. However, the National Youth Agency " identified informal education as the core process of [youth and community] work" (Banks, 2001: 64). They suggest that: * " collective action * autonomy of individuals and groups * change and development * and justice and equality" (NYA, 1993: 14) * are principles underlying the work. Tony Jeffs and Mark Smith suggest that a good educator must adopt a core set of values. They suggest: * " Respect for persons * The promotion of well-being * Truth * Democracy * Fairness and equality" (Jeffs & Smith, 2005: 20). Both these attempts at attaching values to the practice of informal education are similar, and suggest a degree of conceptual consensus. The principles appear virtuous and acceptable to most practitioners, however some points are debatable and possibly impractical in particular circumstances. " Without an active democratic politics among its citizens, a nation may give all its citizens free public schools, but it cannot foster the spirit of democratic education" (Gutman, 1987: 284) As implied by the quote above democratic education cannot be fostered in non-democratic societies. My argument is that Informal education cannot be confined to democratic societies alone, therefore, how can democracy be a core value of education as proposed by Jeffs and Smith? Nevertheless, even in an ostensibly liberal society like our own, the concept

of pure democracy, although being a commendable ideal can be unfeasible in certain circumstances. While working in a youth club in Bexley, there was a meeting set up for the youth to determine how they wanted the youth centre to operate throughout that year. The democratic exercise was intended to give the youth 'ownership' of the club, its resources and support them in re-establishing the ground rules. Surprisingly there was a larger turnout than expected. We soon found out why. A large group put forward their desire to have a section of the grounds where they could smoke (Cannabis) and drink alcohol freely. Despite the centre manager's discourse on the legality of Cannabis and the problems of allowing drinking anywhere on the premises, the group insisted that they, through the democratic process had the right to initiate an application for a drinking licence! When the centre manager respectfully refused to take the idea any further, he was met with derision, and the concept of democracy that the youth had envisioned was legitimately ridiculed as a sham. The complete autonomy of groups and individuals could likewise pose problems under certain circumstances. An excursion with a group of young people could be unacceptably risky, as individuals choose to exercise their right to autonomy. I have had several experiences where groups or individuals have had to be denied the right to autonomy in order to minimise 'risk.' As a play worker, on a summer scheme excursion to Chessington Zoo, we had a few boys who wanted to leave later than we had planned (they had no input into the decision of what time we were to leave when the trip was arranged, to be fair). The spokesperson for the group insisted that their parents would not mind if they came back on their own, a little later, and insisted that we called

his mother to verify this. We refused any negotiation on the matter as we could not get anything in writing. I spoke to the leader of the group of three on his own. I acknowledged his maturity and ability to get home safely, but explained that we were simply not allowed to take the risk. After some deliberation he empathised with our position and agreed to meet us at the agreed meeting point at the allocated time. I would further argue that the supposition that service users are in the need of 'change and development' is both presumptuous and can be seen as condescending, the "promotion of well-being" (Jefferies & Smith, 2005: 20) I think is a more acceptable way to encapsulate a similar idea. Theoretical Practice It is necessary to go back to the definition of 'informal' quoted earlier; "easy, unceremonious, or relaxed." This is descriptive of a key methodology of informal education. It is this 'easy', 'relaxed' and approachable attitude that is used to help create an environment/atmosphere that is, in practice, conducive to learning (Rogers & Frieburg 1994). John Mahoney adds detail to the concept when describing the qualities that informal educators should possess: We need to need to be approachable friendly, open to talk, have a sense of humour and so on. So the words commonly used by various workers when thinking about how they go about 'being informal' seem to have a relaxed atmosphere and an everyday feel about them. (Mahoney, 2001: 18) I am in agreement with Mahoney; it is the informality of our approach as educators that enable us to build conversation and relationships that a formal approach may stifle. "At the centre of our work as Informal Educators is interaction or conversation" (Jefferies & Smith 2005: 77). Informal education is "educational activity, based on dialogue and conversation, working with the issues people bring"

(Buchroth 2010: 62). It is conversation that enables us to foster learning. To foster learning or to educate, is by all accounts the primary focus of educators, informal and formal alike (Mahoney, 2001; Jeffs & Smith, 2005; Doyle 2001). However, informal education can be viewed as in fact; education by 'stealth'. The recipients are generally unaware that the practitioners' purpose of engaging with them is to "foster learning," whether they feel they are in the need of education or not. This need not be harmful to the recipients, if the knowledge and values being passed on are indeed beneficial, however the ethics behind such an approach is legitimately questionable. I therefore find some consensus with the adage that in practice, "informal education can be understood to have a role within social indoctrination rather than being the 'pure', unsullied form of education that the promoters of informal education insist it is" (Belton, 2009: 56) If we look at some institutions where informal education is utilised i. e. the Connexions Service, where I worked for several years. There are mechanisms used to record personal and sensitive information about service users. 'Data sharing agreements' are put in place, between agencies, despite the rhetoric of 'confidentiality.' Young people have no control over this information, and they can be refused a service if they do not sign the 'data protection agreement'. Statistics gathered from their data can be utilised for questionable purposes by the 'data gatherers'. However, the type of information practitioners choose to use and store would be subject to their personal ethics to some degree, hence, scholars like Michelle Doyle and others insist that moral character is a necessity in order to be a good educator (Doyle, 2001).

Practical Application Some assume that informal education takes place

strictly in informal settings such as youth centres, community centres and the street. This is partly because the title Informal Educator has become synonymous with Youth or Community Worker for many outside of the profession. However, this assumption is incorrect, as Brian Belton points out: " Informal Education is not an equivalent to or, replacement for, youth work but a set of tools and precepts that youth workers deployed, " (Belton 2009: x). This is important, since it gives us a better understanding of the scope of informal education and how it can, as a tool, be utilised in a variety of settings, by a variety of professionals. I believe It also helps us understand that alternative forms of education are not intrinsically incompatible, but can be complementary to each other. In fact the three forms of education that I present in figure 1. 1 are correlated and express the multifaceted nature informal education as a tool being used in the alternative environments.

Figure 1. 1: Formal education: " the hierarchically structured, chronologically graded educational system running from primary school through to university" (Coombs 1973.) This system would include both academic and professional training. Non-formal education: " is any organized, systematic, educational activity carried on outside the framework of the formal system to provide selected types of learning to particular subgroups in the population. " (Coombs & Ahmed 1974) This would include some vocational programmes, organisations such as the Boy Scouts and forms of training in the work place. As conveyed in figure 1. 1, the boundaries between the three overlap. Formal learning can take place in a youth club, as a curriculum based accredited programme is delivered by youth workers. Youth workers can be brought into schools to deliver a session on drug misuse or manage lunch

time activities. The Boy Scouts may use staff that utilise formal and informal techniques as and when necessary. Teachers may use informal techniques while running lunch time activities. I believe informal education cannot be confined to a youth club; neither will a youth club only be served by the techniques of informal education. In my opinion it is almost impossible to definitively categorise and separate the three modes of education. The following piece of practice illustrates this supposition and serves to highlight the versatility and adaptability of informal education. As a youth worker at a secondary school, I worked with another youth worker to develop a curriculum, devised in order to explore social issues with Year 9 students. Small groups of students spent an hour a week for 6 weeks with us, to enable us to work with the whole of year 9. We used discussion primarily, and fun activities to explore set topics that came under the titles of ‘ Understanding and Identifying’, ‘ Communication’ and ‘ Aspiration.’ We explored issues of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, empathy, appropriate communication, teacher student relationships and goal setting amongst others. Since we had a curriculum to work through, we were unable to ‘ go with the flow’ as freely as we would in an informal setting. The students had to attend, so the voluntary relationship was absent, we worked in the library (a formal setting), and even had to adopt formal modes of discipline. However, our style of delivery or attitude was true to the informal nature as quoted by Mahoney above. We also ran breakfast and lunchtime clubs that allowed us to work in a more orthodox manner as informal educators.

Conclusion In my opinion, informal education is a legitimate complementary alternative to the traditional mode of education, but is not a replacement for

it. Traditional Education due to its deficiency is described by Carl Rogers (1983) as “jug and mug” education and by Freire (1972) as ‘banking education.’ Informal education theory incorporates concepts and aims that stem from the will to resolve these deficiencies and shares ideology with alternative thinkers such as Rogers and Freire et al. But, in practice it is by no means the solution that ‘radical thinkers’ like Ivan Illich in his book ‘Deschooling Society’ (Illich, 1971) would have proposed. As highlighted by the real life examples used; the concepts and aims are not steadfastly practicable or achievable under certain circumstances. Nevertheless, the adaptability and versatility of informal education make it a relevant methodology to be utilised by diverse professions in diverse environments, for good or for bad, for generations to come. Bibliography Seale, M. (2008), Understanding informal education Unit 2: Educational Thinkers London: YMCA George Williams College Encyclopedia Britannica (2010) ‘education’, Dictionary. com, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/education>. Accessed: December 31, 2011 OED (1995) ‘Education’, Oxford English Reference Dictionary, Oxford: Oxford University Press National Youth Agency (1993) Report of the Working Group to Find the distinctive Elements Which Form the Core of All Youth and Community Work Training, Leicester: National Youth Agency Wiley (2010) ‘Informal’, Webster's New World College Dictionary, Cleveland: Wiley Publishing Gutman, A. (1987) Democratic Education New Jersey: Princeton University Press Buchroth, I. (2010) ‘Education’, Buchroth, I. & Parkin, C. Using Theory in Youth and Community Work Practice Exeter: Learning Matters Belton, B. (2009) Developing Critical Youth Work Theory, Rotterdam: Sense Publishing Coombs, P. (1973) New

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