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## **A case for the underestimated, informal side of lifelong learning**

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*Formal and non-formal education is well established and recognised in our society. However, unbeknown to those who engage in it, informal learning occurs more frequently than these forms of education. Those who engage with others in their informal learning have the potential for personal fulfilment and community well-being. Who is involved? What does it look like? How does it happen? What is the relationship between the teacher and learner, and what use is it anyway? This paper addresses the position of informal learning in the scheme of lifelong learning and documents a research study that sought to produce some answers when 'informal teachers' of a rural community were investigated.*

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### **Introduction**

The expression lifelong learning has come to mean different things for different people over the last thirty years. The UNESCO report

*Learning to be* (Faure, 1972) focused on lifelong education that procured social benefits for individuals and community during world change. Since then, national and international reports and inquiries record a preoccupation with formal education. 'Lifelong' has been portrayed as 'lifelong education', 'permanent education' and 'recurrent education' (Harris, 2000, p.3). Benefits are seen in economic performance, and a highly skilled workforce trivialising personal, social and cultural fulfilment. Lifelong learning is a concept whose time has come (Aspin, Chapman, Hatton & Sawano, 2001).

A more recent refocus includes social and cultural aspects of learning and improving opportunities for people to engage in ongoing learning throughout their lifetime. The Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) (August, 2002) highlights different learning needs associated with lifelong learning. The MCEETYA report, as well as the earlier Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (1996) and Senate Employment, Education and Training References Committee reports (1997), acknowledge the need for formal training through education and training institutions and workplace training but note that it is "increasingly driven by workplace skills, capabilities and ingenuity" (p.2). In addition to formal and non-formal learning, the Ministerial Declaration acknowledged the more "diverse ways of informal learning" (*ibid*). The document emphasised the importance of "achieving community capacity building through community ownership" (p.1); "new ways to contribute to ... communities" (p.2); learning "simply for the love of learning" (p.2) through "social institutions and community organisations" to meet the "needs of individual learners" (p.3) in "individual life circumstances" (p.3). In closing, the Declaration states that learning will contribute to "increased social participation and cohesion by connecting people within their local communities. It renews community capacity and social capital" (p.4).

Reports that Australia is in demographic and economic decline (National Farmers' Federation, 1997; Kenyon & Black, 2001) indicate that in order to survive, Australia has a responsibility not only to develop knowledge and skills but also to develop broader social, cultural and personal values to enrich communities and human lives (Senate Employment, Education and Training References Committee, 1997).

Much that is learned in life comes, not from schooling, but from our experiences in life and involvement with families, neighbourhoods and communities. Informal learning – that is, learning that occurs outside of formal institutions or formally organised education groups – takes place in order to meet the immediate needs of individuals, whether work-related, life-related or both. When knowledge and skills are utilised by community members in the conduct of community activities, projects and services, they meet individual needs and promote community wellbeing, sustaining vibrancy and resilience, perhaps explaining how some communities can be vibrant, resilient and maintain a quality of life for their members, while others lack stability (Kenyon & Black, 2001).

### **Background to the study**

Adult learners use informal learning more than any other form of learning (Livingstone, 1998). Researchers and practitioners first investigated informal learning several decades ago (Tough, 1967, 1971; Penland, 1979; Brookfield, 1983) and found that informal learning was widely used by adults outside formal courses. Although prevalent, this type of learning was difficult for learners to identify or understand, partly because learners are involved just to do something, have a good time, be with people and have a go.

Informal learners are independent in the way they learn; however, they do not always learn on their own. Other studies reveal that informal learners frequently seek an informal teacher as a learning

resource. Tough (1967, 1971), Penland (1979), Brookfield (1983), Tremblay (1986) and more recently Hermanson (1996) and Livingstone (1999b) all found the informal learner approached another human being – family, friends or colleagues – to assist them in their learning.

The process used by informal learners and those who assist the learning process (whom I named in my study ‘informal teachers’) has not been investigated until now. To demonstrate that informal learning differs from formal and non-formal learning, we can compare the teacher, the topic, the process of learning and the relationship between the learner and teacher and the benefit to the community. My study first located informal teachers in a community and determined their characteristics; second, found out how adults residing in a community informally teach outside of a formal learning environment; and third, identified informal teaching activities engaged in by the informal teachers. This paper focuses on a research study of informal teachers in a community – a difficult task as informal teachers, like informal learners and their learning, may not readily identify that they are ‘teaching’. Who is involved? What does it look like? How does it happen? What is the relationship between the teacher and learner, and what use is it anyway?

#### **Literature review for the study**

The literature began by examining and identifying the contexts and terms associated with lifelong learning. In section two of the literature review, sources relevant to each of the research questions were analysed. Of particular interest was what research had been conducted on the diffusion of innovation and the exchange of new information (Havelock, 1971; Rogers, 1983) in relation to the processes used. In order to identify in this study what teaching strategies and actions occurred informally, research conducted for child classroom methods was examined. (References are too

numerous to mention here, but methods examined were direct instruction, discussion, simulations and games, demonstration, and questioning; for a fuller discussion, see Harrison, 2001). Further to child classroom methods, adult teaching strategies, purposes and actions of teacher-centred/learner-centred approaches of Conti (1991), Jarvis (1995) and Caffarella (1994) were collated. By using the teacher-centred/learner-centred approach as a continuum, it was determined that a link can be made to the teaching strategy and the purposes and actions used at various positions on a continuum (Entwistle, Skinner, Entwistle & Orr, 2000). Rather than list them here, I will assume the reader has knowledge of teacher-centred/learner-centred approaches.

Lifelong learning – comprising formal, non-formal and informal learning – has a specific task and role in society. How each form meets the need of society will be briefly summarised here and will include teacher characteristics and teaching strategies and actions in order to demonstrate the benefit and value of informal learning.

#### Formal learning

The term 'formal learning' is associated with institutions that deliver education and place value on the outcome or result of the learning, which may be acknowledged by the act of awarding a credential. Educational institutions may include universities, technical and further education (TAFE) colleges/institutes, adult education centres, and primary and secondary schools. Formal learning:

- occurs from primary to graduate programs (Armstrong & Davies, 1975)
- awards credentials (Houle, 1992; Livingstone, 1999a; Foley, 1995)
- involves compulsory attendance (Livingstone, 1999a)
- includes post-compulsory and workplace opportunities (Foley, 1995)
- is distinguished by professional educators and a defined curriculum (Foley, 1995; Merriam & Caffarella, 1991)

- is under the direction of the educator whose responsibility it is to plan, implement and evaluate learning (Merriam & Caffarella, 1991; Mocker & Spear, 1982).

#### The teacher of formal learning

In higher education, the institution values research in discipline knowledge (Bowden & Masters, 1993), where qualifications are gauged by staff with a doctorate (DETYA, 1999). Increasingly quality teaching has gained emphasis (Ramsden, Margetson, Martin & Clarke, 1995). University students require teachers who have quality subject knowledge, strong communication skills, concern for students and ability to make learning meaningful (Young & Shaw, 1999). In TAFE, the teacher/trainer is seen as an assessor of competencies and a deliverer of knowledge. Teachers/trainers have a specific trade or career with related qualifications (Harris, Simons, Hill, Smith, Pearce, Blakeley, Choy & Snewin, 2001). In a changing sector, staff are professionally unprepared in terms of teaching qualifications and their ability to meet student concerns (Harris *et al.*, 2001).

#### Teaching methods of formal learning

In higher education, teaching methods are largely a didactic transmission of a non-contested body of knowledge and teaching would be better complemented by methods of a more socially interactive nature (Candy, Crebert & O'Leary, 1994). In TAFE, teaching should be expanded beyond the more established strategies of group teaching, lectures, practical demonstration and supervision of practical work to include social learning techniques (Scott, 1992).

#### Non-formal learning

Non-formal learning may be defined by the context in which it occurs and by the nature of the learning. It may occur in an organisational context that is not an educational institution. Non-formal learning:

- may be outside the framework of the formal organisational setting (Jarvis, 1987; Brookfield, 1983)

- is when learners choose what they want to learn and the means of learning (Mocker & Spear, 1982; Brookfield, 1983)
- may be one-off, sporadic or part-time (Foley, 1995; Livingstone, 1999a)
- is delivered by diverse authorities and any institution (Livingston, 1999a)
- is voluntary in attendance (Mocker & Spear, 1982; Brookfield, 1983)
- is not credentialled (Brookfield, 1983).

#### The teacher of non-formal learning

In non-formal learning, the teacher is typically part-time or voluntary from other occupational fields (Senate Employment, Education and Training Committee, 1997; MCEETYA, 1997). Professional development is on the increase due to the changes in course delivery (Peters, 1994; McIntyre, Foley, Morris & Tennant, 1995; Schofield, 1996; Volkoff, Golding & Jenkin, 1999),

#### Teaching methods of non-formal learning

Provision of adult community education is responsive to people of all backgrounds in providing an equitable, non-threatening, nurturing environment that provides opportunities for learners to participate in learning. The term 'adult educator' covers a range of activities from tutoring to organising to counselling (MCEETYA, 1997).

#### **This study**

##### The community

Rivertown, the community selected for the study, is located in Tasmania, an island state of Australia. The island is 68,049 squares kilometres in area (ABS, 1999). Rivertown is a rural community in the northern part of the State and consists of a larger township with a population of 2,168 and smaller locality clusters with a population of 258. It is situated 50 kilometres from the nearest business centre within a local government council area. The community which served

as an example to study had secured a prestigious national award and was considered vibrant, and capable of maintaining a good quality of life for its members.

#### Research questions

The purpose of the study depended on locating a community where informal teaching and learning could be identified. The research questions were:

1. Which people do learners access in order to assist their learning?
2. What are the characteristics and attributes of the people whom learners access?
3. What contributions do social interaction and networks make toward informal teaching?
4. What strategies and actions occur in the informal teaching and learning process?

#### Selecting the sample for the study

A sample – perceived by others as key sources of information and assistance regarding things they wanted to learn – was sought. The ‘community election strategy’ was designed by the author for her doctorate.

To ensure a cross-section of the community was approached, names of people to contact were compiled from the local council’s Community Service Directory of groups, small business, social services, schools, government offices and religious groups within the community. The researcher made 55 successful contacts. Each of these contacts was asked to nominate three people in the community who met the selection criteria of an ‘informal teacher’, that is, someone in the community to whom they would go for help or information. The person contacted was required to make their own interpretation regarding the type of information and the sort of person to ensure that the selection met the need from their perspective. The first round of 55 telephone calls generated 141 names



of which nine were nominated three or more times. These nine people were assigned to the sample.

A second round of telephone calls was made to the 141 nominated people on the list which generated a further 134 names, 23 of whom were nominated three or more times. These 23 people were also assigned to the sample.

From the two telephone rounds, a total of 275 people were nominated. The sample of people derived from this procedure resulted in 32 names. Two people were unable to participate. A random telephone survey confirmed that the community not only knew of the informal teacher but also knew personal details about them.

#### Data gathering methods

Being basically naturalistic in design, this study used a qualitative case study method. The detailed sampling technique identified the people who were deemed to be informal teachers. Triangulation of data collection methods included interview to establish their characteristics and their perceptions of themselves as informal teachers. Diaries monitored their social interaction during a week of their lives to enable an understanding of an informal teaching activity. The social interaction, as it occurred, was audio-tape recorded to capture the strategies and actions informal teachers used in the teaching and learning activity. Observations by the researcher confirmed or challenged the terms used by the informal teacher to describe how they shared their skills and knowledge.

#### Data analysis

To simplify the report of the data analysis processes, the following table outlines the research questions, the research methods and the data analysis processes.

Table 1: Data analysis, research questions and methodology

Research question 1	Which people do learners access in order to assist their learning?
Methods	Community election strategy Telephone survey
Data analysis	Cumulative frequency counts
Research question 2	What are the characteristics and attributes of the people whom learners access?
Methods	Interview of identified informal teachers
Data analysis	NUD*IST category identification Frequency counts
Research question 3	What contributions do social interaction and networks make toward informal teaching?
Methods	Diary keeping Audio-taping
Data analysis	Content analysis / category saturation Frequency counts
Research question 4	What strategies and actions occur in the informal teaching and learning process?
Methods	Interview Diary keeping Audio-taping Observation
Data analysis	Category saturation Frequency counts Content analysis

### Results

Informal learning differs from formal and non-formal learning in placing the purpose of the learning in the hands of the learner. The learner decides what will be learned, where it will be learned and with whom it will be learned.

#### Who is involved?

Informal teachers in a community are unlike formal and non-formal teachers who have necessary and suitable qualifications for their education sectors. The results of this study differ from other studies that were concerned with whom the informal learner contacted for assistance (Tough, 1967, 1971; Penland, 1979; Brookfield, 1983; Tremblay, 1986; Hermanson, 1996, and Livingstone, 1999b). In this study, they were not especially friends, family or work colleagues but a person who was personally accessible and lived in close proximity. New knowledge, skills or information is sought foremost from informal teachers who have expertise and experience. That person is usually a little older because of their experience. Previous educational qualifications, position in the community or employment are not requirements for being an informal teacher. Typical responses when informal teachers were asked who comes to you included: "all walks of life", "all levels", "the everyday person" and "right across the community" (collated responses).

#### What does it look like?

According to the learning need, varieties of topics are sought. Knowledge, skills and information are sought in relation to real life tasks and present situations. The informal teacher belongs to the community and is involved with many community groups. These people are engaged in civic activity, more than any other type of group. The civic groups depict progress, human rights, culture, goodwill and civic pride. This is consistent with the work of Havelock (1971) where innovators attach themselves to many and varied reference groups whose relevance is in the "value of ideas and things" (p.11) and more task orientated. Secondary group involvement revolved around heritage/conservation, sport and recreation, arts/culture and welfare interests. Some examples (collated from interviews) are:

- business decisions and strategic planning
- teenagers in trouble
- genealogy
- Indigenous culture
- umpiring and coaching sport
- natural health
- forestry agreement
- environmental management, and
- making ends meet.

How does it happen?

Contact between the informal learner and teacher was face-to-face, and word of mouth, spontaneous and intentional. The person who uses these processes is seen to have individual prestige and credibility (Havelock, 1971). Unlike formal and non-formal learning where teachers are found in institutions, organisations and classrooms, informal teachers are approached during normal everyday activities more than social outings, meetings and work. The contact was made with the informal teacher while they were 'out and about' in the street, at the pub, at the local store, school, sporting venue and similar locales. Social talk consisting of gossip, story telling, laughter and general interest is important in its frequency, and as a basis on which to establish and maintain contact, support and rapport between the informal teacher and the informal learner.

People come to me at home and, well, sometimes they want the information and so you give them the information if you can ... Well, you might not just give them information but by taking them to where they can find it ... I can talk to people and give advice from my own experience (*interview, Jarvis*).

After the meeting I was mobbed by ten angry citizens and talked to them for over an hour. They represented the extreme of the pro-logging group. Despite this, there was some constructive dialogue or explaining each other's position. One guy in particular was a lot more reflective and we actually had a good discussion (*diary extract, Sandra*).

I'm out in the community a fair bit and I suppose it's like sort of giving information but it's not; it's more sort of telling I suppose, telling stories and telling them how things happened (*interview, Paula*).

#### The relationship between teacher and learner

Students who were studying formally stated they want teachers who are personable, care for them and have quality subject knowledge (Young & Shaw, 1999) and formal trainers were seen to be professionally unprepared to meet student needs (Harris *et al.*, 2001). The informal teachers of this study were sought out for these qualities naturally. Three qualities were particularly noted. Informal teachers:

- have interpersonal strengths, are friendly and are good communicators
- are seen as credible by the learner and to have appropriate knowledge, skills and information
- have a dynamic attitude of 'getting things done', 'on the go', 'accepting challenges' and 'being involved'.

A dynamic attitude is not necessarily sought after in formal or non-formal teachers but is very relevant for informal teachers in a community. These three characteristics contribute to not only the personal fulfilment and wellbeing of community members but to spearheading ideas and innovations:

I have the ability to listen. Because I have a business in town and am readily accessible, I have an office which is not infrequently jammed full of people having cups of coffee and talking (*interview, Kevin*).

I suppose I'm probably a fairly hardnosed businessman who started from nothing and just learnt from experience, and I'm a great believer that you can always learn something; there is never a day goes by that you cannot learn from somebody (*interview, Alan*).

Perhaps I'm more of a leader. When they were having this community group, they said, "You're a leader, you lead". You probably don't think of yourself as being like that, but I am a leader and I think up good ideas (*interview, Lorraine*).

#### Informal teaching methods

Unlike reports on formal teaching strategies that suggested that more social interactive methods were needed (Candy *et al.*, 1994; Scott, 1992), the social learning techniques in this study were prevalent and occurred very naturally. The informal teachers use four main teaching methods: 'discuss', 'bounce ideas', 'advise' and 'show', all of which occur in conjunction with social talk and networking. Discuss and bounce ideas are used to review information, reflect and examine ideas and opinions. Advice is a process of supplying information, opinions, fact and explanation. Show is a process of observation and encouragement through questions, explanation and illustration. None of these methods is teacher dominant, but is shared between members on equal status. Discuss and bounce ideas are used more frequently than other methods.

Sometimes it's just that others have never had the experience. People come to me and say, "Now, you know all about this". You draw on lots of contexts and experience from it all, and use it all the time (*interview, Sarah*).

More just like talking or explaining I suppose (*interview, Paula*).

I showed Terry and the ladies how to identify it (*diary extract, Jules*).

I guess sometimes you can use examples of things that you've done in your life or seen others do that may give some ideas as to how they can go about doing things (*interview, Alan*).

#### What use is it anyway?

Formal learning and some non-formal learning result in a form of qualifications or recognition. For informal learning to be recognised, it must personally affect the learner and be subjectively valued by the learner (Merriam & Clark, 1993). Content significance for informal learners of this study broadly related to life, employment, business, home, community and general interest that included art/craft/music, recreation and hobbies. In this case, learning was for the sake of learning (MCEETYA, 2002) and as such contributed to individual development. As well, when informal learners and informal teachers strive for the betterment of their community collectively, they found new ways to contribute to their community.

#### **Conclusion**

Informal teaching and learning are integral to lifelong learning. An important discovery in this study is that the informal learner approached someone who had more expertise and experience than themselves, and through this approach new knowledge, skills and information were exchanged. These people were not friends, family or work colleagues, but heterophilous contacts. Heterophilous contacts exhibit stronger, new informational exchange where the contact acts as a change agent (Rogers, 1983). For a greater information exchange, the informal teaching methods 'discuss', 'bounce ideas', 'advise' and 'show' were collaborative, facilitative, interactive and inclusive.

Homophilous relationships (that is, a relationship wherein people have an affinity) were equally important. These relationships were generated through interpersonal networks, between members on an equal footing, where people were in close proximity and accessible, cohesive through their belonging, who communicated through social activities, social talk and face-to-face contact. Informal teaching and learning is a very social activity that connects and bonds people, increasing social participation and cohesion (MCEETYA, 2002).

A relationship of new information exchange as well as interpersonal relationship and affinity is the ideal. Along with a range of topics that included heritage/conservation, sport and recreation, arts/culture and welfare, informal teachers were involved in civic groups that depicted progress and civic pride more than any other. The topics engaged in renewed knowledge, skills and information along with interpersonal relationships, and fulfilled the cultural and social concerns of the community, confirming that both heterophilous and homophilous relationships are a vital resource for community vibrancy, reliance and stability, and community wellbeing (MCEETYA, 2002; Kenyon & Black, 2001).

The key to this community's capital is in the social connections that bond its members, cultivate learning and engender resilience.

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