Preface

This book grew out of a realization that may seem commonplace: that we live in a changed and rapidly changing world. At the same time, a closer look at the contours of that change and the speed at which it unfolds bring in their wake a further awareness that is as profound as it is sobering. Time was when hobbies, learning crafts, obtaining information on everything ranging from cooking to pancreatic cancer meant some serious investment in terms of money, time, and energy. No more. Almost everything is now one click away with minimal connectivity and the cheapest available platform be it outdated machines of an equally dated business center cum Internet café or fancy smart phones or the now ubiquitous tablet computers. This book is a product of the kind of possibilities offered in a world that is interconnected by the digital age—one editor is on the African continent and the other two are in different parts of North America. They have had formal and informal learning interactions and friendship for years; in part this relationship is made possible by the Internet.

Outside of countries that impose restrictions on internet connections for political reasons, our world has become one giant learning condominium. What all this means is that there now is less distance between a common refrain among the authors represented in this book that living is learning and the fact that most of it is informal. Let us say you are an adult who desires to have another go at mathematics in your spare time to make up for your flunking at it in high school. The Khan Academy is there to the rescue. Your family friend has just shared with you the grim news of the diagnosis of a condition she herself had never heard about till then. Of course, you don’t have to wait for her to go through the excruciating pain of having to spell it out for you herself. She counsels: “I think you should Google it” and proceeds to spell the word for you. No medical personnel need be present in your ranks. Even the veterinarian suggests we consult “Dr. Google” when we take our ailing pets to the doctor. Going online means that you have just enhanced your knowledge repertoire. No formal instruction; no sign-up for any classes. Welcome to the world of the digital age. It does not matter much where in the world you are. More than at any other time in world history, this is the age in which the resources for informal learning and the sheer volume of what is there to be known are unprecedented in human experience.

Despite what we just described, informal learning remains a beggared cousin of formal and non-formal education in the literature, especially in the sphere of adult education. Yet, as the research studies reported in this book show, informal learning, in its many variations, is the foundation on which much of formal and non-formal learning is built, and there is a history of informal learning in adult education, going back at least to Allen Tough’s work on independent learning projects in the early 1970s, and perhaps even to Eduard Lindemann’s 1926 description of the meaning of adult education. Clearly, formal schools and non-formal education provisions do not teach half of the knowledge, skills and attitudes that adults require as they confront new challenges, and negotiate the hills and valleys of life.
In everyday living, adults respect their intuition, they remember stories they had been told, places they had visited, including web sites, books they had read, an innocuous remark they heard at work or in the market, they reflect on these and gain insight with which they either innovate or resolve problems that confront them in particular contexts. We often wonder how persons who did not attend the big business schools became successful business women and men; how local politicians who are unlettered became astute politicians, and how local pharmacists understood the plants, roots and bark of trees that were used to cure ailments in their communities before the viruses without borders and the huge pharmaceutical industries took over the space.

It is part of our aim in this book to reduce the distance between informal learning and its formal cousin by soliciting and reporting research that delves into informal learning in diverse learning locations, with varying practices and offering some tools with which to reduce the difficulties that are usually associated with informal learning, especially regarding its variety and its measurement.

The other gap that we are concerned to fill in the literature relates to informal learning and its manifestation in an area of the world that is not often featured in the discourse about informal learning: Africa. Although research studies on informal learning in Africa are few relative to studies on the phenomenon in North America, the research studies and scholarly writings on informal learning from Africa have addressed informal learning in a wider variety of settings; in families and community contexts; in social and independence movements; in research, and in formal teaching-learning contexts. They have also been more attentive to tacit informal learning (including informal indigenous learning) and explicit informal learning. Research studies on self-directed learning are very few indeed. What is offered here has the potential to enrich our understanding and expand our knowledge of informal learning in Africa, Asia, Europe, and North America. Although most of the chapters came from North America, we have one full chapter from Africa, two of the editors, who are co-authors of Chapters 1 and 19 are Africans, one of them lives and works in Africa. What results, we hope, is a global snapshot of contemporary investigations into the phenomenon of informal learning.

This book is a truly international book, which contains 18 chapters written by accomplished scholars and practitioners based in Africa, Asia, Europe, and North America.

In the introduction of this volume, the editors of the volume, Olutoyin Mejuni, Patricia Cranton, and Olufemi Taiwo explore the meaning of formal, non-formal, and informal learning, and their interconnectedness in the education system. They explore the dimensions of informal learning, including the extent to which it is unconscious or deliberate. They establish the link between informal learning and adult education and explore adult education as a context of informal learning.

Peter Sawchuk, in Chapter 1, argues that as a concept, informal learning helps researchers and policy makers to render alternative conceptualizations of learning. Therefore, informal learning is a concept that must be built upon, although there is also a need to transcend the concept of informal learning. Sawchuk offers a rationale for, and an explanation of, the use of an expansive material dialectics: the theory of activity and “the Vygotskian project” in the study of informal learning.

From his prior research on informal learning, Daniel Schugurensky, in Chapter 2, explores four related issues that he formulates as challenges, relevant to the theory and practice of informal learning. They are: the conceptual challenge, which refers to both the need to go beyond a ‘residual’ definition of informal learning and to unpack the “black box” of informal learning; the research challenge which relates to the need to develop creative methodological strategies to overcome the difficulties in eliciting informal learning and tacit knowledge; the recognition challenge which refers to the societal need to
acknowledge and certify informal learning; and finally, the pedagogical challenge relating to the design and implementation of meaningful opportunities for relevant learning without the presence of a teacher or a curriculum. He also proposes strategies to address these challenges.

In Chapter 3, Al Lauzon focuses on the tacit form of informal learning, highlighting the need to recognize that learning happens in all of life and throughout life, so it is not a process restricted to those institutions created for teaching and learning, and does not privilege the knowledge of the expert. He argues that often, significant tacit learning is not merely socialization; it is rooted in Eros and an intimate epistemology, a world undivided. He describes the five characteristics of an intimate epistemology.

Through a case study of the informal language learning activities of two English as a Second Language (ESL) learners in Hong Kong, Helen Yeh, in Chapter 4, highlights the contributions of informal English language learning to performance in English language examination and proficiency in English usage in a formal education institution. The learner with the highest English proficiency and performance in a class of 96 persons adopted self-directed learning, which is high level conscious and intentional informal learning, while the learner with the lowest English proficiency and performance in the same class engaged in low level conscious and intentional informal learning.

In Chapter 5, Chad Hoggan presents the concept of informal transformative learning through an exploration of the learning of survivors of breast cancer. Through interviews and a focus group discussion, Hoggan presents the three distinct types of experiences that participants identified as crises, coping and engagement. These experiences either led to self-directed learning, or were themselves processes of tacit learning, or they integrated self-directed and tacit learning, that resulted in profound positive change or transformative learning.

In Chapter 6, Leah Poirier examines women’s learning about positive breastfeeding attitudes in formal, non-formal, and informal learning contexts. She identifies the contexts that contributed to an enthusiasm for breastfeeding. Through the stories of participants in her study, Poirier shows how formal education, nonformal education, and informal learning interface; one leading to a better understanding of breastfeeding experience in another.

Lin Lin and Patricia Cranton, in Chapter 7, examine the phenomenon of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) within the framework of informal learning and self-directed learning. Through the example of a learner in a MOOC, the authors show how learners in MOOCs order their own learning of organized, sequential academic topics in informal learning environments—in spaces where they feel comfortable to access the internet. Lin and Cranton provide highlights of the benefits that accrue to persons who participate in MOOCs and could accrue to workplaces and educational institutions. They also point out the challenges of learning in MOOCs.

With a focus on early childhood and middle childhood teacher preparation programs, Amy Sedivy-Benton and Katina Leland, in Chapter 8, highlight the informal learning experiences of pre-service candidates and first year teachers. From data gathered through mixed methods, the authors present teachers’ experiences of teaching and the impact of formal education and informal learning on their experience in real life teaching contexts. They make the case that although teacher preparation programs strive to prepare teachers for the classroom as best as they can, teachers’ lifelong learning happens on the job informally.

Through a grounded theory research methodology, Rebecca McGill, in Chapter 9, describes the experiential and informal learning of hospital-based nurses in two hospitals in the United States, as they assume leadership roles as nurse managers. McGill shows the merits in a more deliberate and purposeful fostering of informal learning as part of nurse managers’ professional development strategies.
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In Chapter 10, Kin Siu and Giovanni Contreras explore the specific characteristics of personal relationships in China as they are shaped by a unique mixture of cultural values and practices. They analyze their implications for informal learning. The authors posit that although relationships in China are shaped by a valuing of hierarchies and a belief in harmony leading to instrumental and premeditative relationships, especially with outsiders, these relationships hold the possibilities of both limiting and enhancing informal learning.

In Chapter 11, Adejoke Babalola examines the informal learning incidents that resulted from relationships women formed within and outside the adult literacy classes they attended and the community development projects they participated in. From data drawn from a study of the interface of literacy education, social capital and community development in southwest Nigeria, Babalola highlights what women learned, how they learned and the type of learning that resulted from relationships they formed in their homes, neighborhoods, literacy classes, and communities.

Leona English, in Chapter 12, focuses on adult health learning—an approach to creating healthy communities, which is grounded in a critical understanding of health learning and education and aims to support the transformation processes around quality of life issues in communities. The author identifies and describes the processes of creating healthy communities, pointing out the centrality of adult and informal learning principles in the processes. She examines specific barriers to informal learning about health in communities.

In Chapter 13, Mary Ziegler, Trena Paulus, and Marianne Woodside explore informal learning in peer-initiated online communities in an attempt to expand and enrich the conceptualization of informal learning as a group meaning-making process, rather than as an individual cognitive process. The authors picked up one conversational thread from conversations of an online hobby group of long-distance hikers, and through discourse analysis, show how groups make sense of their individual and collective experiences as they construct and share tacit knowledge.

In Chapter 14, David Starr-Glass reports on a study in progress, a phenomenological study of the ways in which transnational students in a Business Administration Program of an American university in Prague learn about national cultures and negotiate their cultural adaptation. He uses the reflective journals of students in a Cross-Cultural Management (CCM) Course as a source of data. Following his analysis of how transnational learners had learned about cultural difference informally and how they had used that knowledge in their cross-cultural adaptation, Starr-Glass suggests strategies and approaches for using informal learning to complement, advance and enhance the teaching and learning in a standard CCM Course.

In Chapter 15, Victoria Marsick, Miren Fernandez-de-Alava and Karen Watkins examine research from Communities of Practice (CoPs) in the Catalan Public Service in Spain and in a not-for-profit youth organization and in the United States Army. They highlight the tensions that may arise from the formalization of informal learning within organizational contexts. Tensions include how to assess and evaluate informal learning in workplace-initiated CoPs and the certification of informal learning.

In Chapter 16, Elizabeth Bishop highlights the results and the implications of a qualitative research she conducted with a group of mental health practitioners, involving an eight-week educational program designed to help establish and enhance self-reflective practice. The author posited that an incorporation of self-reflective practice into formal and non-formal educational provisions for professionals in the human services, would lead to honoring, valuing and integrating informal learning into formal and non-formal education processes and structures.
From the perspective of the theory of implementation science and the point of view of speech-language pathology, Patrick Walden, in Chapter 17, introduces the reader to the role of informal learning in implementing evidence-based practices in healthcare contexts. Drawing from data collected from 24 certified speech-language pathologists in the United States, Walden describes how speech language pathologists engaged in informal learning so as to meet workplace needs created by gaps in their knowledge base and clinical experience at some point in their practice.

In Chapter 18, the editors, Patricia Cranton, Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò, and Olutoyin Mejini, conclude the volume by reflecting on and undertaking an analysis of contributions to this volume as they cast their gaze on the future. They review the common themes that run through the volume: the common elements among models of informal learning; the insightful reflections of authors on how, when and why informal learning occurred; and the reflections on how the research and writing on informal learning contributes to adult and higher education.

This book addresses the subject of how to measure and analyze informal learning in the digital age from a multidisciplinary perspective: health (breastfeeding, speech language pathology, and surviving cancer); professional development and leadership (of teachers and nurses); online learning (including MOOCs); public administration; human services; community development; and business administration. It addresses the need to be more attentive to, and be more systematic about, paying attention to learners’ informal learning for two reasons. The first is that respecting and honoring learners’ informal learning when it holds the possibility of serving as a precondition for, a complement to and a supplement for formal and non-formal education provisions blurs the disconnection (and sometimes alienation) that learners sometimes feel between formal/organized instruction and daily living. Second, attentiveness to learners’ informal learning in structured teaching-learning interactions is also a way of tracking informal learning that could result in, or has resulted in, negative outcomes such as racism or sexism. This book holds the possibility of influencing the discourse of informal learning and the practical integration of formal, non-formal and informal learning in distinct ways.

We expect this book to appeal to a wide audience, from adult educators and teachers to administrators and development practitioners, from philosophers to sociologists, and from social psychologists to healthcare practitioners. Such is the centrality of informal learning that we hope that our readers, scholars and non-scholars alike, find here enough direction for further work on our topics in terms of practice, research, and theory development.

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