Chapter 1
Informal Learning as Dialectics of Activity

Peter H. Sawchuk
University of Toronto, Canada

ABSTRACT

The concept of informal learning has made an invaluable contribution, in a short time, to overthrowing the hegemony of formalize learning. And, as conceptualizations of informal learning have diversified, they have helped provide the basis for broader conceptualizations. In this chapter, drawing in particular on the work of Bertell Ollman (1993), the author outlines the role of an expansive material dialectical understanding of informal learning, its foundation in a philosophy of internal relations, and four integrated analytic moves that allow researchers to realize the potential for synthesis stemming from the concept of informal learning. Following that is a rationale for the claim that a more expansive material dialectics is most clearly possible in the theory of activity associated with what Stetsenko (2009) refers to as the Vygotskian Project.

INTRODUCTION

My argument in this chapter builds from a premise and a caveat in relation to what I take to be the themes of this collection as a whole. The premise is that, emerging from notions of learning from life experience, non-formal learning and informal education, in its relatively short career as a concept, informal learning has served an important role in the debate about the nature and meaning of learning. In this chapter, this is a point I will not argue so much as simply highlight and interpret, other than to say the following. For a variety of reasons including our unique historical context, the formation of the concept of informal learning is taken here to be a key constituent of the remarkable growth in contemporary responsiveness among researchers and policy-makers for alternative conceptualizations of learning. In different ways, these alternatives have either challenged, or sought to entirely synthesize, the long-standing precept that learning is synonymous with schooling, pedagogy and the individual. The creation of this level of responsiveness, I believe, is no small feat. Thus, this premise suggests that, as uneven and imperfect as conceptualizations of either informal learning, non-formal learning or informality/formality in learning may or may not have been, they have

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-8265-8.ch001
Informal Learning as Dialectics of Activity

helped lay the groundwork for “learning” as a new form of social/psychological (and possibly, political, economic and historical) question. The caveat to this is that – understood under the premise that informal learning has formed the “groundwork” – informal learning is a concept that must be built-upon.

In what follows, I offer a rationale for and explanation of the use of what I will call an expansive material dialectics in the study of informal learning. This necessarily involves a turn toward a discussion of philosophy, and in the context of limited space it is a portion of the chapter that I think benefits greatly when we keep the idea and/or the practical experience of an actual attempt at carrying out an analysis of informal learning clearly in mind. The goal is to establish a set of tools supportive of analysis that, I argue, allow informal learning to be more deeply understood, conceptualized and eventually synthesized as a broader formulation of socio-cultural practice. This is followed by a brief discussion of what I argue to be one of the most viable existing attempts at the synthesis of learning in terms of the application of an expansive material dialectics: the theory of activity and what Stetsenko (2009) calls the “Vygotskian Project.” I begin, however, with a brief background statement concerning the rise of the concept of informal learning and its two principal traditions (which I refer to as categorical and radical).

BACKGROUND

I believe in its short career as a concept it is remarkable the way that informal learning has so swiftly come to stand on the doorstep of mainstream educational thought. Indeed, conceptualizations of informal learning have rapidly diversified. In many instances informal learning has come to virtually refuse clear definition such that the closer one looks the blurrier it becomes. And, as we will see later, I do not necessarily feel this is a bad thing at all.

For now however, as a way of proceeding, I want to begin with a broad organizing heuristic in order to support an understanding of how and why I am focusing my attention in this chapter in the way that I am. There are many details omitted in the following, but (heuristically) I think it is possible to talk about a division line between what I will refer to as “categorical” and “radical” traditions in the study of informal learning. These are terms that I argue are useful even while researchers can and do straddle them.

In order to consider the practical uses of empirical study, I define categorical treatments as those that presume and/or maintain the concept of informal learning as a distinctive type or species of learning. Here, inherently and often unsatisfyingly defined in the negative, the examples are legion, though diverse. And, many are exhaustively detailed in the authoritative review offered by Colley, Hodkinson and Malcolm (2003) where we can see the range of definitional attributes involved, and debated.

The principal contribution by Colley et al. for my purposes however is to identify alternatives to the categorical (types) approach to informal learning. Indeed, they go on to conclude that such a categorical approach is not only distinctive, but analytically untenable:

[…] it is not possible to clearly define separate ideal types of formal and informal learning which bear any relation to actual learning experiences […] when we examined a range of different contexts in which learning took place against the issues that supposedly distinguished informal/non-formal from formal learning, we discovered that what we termed attributes of informal formality were present in all of them. We chose the term ‘attributes’ after much deliberation. It signifies both the characteristics of learning in a wide variety of situations, and also the fact that it is people – often representing particular group,
Related Content

Benchmarking HBCU Efficiency: Beyond Retention
Jason Coupet (2016). Administrative Challenges and Organizational Leadership in Historically Black Colleges and Universities (pp. 95-128).
www.igi-global.com/chapter/benchmarking-hbcu-efficiency/156855?camid=4v1a

International Students’ Eating Habits and Food Practices in Colleges and Universities
www.igi-global.com/chapter/international-students-eating-habits-and-food-practices-in-colleges-and-universities/143811?camid=4v1a

www.igi-global.com/chapter/the-japanese-tertiary-education-system-and-its-impact-on-economic-conditions-from-2000-to-2010/133731?camid=4v1a

Accessibility to Higher Education in Nigeria: The Pains, Problems, and Prospects
www.igi-global.com/chapter/accessibility-to-higher-education-in-nigeria/181939?camid=4v1a