Chapter 18
Looking Back and Looking Forward

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ABSTRACT
This chapter reviews the common themes that run through the volume. The authors review the relationship between informal learning and adult and higher education and how the research and writing on informal learning contributes to adult and higher education. They pay attention to how informal learning plays a role in independent learning projects, self-directed learning, and transformative learning. The common themes that run through this chapter include learning experiences, contexts of learning, processes and strategies, outcomes of informal learning, and to a lesser extent, critical perspectives and cultural issues. The authors describe how the chapters contribute to each of these themes. They also speculate on the future directions of research, theory development, and practical applications related to informal learning.

INTRODUCTION
In this final chapter, we review the common themes and threads that run through the volume; we look back over the contributions of the authors, our goals in collecting these contributions in one volume, and the extent to which we met our goals. Informal learning does not sit at the center of theory in adult and higher education, but it has the potential to have a larger place in the field. Both self-directed learning (a popular adult education model from the 1970s and the 1980s), and transformative learning theory (a primary adult education theory from the 1990s to the present) include informal learning, even though it is not necessarily described as informal learning. Going back even earlier, Tough’s work (1971, 1978) on independent learning projects
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describes informal learning, and the first book on adult education (Lindemann, 1926) implicitly addresses informal learning. When we say that informal learning does not sit at the center of theory in adult education, we mean that it is not explicit. We hope that this volume will increase adult educators’ awareness of informal learning in theory, research, and practice.

The common themes that run through the chapters in this volume include: learning experiences, contexts of learning, processes and strategies, outcomes of informal learning and, to a lesser extent, critical perspectives and cultural issues.

The Learning Experiences

The learning experiences documented in this volume have shown that there are no boundaries as to what could be learned in informal ways; topics range from language learning and acquiring knowledge and skills in an academic topic such as statistics, to positive attitudes towards breast-feeding and coping and engagement with breast cancer. Authors also report learning experiences that include the knowledge, skills and attitudes required while transitioning from one job role to the other, or from being a trainee to a qualified professional, or required to becoming a more effective (and at times, more empathetic) professional. Further, the learning experiences reported cover the acquisition of knowledge, skills and attitudes about women’s gender roles, other cultures, support for transformational learning from a critical understanding of community health issues, and about leisure. The subject matter that is explored could therefore be of interest to a wide range of professionals in the education, health and helping sectors, cultural studies, women’s studies, development practice, and information and communications technologies.

The learning experiences that are documented in the chapters also span the entire gamut of informal learning experiences that we identify as appearing on a continuum of forms of informal learning, ranging from tacit learning (in the chapters by Lauzon, Hoggan, Poirier, Siu and Contreras, Ziegler, Paulus, and Woodside, Babalola, English, Starr-Glass and Marsick, Fernandez-de-Alava and Watkins) to incidental learning (in the chapters by Hoggan, Poirier, Sedivy-Benton and Leland, Babalola, English, McGill’s, Starr-Glass, Marsick, Fernandez-de-Alava and Watkins, and Bishop). The learning experiences also range from explicit learning (chapters by Hoggan, Poirier, Sedivy Benton and Leland, McGill, Siu and Contrera, English, Marsick, Fernandez-de-Alava, and Watkins, Bishop, and Walden), to self-directed learning (chapters by Yeh, Hoggan, Lin and Cranton, Poirier, and Walden). While a few of the chapters record only one form of informal learning, most present learning experiences that straddle two or more of the forms of informal learning that we have identified. In addition, while many of the chapters recorded informal learning experiences that interface with formal education/learning and non-formal education provisions (Yeh, Poirier, Babalola, Starr-Glass and Bishop) others focus on informal learning in contexts and interactions that were not designed or structured as teaching-learning interactions (for instance, Hoggan, Lin and Cranton, Siu and Contreras, and Ziegler, Paulus, and Woodside). On their part, Marsick, Fernandez-de-Alava, and Watkins present an interesting phenomenon of organizations (the Catalan Public Service, the US Army and a not-for-profit organization for youths) promoting explicit informal learning by initiating Communities of Practice, thereby encouraging employees to share tacit and incidental learning, and knowledge, skills and insights gained from formal education and self-directed learning in the Communities of Practice.

Finally, in their chapter in this volume, Lin and Cranton offer a lens through which we could understand the learning experiences recorded by authors in this book, when they make a link between the learning of learners in MOOCs and instrumental and communicative learning. Ewert