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# **Formality and Informality in College-based Learning**

**Phil Hodgkinson and Helen Colley**

*Workplaces and educational institutions merely represent different instances of social practices in which learning occurs through participation. Learning in both kinds of social practice can be understood through a consideration of their respective participatory practices. Therefore, to distinguish between the two ... [so that] one is formalised and the other informal ... is not helpful (Billett, 2002, p57).*

## **The Presence of Informal as well as Formal Learning in Educational Institutions**

Despite Billett's view, it has become commonplace in Western, industrialised societies to think of formal and informal learning as inherently different from each other. Thus, formal learning is planned, teacher-dominated, assessed and takes place in educational institutions, where learning is the prime official objective of activity. Informal learning, on the other hand, is unplanned, incidental, unassessed and uncontrolled by a teacher, and takes place in everyday life, where learning is not the primary purpose of the activities that we engage in. Thus, the argument has gone, we learn informally through participating in everyday life – in the family, the local community, in the workplace and at leisure. On occasions, we learn formally, if and when we attend courses at schools, colleges or university.

The origins of this division are not only theoretical: particular meanings of formal and informal learning have historically been associated with the interests and practices of different social and political groupings (Colley et al, 2003). Most recently, political attention has been focused on this debate by European lifelong learning strategies (European Commission, 2001). These have introduced a third category of 'non-formal' learning (a term intended to convey a combination of formal and informal characteristics), associated mainly with the workplace. A key policy goal is that non-formal learning should be clearly identified to allow formal assessment and accreditation, supposedly in the interests of both individual workers and economic competitiveness. This strategy has created controversy not only about its feasibility but also about whose interests it is likely to benefit most. At the same time, it reinforces the notion that there are separate types of learning, and that a prime task for research is to delineate clear boundaries between them.

In this chapter, we were asked by the editors to focus on formality and informality in educational courses and provision. The very act of doing so highlights a paradox in some of the existing literature. Formal learning (or education) is partly defined as that which takes place in a school or college. Indeed, when the term is used without a clear definition, this is almost always what is implied. In a seminal paper published in 1973, Scribner and Cole argued that much of the research and theorising about learning in advanced industrial societies had focused predominantly upon schooling, and had therefore ignored and devalued learning elsewhere (including in settings such as work-

based apprenticeships), which they termed informal. Much of the subsequent literature on informal learning has developed as a way of re-introducing attention to learning in non-educational settings back into the debate.

There was, however, a further dimension to this polarisation, since the dominant literature assumed that formal learning was superior to the informal:

As Enlightenment-based rationality and science were applied to learning, ways were sought and developed to improve upon the supposedly more primitive and simple everyday learning. Formal learning, when effectively provided, was assumed to have clear advantages. It opened up the accumulated wisdom of humankind, held in the universities... Furthermore, such knowledge was generalisable – it could be used or applied in a wide range of contexts and circumstances (Colley et al, 2003, p.5).

Scribner and Cole were amongst a steady stream of writers to challenge that inherent superiority. Thus, Brown et al (1989) argued that all learning is situated. In their terms, concept, activity and context are all inter-related. In (informal) everyday learning, there is a synergy between these three, for example, when people apply number skills through practical activities, rather than through mathematical algorithms. Much school-learning, on the other hand, is less authentic, for the context and activities of a school conflict with the concepts and skills being learned. Lave and Wenger (1991) took this argument further. For them, participating in school meant learning to belong – to be a student. Thus, students learned to complete classroom tasks, to stay out of trouble, to establish

good relations with other students, and so on. From their perspective, school is a much less effective learning environment than, for example, a tailor's workshop. This is because in the tailor's workshop, context, concepts and activities are all working together, whilst in school, there are tensions between, say, the concepts of mathematics and the context (classroom) and activities (of being a pupil). Thus, one of the key differences between informal and formal learning lies in the 'authenticity' of the former.

But if we draw the distinction between formal (school-based) and informal (everyday) learning in this way, the paradox is revealed. For the very thing that makes school-based learning less 'authentic' is the presence of very powerful informal learning processes within it. As well as learning to belong as a pupil, in Lave and Wenger's terms, schools also include the learning so memorably characterised as the 'hidden curriculum' by Jackson (1968): some young people will learn that they do not fit in, or that they are academic failures destined to enter lower-status occupations. Thus, formal learning defined as that which takes place within schools or colleges is also inherently informal.

If we examine different writers' attempts to define formal and informal learning, this paradox is reinforced. Colley et al (2003) examined 10 such attempts. Here we will draw upon three recent examples, to make the point. Eraut (2000) follows the most common approach in defining formal learning, so that anything that is not formal is informal. (He prefers the term non-formal, but as a replacement for informal, not a third category. For consistency, we use the term informal here.) For him, formal learning has five characteristics:

- a prescribed learning framework
- an organised learning event or package
- the presence of a designated teacher or trainer
- the award of a qualification or credit
- the external specification of outcomes.

Much learning in schools and college does not fit all five of these characteristics. As well as issues connected with the hidden curriculum and learning to be a student, some school courses are not directed at a qualification, nor are outcomes always or entirely externally specified. Consequently, some school or college learning must be either informal, or a mixture of the formal and informal.

Focussing on workplace learning, Beckett and Hager (2002) argue that dominant views of learning, which they term the 'standard paradigm', are based upon a Cartesian dualism which construes body and mind as separate, and mind as superior to body. For Beckett and Hager, this is philosophically and empirically untenable. Rather, learning is organic or holistic, engaging the whole person, so that intellect, emotions, values and practical activities are blended. They focus on the characteristics of informal learning, but are wary of grandly universalist theorising, and restrict their focus to informal learning in the workplace. Practice-based informal workplace learning, they argue (2002, p.115), has the following characteristics, which they set against formal learning:

**Formal learning**

Single capacity focus, eg cognition

Decontextualised

Passive spectator

An end in itself

Stimulated by teachers/trainers

Individualistic

**Informal learning**

Organic/holistic

Contextualised

Activity- and experience-based

Dependent on other activities

Activated by individual learners

Often collaborative/collegial

As with so many of these classificatory attempts, distinctions are less than completely clear. For if all learning is organic or holistic, so that intellect, emotions, values and practical activities are blended, all learning is also informal, against at least one of their stated criteria. At the very least, much of the learning that takes place in educational institutions must be informal, according to their classification. Learning in school or college often (if not always) entails activities and is contextualized (in a classroom and school) – a key point of the Brown et al (1989) analysis. Beckett and Hager (2000) do not argue that educational learning is always formal, and a discussion of this issue lies beyond the scope of their book.

Livingstone (2001) develops a complex typology, classifying formal education, non-formal education, informal education/training and informal learning against a range of criteria. The decisive distinctions drawn between formal and informal learning are those of curriculum and teacher control rather than location. Formal learning has ‘prescribed curricular requirements [and] a designated instructor’ (2001, p.3) typically found in

modern school systems, while informal learning ‘may occur in any context *outside the pre-established curricula* of educative institutions’ (2001, p.4, emphasis added). Such learning may, therefore, occur anywhere, including within those institutions. It follows that, when we examine school or college learning, we have to consider both formal and informal learning, however they are defined.

### **Are Formal and Informal Learning Two Distinct Types?**

The most obvious way out of this paradox is to see formal and informal learning as different types of learning, both of which co-exist within educational institutions. This explanation requires a clear and well-established boundary between the two types, and a coherent and defensible theoretical justification for the distinction. Colley et al (2003) challenge this approach. Through examining an extensive range of literature on formal, informal and non-formal learning (mainly literature written in English) they claimed that there is very little agreement about how to define the boundaries between them. They found at least 20 different criteria that had been used to draw up the distinction.

Although there was significant overlap between different classifications, there was no clear agreed core as to what the distinction was. This meant that learning which would be classified as informal by one person was seen as at least partly formal by someone else, and vice versa. More significantly, under all classifications, several criteria were used to define formal or informal learning – but what happened if learning met some of these criteria and not others? Thus, for example, Colley et al (2003) claim that Livingstone’s (2001) classification can be related to six different issues – knowledge



structure, knowledge status, mediation of learning, location, primary agency, learner voluntarism. The result is four ideal-types – but a glance at the ways in which the criteria are applied shows that it is quite possible for a particular learning situation to fall into several types at the same time.

Colley et al (2003) go on to argue that this shows there is no clear way to distinguish formal from informal learning. Furthermore, attempts to label learning as formal or informal are the constructions of practitioners, writers and researchers. That is, such terms are *attributed* to learning, and the criteria used to underpin those broad attributions can be themselves seen as *attributes of learning*. Thus, Beckett and Hager (2002) attribute the term ‘formal’ to learning that is decontextualised and an end in itself, and the term informal, to learning that is holistic and activity-based. Being decontextualised or holistic then become attributes of the formality or informality of learning, using their classificatory system. Colley et al (2003) conclude that all learning situations entail attributes of what they term ‘in/formality’, and that what matters is the nature of these attributes and their interrelationships, in any particular learning situation.

This line of argument raises questions about the origins of the various attempts to classify learning as formal or informal. Beyond the political origins already noted above, it is possible that there are tensions between logical attempts to identify clear and universal criteria for the difference between formal and informal learning, and empirical evidence of the nature of learning in practice. Where the attempts to develop such classifications are based on empirical evidence, this is most commonly focussed on learning outside

educational institutions. The results are descriptions of the complex and relational nature of such learning, and the inappropriateness of characteristics defined as belonging to formal learning. In our view, such accounts are much more convincing in their analyses of learning outside education than within it.

In one such workplace study, Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2004) attempted to test out a classification of learning as consisting of distinctly different types against empirical evidence in a study of schoolteachers' learning in the workplace. They adopted their own classification for this purpose, producing a typology of learning, which contained six cells. They argued that one of these six, 'the intentional and planned learning of something which is already known', covered most if not all of what was commonly described as formal learning. Their data and analysis produced two conclusions. Firstly, they identified significant elements of such formal learning in the workplace, thus supporting a major part of Billett's (2002) argument with which we opened this chapter. Secondly, they found that the attempt to separate out distinct types of learning made no sense in relation to the workplace practices of the schoolteachers they had studied. Rather, these supposedly different types of learning blended and co-existed in practice, thus providing evidence to support the conclusions of Colley et al. (2003).

In this chapter, we draw upon empirical evidence to examine whether or not it is possible to identify two clear types of learning within educational settings, or whether the approach of Colley et al (2003) makes more sense. To do this, we analyse learning in three contrasting settings, all of which are part of the English Further Education (FE)

system. FE is complex, and has few if any clear equivalents in other countries. Rather than having a clearly identifiable educational role, FE has traditionally filled any gaps between school or higher education provision in England, whilst also over-lapping considerably with both. Thus, although most FE students are over the compulsory school-leaving age of 16, some 14 year olds are taught, in partnership arrangements with schools, and schools themselves offer considerable provision for 16 to 19 year olds. Similarly, although the university sector controls and teaches most higher education in England, many FE colleges also run higher education courses, often in partnership with a university. FE courses may be vocational or academic, and students may be part-time or fulltime. They may be young people or older adults (See Hyland and Merrill (2003) for a fuller account of English FE). The very diversity of FE provision makes it an ideal location to examine formality and informality in learning. The analysis which follows was made possible because both authors are part of a major research project currently investigating learning in FE – the Transforming Learning Cultures in FE (TLC) project.

The TLC project is part of the Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC) Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) (grant number L139251025). It is a four-year longitudinal study that takes a cultural approach to learning in FE. We deliberately adopted a cultural perspective, because we believed teaching and learning, and the relationships between them, to be inherently complex and relational. To examine learning from this perspective, we focussed on 16 case study learning sites, divided between four partner FE colleges. The sites were selected through negotiation with the colleges, to illustrate the diversity of FE learning, whilst not claiming to be representative

of it. Changes since the project commenced extended the list to 17 sites. (See Hodkinson and James, 2003, for fuller project details). One key tutor in each site worked with us as part of the research team. Data were collected over a three year period, through: repeated semi-structured interviews with a sample of students and with the tutors; regular site observations and tutor shadowing; a repeated questionnaire survey of all students in each site; and diaries or log books kept by each participating tutor. We also interviewed some college managers. Here we focus on three contrasting sites, in order to explore the different ways in which attributes of formality and informality and the relationships between them influence the learning that takes place. One site is a vocational course, preparing mainly young women for employment in childcare. The second is a high status and intellectually demanding course teaching French as an academic discipline. The third focuses on young people defined as possessing ‘special educational needs’ – those with learning disabilities, and often possessing further physical and emotional difficulties. They study drama, in a course that focuses on an actual theatrical production. We begin with a detailed discussion of the childcare site to illustrate the issues in some depth, before presenting shorter descriptions of the other contrasting sites.

### **CACHE Diploma in Childcare**

Our first site focussed on the CACHE Diploma, the most common vocational education and training course in the UK for nursery nurses, a registered occupation of carers for children under the age of eight. Almost all of the students were young women 16 or 17

years old, reflecting the strong gender-stereotyping and relatively low status of this occupation. It was a two-year, full-time course divided almost equally between a taught course in the college and a series of work placements in nurseries and schools. (A fuller case study of the site is provided in Colley, 2003.)

Traditional classifications would lead us to assume that this site simply alternated periods of formal learning (lectures and tutorials in college) with informal learning (work experience). The college course clearly contained many attributes that are usually thought of as formal. It took place on the premises of an educational institution; registration for the course was strictly time-bound; the syllabus was externally determined by a national examining board; and there were summative assessments for all coursework, with a final written examination. The course was structured to meet the demands of various institutions: not only the college, but the examining board, the childcare profession, and the government, which legislates for and funds most of the activity. The tutor was charismatic, and forcefully directed the teaching and learning. Students had no choice regarding the content, pace or assessment procedures of the course, and largely believed that such choice would be inappropriate.

At the same time, the tutor and her students all perceived the course predominantly as a site of *practice*, which most people would regard as the context for informal learning. 'Theory' (the term used by students and tutors alike to refer to the formal, taught content) was seen as necessary, but subordinate to practical aptitude for childcare. The tutor was a former nursery nurse and manager, with a wealth of experience and insider knowledge of

the workplace which she brought into the classroom, and which students valued highly. This enabled her to carry out practical coaching sessions and to use group tutorials to draw out students' workplace experiences and link them to the formal assignments they must complete.

The curriculum of this course provided a particularly strong illustration of the difficulty of trying to separate out formal and informal learning. There was a highly specified curriculum prescribed by the national examining board, defining a range of knowledge and skills outcomes relating to a series of units on topics such as theories of child development, the health of young children, anti-discriminatory practice and child protection procedures. But observations and interviews revealed that the curriculum was much broader than this.

One unwritten (informal) aspect of the curriculum was that students must learn to bond emotionally with their personal tutor and others in their group. This was not specified in any official documentation, but was overt and explicit as a goal of the teaching team, and discussions about the degree to which each tutor group had 'gelled' were prominent in the staffroom. It also formed one of the clearest boundaries for inclusion and exclusion in the site. While tutors made strenuous efforts to retain and support students who were struggling with (or even failing) written work, those who were perceived to be disrupting a group's bonding were almost always eventually excluded. Most were subject to a subtle process of 'cooling out' by the tutor, and sometimes also by other students. Only in the final instance were they subject to formal disciplinary procedures.

A related but more hidden 'informal' element of the curriculum focused on becoming 'the right person for the job'. What counted as knowledge was not just that required to write essays or complete practical projects within the official curriculum. It also entailed knowing the right way to be and to behave as a nursery nurse, including the appropriate demeanour and values to express. Much of this learning was initiated by the tutor, in the ways that she presented herself as an expert practitioner, but little of it was formally planned. For example, the tutor made complimentary comments in class about a student's risqué item of clothing, then asked a pointed question about whether she would wear it to work placement. Similarly, the distinction between formal and informal assessment was blurred. During an assessment visit to one student on placement, the tutor wrote a report of her excellent progress, but also told her off for wearing a cropped T-shirt and 'showing acres of belly – not very nice for parents coming in'.

There is no such dress code in college, where students are allowed to dress as they please, and we have observed how each cohort began by wearing very fashionable and revealing clothes, lots of gilt jewellery, and flamboyant make-up and hairstyles. But over the course of the first year, the majority soon came to adopt an informal uniform of sombre or pastel-coloured sweatshirts, tracksuit bottoms and trainers, and neatly tied-back hair. While most people would view this process as highly informal, the more formal processes of teaching and assessment also contribute significantly to it.

In the written curriculum, explicit reasons relating to health and safety were given for certain dress rules. Beyond this, however, the prevailing occupational culture of childcare implicitly demands a demure appearance as evidence of moral propriety, since nursery nurses caring for other people's children are expected to be 'nice girls'. Reference to 'what parents will think' was a subtle code for enforcing these norms. While Eraut has argued that such matters as dress 'have little to do with learning, *per se*' (2000: 12), it is clear that they contributed to significant changes in students' understanding and capability – a key definition of learning for Eraut. Both the unwritten curriculum of emotional bonding, and the hidden curriculum of appearance as a signifier of moral suitability, suggest that learning in this site was far from exclusively cognitive, being deeply embodied.

This is further reflected in the way that students had to learn the requirements of emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983). In a group tutorial discussion soon after the start of the course, following the students' first few days in placement, there were many expressions of delight at being with children. But the session also revealed events described as far less pleasant: taking little boys to the toilet; finding oneself covered in children's 'puke' and 'wee'; and being hit by children. The tutor was at great pains to emphasise the correct behaviour students should display in these situations:

*Tutor:* Don't forget, you've got to stay cool and say, {*nonchalant tone*} 'Oh, that's not a very nice thing to do, is it?', and keep your own feelings under control.



Students learned that they had to limit their affection for small children and their enjoyment of play, and learn to be both engaged with and detached from their charges in order to take on a consciously developmental role:

*Student 1:* Well, like, you're taught you can't be all lovey-dovey with the children. You've got to be quite stern if they've done something wrong.

*Student 2:* That's what I've kind of learned, now... I teach, although I was playing with the children. If you went and just played with the kids and just not said `owt [something], like 'How many bricks are there?', they wouldn't really ever learn, would they? So you've just got to really think about it. Make `em count the bricks, and say how many bricks there are, and also play at the same time.

They also talked about the difficulties and stress of dealing with children's distress, aggression, or disobedience. This involved working on their own and the children's feelings to suppress extreme emotions and evoke calmer feelings.

*Student 3:* The morning group [*of children*] are still tired and maungy [*irritable*], and in the afternoon, they're giddy and hyper... I was so tired after a week working at nursery... I don't know if I could do it again.

*Student 4:* I asked one girl to go and get a book because we were waiting for story time. Well, she kicked up: 'I'm not getting a book! I'm not getting a book, I'm staying here!' So I took her into the cloakroom and I sat down with her, and by this point she was really, really hysterical, crying because she couldn't stay outside.

At first, this required conscious effort, repeated practice, and self-surveillance on the part of the students, in line with a gendered construction of female identity and selflessness which dominates the occupational culture of childcare.

*Student 4:* Children can wind you up! You'd say something to them, and then they're really, really cheeky. They've learned how to answer you back, so they're gonna do it. And they can wind you up, and suppose you've got a short temper? But saying that, I've got a short temper, but I don't let them try it.

*Student 5:* Sometimes I shout at the children, but that's just me... `Cause the nursery nurses don't always raise their voice as much as I do. I could probably just tone it down a little bit, still try and realise when I'm speaking loudly, try and quieten it down.

Some students were unable to sustain this emotional labour, and left the course early. But those who completed the course felt they were able to display a new-found patience and equanimity not only in the workplace, but also among fellow students at college and

with their own siblings or children at home. They explained that they felt like ‘a different person’: they had ‘become nursery nurses’. Their learning had involved a complex interaction of aspects which cannot coherently be separated as either formal or informal, and both college- and work-based elements seem to share the characteristics of organic, contextualised and experiential learning that Beckett and Hager (2002) ascribe to informal learning. Their qualification as nursery nurses not only entailed passing coursework assignments, placement assessments and the final examination. It also meant taking on a new identity and a different repertoire of emotions.

### **AS Level French**

AS Levels are traditional academic courses at advanced level, assessed by terminal examinations, and usually taken in preparation for entry to higher education. The majority of AS students either stay on at school sixth form or attend specialist sixth form colleges, rather than going into FE. Modern Foreign Languages are regarded, along with Physics and Mathematics, as the most difficult AS subjects. Since AS French requires a good command of the written and spoken language, as well as a detailed knowledge of culture and history in the French-speaking world and a study of French literature, it might be easy to assume that this would be the most formal and cerebral of our learning sites. Indeed, the students we interviewed claimed to enjoy the high status and intellectual challenge of the course.

However, their experience seemed far from disembodied or passive. They also seemed to relish aspects of speaking French as a kind of ‘performance’. On the one hand it involved a strong element of risk, since mistakes in speaking French in front of a group of peers could be potentially humiliating. On the other hand, success brought with it a powerful thrill of excitement, and the ability to communicate in a foreign language made them feel special and distinct from those many British people who cannot. This in turn is connected with a desire to experience the exotic ‘elsewhere’ promised by mastery of a foreign language and understanding of a foreign culture. As one student enthused, ‘It’s like the study of France - *in French!* ... It’s more than just being able to speak French, really, isn’t it? Like, it’s a bit of knowledge in there as well’.

These emotions were a strong feature of participating in the course, since the tutor had a deep ideological commitment to conducting lessons predominantly in French. Her preference was to eschew didactic, teacher-controlled approaches, and to negotiate students’ democratic involvement in self- and peer-conducted diagnosis and assessment. Using the target language as much as possible served her more fundamental aims of creating an inclusive and motivating experience for all her students. But this approach was also dependent on her intuitive understanding of students’ degree of comprehension, her sensitive responses to their difficulties, and her ability to nurture a supportive culture within the group. Both these aspects of her pedagogy, which had little to do with technical aspects of teaching, allowed students to take the risk of performing as French speakers in a relatively safe environment. This suggests the authenticity that underlies the ‘performance’ in this site: content, context and activities may not cohere with the actual

experience of *living* in France, but they do seem to cohere with the task of studying AS Level French.

Students' (informal) intentions can also conflict with official (formal) purposes for such a course. For many, the decision to study academic courses in FE – rather than in a school or sixth form college – reflects their rebellion against the stricter disciplinary régime of more traditional academic institutions. In contrast with their tutor's aim of encouraging them to achieve their full potential in the subject, and government targets that focus on high levels of attendance, retention and attainment, some students wanted to minimise the importance of education in their wider lives. Their purposes were to be simply happy, to have a rest from being pressured about achievement, and therefore to do just enough studying to 'get by'. Such students not only showed resistance to official indicators of success, frequently missing lectures and failing to complete homework. They also resisted the tutor's inclusive attempts to develop a rapport with them, which she hoped would enable her to understand obstacles to their learning and engage them more effectively.

### **Entry Level Drama**

Our final site catered for students aged between 16 and 23, regarded as having moderate to severe learning disabilities, studying drama on a one-year full-time course. The site was characterised by a synergy between two forms of practice and identity. The first was

preparing for and performing in a dramatic production. The tutor (as ‘company director’) determined the nature of the play and the day to day tasks and activities. Other externally determined objectives, such as learning basic numeracy and literacy skills, were tied in to this overall dramatic production. Unlike AS French, performance was the official, formal, purpose of the course. The course had two explicit educational goals: to learn drama and to learn skills that would increase employability. Even when this form of the learning is considered in isolation, attributes of both formality and informality were inter-related. More formal attributes included teacher direction, fixed one year time frame, externally set objectives, and assessment and qualification (through a portfolio-based scheme). Informal attributes included the experience-based holistic engagement of the students, in the play itself and in a series of practical exercises and activities. Students were pleased to be actors, and to be part of a production. This became a (temporary) part of their identities.

The second form of practice and identity was that of a ‘second family’. The students actively constructed this by treating tutors as surrogate parents, who were pressured to sort out any difficulties, problems or arguments. The tutors took on a much more protective, caring pastoral role for these students than for others, including, for example, supervising them at lunch time, when the students went to the canteen, but did not mix outside their own group. The students’ growing self-confidence and ability in areas such as interpersonal communication were bounded by this family context. They learned how to behave in this setting, with these particular fellow students (siblings) and these particular tutors (parents).

The family and the theatre company were completely integrated. Both were structured by and themselves structure the isolation of the group, in one mobile classroom. Students were there all the time, some tutors came and went, but the teaching team was small. This was home and rehearsal room. This combination co-constructed a hidden curriculum of increasing dependency and safety, with minimal risk or challenge. The family identity constrained and tamed the theatre company, and the tutors made more allowances for these students than for those on other drama courses. Formal assessment was relatively painless, with no externally set high performance thresholds to increase anxiety and the risk of failure. The final production was only for parents and close friends, and in one year not even parents were invited, as the tutor felt that to have an audience would be too demanding for some students (the family) and risk an unpolished performance (the theatre company). Despite the rhetoric of learning for employability, the students progressed onto other similar Entry Level courses. There they entered a new second family, with a different formal academic focus. Thus, the implicit and hidden purpose of the course could be described as warehousing with productive engagement.

### **Moving Beyond Formality and Informality**

These analyses, which could be repeated for any of the other sites covered by the TLC research, demonstrate two things. Firstly, as our earlier analysis predicts, there is as much informal as formal learning within educational institutions. Secondly, though it is

possible to use the labels formal and informal to describe aspects of the learning, in makes no sense to see two significantly different types of learning, running, as it were, in parallel with each other.

As we constructed these site accounts, we found it increasingly difficult to attribute formal and informal as labels for learning at all. The issue of students' dress and appearance in the CACHE site is a good illustration of the problem. In contrast with the written and prescribed elements of the course curriculum, the students' adoption of modest yet casual clothing appears to be a highly informal process. However, formality can also be defined as conformity to tacit social codes. Compliance with such conventions is an essential part of the cultural capital required to succeed as a nursery nurse, although it remains both unwritten and hidden in the curriculum. Moreover, on entering a nursery school setting, it is immediately apparent who is the professionally-qualified teacher in charge (wearing perhaps a smart jacket, skirt and blouse) and who is the subordinate nursery nurse (clad in her pastel tracksuit). Such workplace conventions often become so taken-for-granted that they are barely visible to the familiarised eye. But as Billett (2002) and Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) argue, they express and reproduce aspects of social structures, as well as organisational power and status, that are, at root, deeply formal.

Put differently, the problem is that the labelling of learning as formal or informal is not a technical matter. These terms do not correspond to independently verifiable characteristics of learning. Rather, they construct the ways in which we understand that



learning. These constructions (Colley et al, 2003, report far too much variability for the use of the singular noun) are politically situated, through movements of emancipatory pedagogy or through employability and social inclusion agendas of governments and the European Commission (2001). Like all such conceptual constructions, the language of formal and informal learning enable some things, whilst preventing others. Thus, the growing literature about informality has raised the profile of learning outside educational institutions, helped differentiate progressive pedagogies from more conservative versions, and contributed to the provision of a theoretical alternative to what Beckett and Hager (2002) term the ‘standard paradigm’ of learning. However, our research and analysis reveal an equally formidable list of problems and costs. Thus, such conceptualisations seriously over-simplify to the point of misrepresenting the nature of learning in educational settings, and deflect attention away from the effective uses of more ‘formal’ learning in workplace settings. The risks then are that deliberate pedagogy and off the job training are neglected within workplace contexts, and that the hidden curriculum and participatory nature of learning in education is overlooked, leaving a technically-rational view of learning as the acquisition of known content reinforced or, at best, left unchallenged. Put bluntly, arguments about the nature of formal and informal learning may have outlived their useful purpose.

However, the TLC research confirms the significance of what have often been conventionally termed ‘informal’ processes in educational settings. It also shows that such informal processes sometimes reinforce learning that can be considered as ‘formal’, as is arguably the case in all three examples described above. That is, learning in

educational settings is not inherently less authentic than everyday learning, in the sense that Brown et al. (1989) use the term.

We require, therefore, different language for conceptualising learning that avoids this troubling and artificial dichotomy. In French, the term '*formation*' describes the alliance of formal and experiential learning that gives shape to an adult life' (Dominicé, 2000, p11). In English, the problem is more difficult, and no such existing term is readily available. One way forward, which is supported by our analysis and the TLC data, is to understand learning in educational settings from within a participation metaphor (Sfard, 1998). In understanding such learning, what matters is that a multi-faceted, relational and cultural view of learning is adopted (Hodkinson et al, 2004). Within such an analysis, many facets of learning to which the labels of formal and informal could be attributed will be significant, but those attributions, together with the conceptual baggage and history that they entail, can be abandoned. We can then see the three cases presented in this chapter as examples of complex cultural learning practices, within which students and tutors participate, and which their participation helps (re)construct. What matters then is not that all three are part of some unifying category of 'formal courses', but that, as Billett (2002, p57) argues in the quotation with which we opened the chapter, within these and other sites, 'Learning ... can be understood through a consideration of their respective participatory practices'.

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