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John Field and Alan Tuckett

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Contents

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The combination of population ageing, technological change, globalisation and increased international competition at work, alongside evidence of wider benefits to health and well-being, is stimulating interest in promoting learning throughout adult life. While much of the focus is on skills acquisition and workplace learning, there is also growing attention to informal learning in communities and homes, and in the ways that skills developed in these settings can be transferred across contexts.

Much debate has focused on terminology and definitions. This is hardly surprising: 'community' is notoriously hard to pin down, and it has become harder to produce a precise definition of 'family'. Adult education researchers do not always specify what they mean by 'community', and to some extent the division between community and provider can be an artificial one. Madhu Singh of the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning defines informal learning as 'learning that occurs in daily life, in the family, in the workplace, in communities and through the interests and activities of individuals'. She contrasts it with formal learning, which takes place in institutions and is structured to their requirements, while non-formal learning is provided in non-educational settings (Singh 2015, 20).

A review of debates around informal, formal and non-formal learning concluded that 'it is not possible to clearly define separate ideal-types of formal and informal learning, which bear any relation to actual learning experiences' (Hodkinson, Colley and Malcolm 2003), and a EUROSTAT review reported a 'lack of conceptual work' on the topic (EUROSTAT 2006, 6). Pragmatically, many researchers would agree with Marsick and Watkins (2014), who argue that the two modes should be understood as distinct but complementary.

Most discussions of informal learning start with Tough, who estimated that over two-thirds of adults' intentional learning efforts occurred outside formal educational or training settings (Tough 1971). Sargant's UK study estimated that one in six people were trying to learn something informally – at home, at work, or elsewhere (1991). A UK survey covering 1994-97 found that 57% of all adults undertook some form of non-taught learning during this period (Beinart and Smith, 1998). A follow-up survey found that the participation rate in non-taught learning over the entire 4.5 year period increased to 65% (LaValle and Finch, 1999), falling back thereafter, which may or may not be associated with reductions in public adult education (BIS 2012). Qualitative research suggests that informal learning activities involving self-study and the pursuit of hobbies and interests are particularly important for older adults (Withnall 2009).

This body of research focuses mainly on intentional learning. Incidental learning, defined as 'a by-product of some other activity' (Marsick and Watkins 2001), is little studied outside of the workplace, and remains poorly understood.

General-purpose surveys rarely provide good measures of informal learning (Jenkins 2011). In one paper, Jenkins and Mostafa use 'informal learning' to cover participation in organised courses that does not lead to a qualification (Jenkins and Mostafa 2013). A study of informal learning currently being undertaken by the Leibniz-Zentrum für Lebenslanges Lernen using the National Education Panel Survey will use book-reading as an indicator of informal learning at home; this is a rather rough and ready proxy measure, if easily measured.

A small number of surveys aim specifically to examine informal learning. Livingstone, the architect of a major Canadian survey, distinguished 'informal education', which takes place in incidental or spontaneous settings and is guided by a mentor or teacher, from 'self-directed or collective informal learning', which embraces 'forms of intentional or tacit learning in which we engage either individually or collectively without direct reliance on a teacher or an externally-organized curriculum' (Livingstone 2001). He also distinguished learning related to the home from that associated with community activity. Using telephone interviews, Livingstone reported that 95% of those interviewed were involved in some form of explicit informal learning activities that they considered significant. On average, respondents devoted approximately 15 hours per week to informal learning (against an average of approximately 4 hours to organized courses), but this figure masked considerable variation.

The most commonly cited subjects were: computer skills related to employment, communications skills through voluntary community volunteer work/home renovations and cooking skills in household work, and general interest learning about health issues (Livingstone). Household-based learning in this survey mostly comprised skills and knowledge that have limited value in other contexts, such as home renovations, gardening and cookery; but they also included child or elder care (44%). Those involved in organized community work over the previous year (over 40%) devoted some 4 hours a week on average to community-related informal learning; the most popular topics concerned skills that have potential value in workplaces, such as interpersonal skills (62%), communication skills (58%), and organisational/managerial skills (43%) (Livingstone 2001).

Findings from a representative UK survey suggest that informal learning (self-taught) declined in tandem with non-formal (non-credit) learning (BIS 2012), so it is in principle possible that the two are inter-dependent. Whether the growth of self-help models of adult learning (eg U3A, reading groups, sports clubs, Men's Sheds, the proliferating market for self-help texts) compensates for the absence of formal provision is more debateable, partly because self-help approaches appeal mainly to the already well-educated (Jun 2014), partly because the aims and outcomes may not align with public policy. There is also a marked asymmetry in the use of self-help reading, with very high levels among the best-educated; there is also a clear gender dimension to the ways that men and women use such literature (McLean and Kapell 2015). We know that broadcasting can influence informal learning; the numbers who bake at home rose rapidly following the launch of The Great British Bake Off (first aired 2010), and a sharp rise in the number of baking titles (books and magazines).

The benefits of family learning are reasonably well established, and are reviewed in the report of the NIACE Family Learning Inquiry (NIACE 2013, 20-24). A recent UK evaluation of family literacy schemes identified a positive effect on Key Stage 1 reading scores, and further

suggested that participating parents subsequently undertook a greater number of reading activities with their children, as well showing greater understanding of school literacy (Swain et al 2015). There is some evidence that the benefits may endure throughout adult life (Heckman 2000; Cunha and Heckman 2007). A study of adults in nine European countries who showed that after controlling for other factors, those who at age 10 lived in households with many books enjoyed substantially higher returns to their additional education through their adult lives (Brunello, Weber and Weiss 2016); the presence of books, though, is a weak proxy for informal family learning.

Relatively few rigorous studies have examined the relative merits of different types of intervention. An early US study found that family reading interventions improved parents' literacy as well as their retention rates on literacy programmes (Nickse, Speicher and Buchek 1988). A UK study, examining an intervention which combined behaviour change with literacy training for parents, reported a significant effect of the intervention on children's word reading and writing skills, as well as parents' use of reading strategies with their children (Sylva et al 2007). These findings were echoed in a review of existing studies (Swain et al 2015). An American study reported that interventions which focus solely on immediate cognitive gains produce fewer long term effects than those with a broader focus (Heckman et al 2009). A review of qualitative work suggested that the location of learning can be more important than its subject, with informal learning generated by local people themselves fostering wider community involvement, and learning arranged by education providers raising rates of educational progression (McGivney 1999).

As with participation in formal learning, participation in informal learning is asymmetrically distributed across the population. Livingstone reported that the proportion involved in informal learning was positively associated with prior educational attainment, though differences between groups were far smaller than for participation in formal adult learning. The differences were even smaller for different age groups, suggesting that unlike formal learning, age presents no barrier to informal learning in home and community (Livingstone 2001). There is, though, a gender dimension (Sargant 1991) and a marked socio-economic gap - including a disproportionate number who are already highly educated (BIS 2014a). The latter may be associated with the differing nature of social ties in different communities, as would be consistent with social capital theory (Field 2005). Evaluations of the Community Learning Trust pilots have identified a number of strategies for balancing participation fairly (BIS 2014b).

Most research into the transfer of informal learning into other contexts has focused on workplace learning (Eraut 2004, Enos et al 2003). However, there is considerable policy interest in the validation of learning acquired outside formal educational settings, with much of the impetus coming from international bodies such as the World Bank, UNESCO, European Commission and OECD. Werquin suggests that much policy enthusiasm for recognising informal learning is based on 'the questionable belief that the validation of such learning outcomes is free' (Werquin in Harring, Witte and Burger 2016, 40). Be that as it may, there have been large numbers of small scale projects as well as national systems for credit recognition, but there is relatively little empirical evaluation of the results. CEDEFOP maintains a European inventory on the validation of informal and nonformal learning, and the Observatory on Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning (Observal) also maintains an accessible

database. NIACE (now the Learning and Work Institute) is one of a number of bodies who have produced toolkits to support recognition of learning. Over 70% of respondents in Livingstone's survey declared interest in the assessment and recognition of informal learning, with support being relatively even across all groups but highest among the unemployed. Particularly important in the light of rapid growth in open online learning is the development of 'digital badging' as a way of recognising informal online learning; again, though, this is still in an experimental stage (Law 2016).

Policy issues

Assuming that the main challenge for policy is to increase both the overall volume and the benefits (for the community as well as individuals), then a number of areas are worth exploring. These include:

- **Research.** In contrast to workplace learning, there has to date been limited research into informal learning in the family and community, and much of what there has been is small scale in nature, and is published in different and largely separate disciplinary fields. This makes it impossible to be confident about the success of potential interventions and their wider outcomes, or to judge the claims made on behalf of national and transnational credit frameworks. However, some studies are currently under way, including a BIS partnership with 60 local authorities in England to examine whether short, part-time community learning courses help people develop strategies to manage their mild to moderate mental health problems.

- **Family learning.** There is good evidence that direct interventions to support family learning can produce desirable results, both for children and for parents. Parents usually participate out of interest in their children's school performance, and open programmes will therefore tend to recruit those who are already well-placed and motivated to encourage informal learning in the family. Relatively short term 'taster' events for families, as well as longer term courses, can if targeted effectively engage those who are at most risk of falling behind in key skills, including literacy, numeracy and IT skills. There is abundant scope for mobilising new technologies (particularly social media, apps and mobile devices) to support family learning. The characteristics of good practice in family learning have been identified by OFSTED, and summarised by NIACE (NIACE 2014, 35-6). In addition, more can be done to raise awareness among relevant professionals (museums, libraries, social services, sports clubs, outdoor facilities, and above all schools staff) of the effectiveness and benefits of family learning.

- **Community learning.** Although there is a reasonably strong consensus on how to engage new learners and build bridges into formal learning, the wider evidence base is incomplete. For engaging new learners, professional experience and independent research are agreed that local face-to-face contact works well, as do interventions through intermediary bodies with strong local roots. Recent innovations have provided an indicative basis: the Take Part pathfinders, which built on earlier experiences of promoting active citizenship through adult learning, demonstrated how to expand the range of those contributing to their communities (Miller and Hatamian 2011); Men's

Sheds in Ireland and Australia are proving a particularly promising way of engaging non-participant men (Cordier and Wilson 2014); intergenerational learning interventions produce benefits for both grandparents and grandchildren (Boström 2014); and the lessons from MOOCs can be applied in community settings (including those dealing with the oldest adults (Hasan and Linger 2016)). Education Scotland has developed expertise in assessing and improving the quality of community learning which includes progression from informal learning. Broadcasters can influence informal learning in the home and community.

- **Validation and accreditation.** Validation of informal learning can help counter disadvantage and smooth pathways to vocational and educational progression. Policy can help promote the take-up of validation processes by raising awareness of their availability and benefits, However, there are two reasons for caution. First, these processes tend to be resource-intensive: compared with the assessment of formal learning, validating informal learning shows few economies of scale; further, as Werquin notes, the labour market value of qualifications based on informal learning is uncertain, for individuals as well as employers (Werquin 2011, 86-7). Second, while there is growing experience of recognising and validating informal learning, there so far is little research-based evaluation on the outcomes of the various mechanisms and frameworks that now exist. This may change with the high level of research attention now being paid to MOOCs, particularly as recent developments in digital assessment start to bed down (Witthaus et al 2016). While these experiences have focussed to date chiefly on higher education and work-based learning, it should not be difficult to review existing research on digital assessment and draw out implications for community and family based informal learning. Rigorous studies of the ways that informal learning is handled in national credit frameworks, on the other hand, are in short supply; improving the knowledge basis in this respect is therefore potentially an important contribution.

- **Partnerships.** Informal learning takes place mainly outside formal educational settings, and interventions designed to promote it or improve its quality and outcomes must therefore seek partnerships with those who manage these settings. This idea is well established in public policies for work-related learning, and it is of course widely shared in respect of family and community learning by adult education professionals. Obvious partners include libraries, museums, sports associations, faith groups, social services departments, health providers and voluntary bodies of various kinds. A relatively new challenge is to mobilise the resources of open online learning through a range of partnerships that can reach out to the least engaged.

- **Self-help learning groups.** Grounds exist for thinking that participation in self-help forms of learning is growing. Some organisations, such as the U3A movement, are relatively large and well-established; others, such as the men's sheds movement, are comparatively new and are still untested. From a public policy perspective, there could be two risks: first, such organisations exist to serve their members, and any contribution to public policy goals is a by-product of their primary purpose; second, it is effectively

impossible to guarantee that teaching and learning meet government's expectations of quality standards. Given that these organisations will continue in their activities anyway, interventions should be designed to help promote higher quality learning, and raise awareness of more formal opportunities for those who wish to take their learning further.

- **Maximising returns on public investment across departmental boundaries.** The NIACE Inquiry into Lifelong Learning commissioned a number of studies that built on earlier research into the wider benefits of adult learning. The OECD has similarly reviewed research on the economic and non-economic benefits of adult learning. NIACE and others have subsequently sought to develop tools for measuring the social returns on investment in adult learning. However, while researchers and practitioners alike can provide abundant evidence of the benefits of learning, the costs tend to lie with one set of public bodies (usually education departments) while the benefits may accrue to others, and in a departmentalised system of government this can block sustained policy movement. As the NIACE inquiry concluded, 'The 'system' is not sufficiently intelligent, i.e. it does not create and use information as well as it might in order to innovate and improve' (Schuller and Watson 2009). A strong focus on public value across departmental boundaries should help improve outcomes.

- **Equity dimensions.** Equity should be treated as a policy reminder that is considered across all interventions. Inequalities of social and cultural capital inevitably imply unequal outcomes from informal learning in the family and home. In considering how best to address the issue, the benefits of targeting have to be balanced against the risks of stigmatisation.

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