# What is informal education?

## So what is informal education? Here Tony Jeffs and Mark K Smith cut a path through some of the confusion around the area. They focus on informal education as a spontaneous process of helping people to learn. Informal education they suggest, works through conversation, and the exploration and enlargement of experience. It’s purpose is to cultivate communities, associations and relationships that make for human flourishing.

Some see informal education as the learning that goes on in daily life. As friends, for example, we may well encourage others to talk about things that have happened in their lives so that they can handle their feelings and to think about what to do next. As parents or carers we may show children how to write different words or tie their laces. As situations arise we respond.

Others may view informal education as the learning projects that we undertake for ourselves. We may take up fishing, for example, and then start reading around the subject, buying magazines and searching out other anglers (perhaps through joining an Angling Club).

Many view informal education as the learning that comes as part of being involved in youth and community organizations. In these settings there are specialist workers / educators whose job it is to encourage people to think about experiences and situations. Like friends or parents they may respond to what is going on but, as professionals, these workers are able to bring special insights and ways of working.

Informal education can be all of these things. However, here we focus on informal education as a spontaneous process of helping people to learn. It works through conversation, and the exploration and enlargement of experience. It’s purpose, we suggest, is to cultivate communities, associations and relationships that make for human flourishing.

***A definition***

Informal education is the wise, respectful and spontaneous process of cultivating learning. It works through conversation, and the exploration and enlargement of experience.

See, also, [what is education?](http://infed.org/mobi/what-is-education-a-definition-and-discussion/)

#### So what is informal education?

In the examples above we can see that whether we are parents or specialist educators, we teach. When we are engaged in learning projects we teach ourselves. In all of these roles we are also likely to talk and join in activities with others (children, young people and adults). Some of the time we work with a clear objective in mind – perhaps linked to some broader plan e.g. around the development of reading. At other times we may go with the flow – adding to the conversation when it seems right or picking up on an interest.

These ways of working all entail learning – but informal education tends to be unpredictable – we do not know where it might lead – and spontaneous.

##### ***Conversation***

Informal education, we argue, is driven by conversation and being with others. It develops through spending time with people – sharing in their lives – and listening and talking. Catherine Blyth has described conversation as ‘the spontaneous business of making connections’ (Blyth 2008: 4). It involves connecting with both ideas and other people. When we join in conversation it is often difficult to predict where it will lead. As such it can be a very powerful experience – ‘conversation changes the way you see the world, and even changes the world’ (Zeldin 1999: 3).

As well as talking and listening to others, we also have conversations with ourselves. We can watch ourselves as we go about our lives, as we talk and think. People ‘have, as it were, two internal voices, so they can both create new ideas and look at them, criticize and admire’ (Zeldin 1999: 57).

When we put conversation at the centre of education something very important happens. It is the exchanges and the thoughts they provoke that leads us – not some predetermined curriculum or plan. In conversation we, as educators, have to catch the moment where we can say or do something to deepen people’s thinking or to put themselves in touch with their feelings. For the most part, we do not have lesson plans to follow; we respond to situations, to experiences.

##### ***Spontaneity – exploring and enlarging experience***

‘Going with the flow’ opens up all sorts of possibilities for us as educators. On one hand we may not be prepared for what comes, on the other we may get into rewarding areas. There is the chance, for example, to connect with the questions, issues and feelings that are important to people, rather than what we think might be significant.

##### Picking our moment in the flow is also likely to take us into the world of people’s feelings, experiences and relationships. While all educators should attend to experience and encourage people to reflect, informal educators are thrown into this. As such they look to what lies at the heart of education. As John Dewey once wrote,the ‘business of education might be defined as an emancipation and enlargement of experience’ (1933: 340). Our task is to work with people so that they may have a greater understanding or appreciation of their experiences. Through coming to understand what might be going on people can begin to be ‘set free’ – not be dictated to by, or victims of, experience (Jeffs and Smith 2005: 58-9).

##### ***Anywhere, any time***

Such conversations and activities can take place anywhere and at any time. This contrasts with formal education which tends to take place in special settings such as schools. However, we should not get too tied up with the physical setting for the work. Formal education can also take place in almost any other location – such as teaching someone to add up while shopping in the market. Here it is the special sort of social setting we have to create that is important. We build an atmosphere or grab an opportunity, so that we may teach.

Obviously, informal educators work informally – but we also do more formal things. We spend time with people in everyday settings – but we also create opportunities for people to study experiences and questions in a more focused way. This could mean picking up on something that is said in a conversation and inviting those involved to take it further. For example, we may be drinking tea with a couple of women in a family or health centre who are asking questions about cervical cancer.

 We may suggest they look at some materials that we have and talk about they see. Alternatively, it could mean we set up a special session, or organize a course. We may also do some individual tutoring, for example, around reading and writing. Just as school teachers may work informally for part of their time, so informal educators may run classes or teach subjects. The difference between them lies in the emphasis they put on each.

So what is informal education? From what we have looked at so far we can say the following. Informal education:

* works through, and is driven by, conversation.
* is spontaneous and involves exploring and enlarging experience.
* can take place in any setting.

However, there is more – purpose.

#### … and the purpose of informal education?

At one level, the purpose of informal education is no different to any other form of education. In one situation we may focus on, say, healthy eating, in another family relationships. However, running through all this is a concern to build the sorts of communities and relationships in which people can be happy and fulfilled. John Dewey once described this as educating so that people may share in a common life. Those working as informal educators have a special contribution to make here.

A focus on conversation is central to building communities – and forms of cooperation that enhance the quality of social life (Sennett 2012: 273). The values and behaviours needed for conversation to take place are exactly what are required if neighbourliness, cooperation and democracy are to flourish. What is more, the sorts of groups informal educators such as youth and social action workers work with – voluntary, community-based, and often concerned with mutual aid – are the bedrock of democratic societies. They also places where friendship can flourish, support be given and recieved, interests deepened, and changes made. As Hemmings (2011: 280) has commented ‘remarkable things can happen when we come together in small groups’.

It comes as no surprise then, that those working as informal educators tend to emphasize certain values. These include commitments to:

* work for the well-being of all.
* respect the unique value and dignity of each human being.
* dialogue.
* equality and justice.
* democracy and the active involvement of people in the issues that affect their lives. (Jeffs and Smith 2005: 95-6)

As informal educators we have to spend a lot of time thinking about the values that run through our work. We do not have a curriculum or guiding plan for a lot of the work, so we have to consider how we should respond to situations. This involves going back to core values. Reflecting on these allows us to make judgements about what might best help people to share in a common life.

Why have specialist informal educators, what sets them apart?

As we have seen, everyone is an educator – but some people are recognized or appointed to teach and to foster learning. There are three main reasons why specialist informal educators may be needed. First, it may be that some situations demand a deeper understanding or wider range of skills than many of us develop in our day to day lives. Through reflection and training specialists can become sophisticated facilitators of groups and of conversations with individuals. They can also develop a certain wisdom about people and situations because of the opportunities they have. In many communities the role may be fulfilled and developed by ‘elders’ or by those who are recognized to be wise. In other situations, often linked to the development of capitalism, there has been an increased division of labour. Additional or alternative forms of learning and teaching are needed.

Second, it may be that people do not have the time to spend exchanging and learning with others in the ways they wish or need. Because of their situation, they may not have a chance to engage in the sorts of conversations they find fulfilling. Where we, for example, have to work some distance from home, deal with complex systems or have so much to do simply to get by, the amount of time we can spend in open talk can shrink. In addition, we may choose not to spend time in conversation or doing things with others. With our increased use of different (and often individualized) entertainment media such as television, the amount of time we spend directly engaging with others may well be lessened.

Third, a good deal of the work that informal educators engage in is with other professionals. For example, an informal educator working in a school will have to spend a lot of their time deepening and extending the understanding and orientation of teachers and other staff. With the pressure to produce results and to achieve good test scores, relationships and processes can be easily neglected. Furthermore, there can be a narrowing of educational focus. In these situations, while informal educators may be appointed to work with students, they have to encourage and educate staff so that the needs of students can be recognized and, hopefully, met. To do this informal educators will often need both to develop a detailed understanding of the situation, and (in that status-conscious world) have some sort of professional qualification.

Looking forward

So what sets informal educators apart? If we examine what they are doing, a number of characteristics emerge. They:

* place conversation at the centre of their activities.
* operate in a wide range of settings – often within the same day. These include centres, schools and colleges, streets and shopping malls, people’s homes, workplaces, and social, cultural and sporting settings.
* look to create or deepen situations where people can learn spontaneously, explore and enlarge experience, and make changes
* place a special emphasis on building just and democratic relationships and organizations that allow people to share in community.

We can also see that they:

* use a variety of methods including groupwork, casual conversation, play, activities, work with individuals and casework. While their work for much of the time is informal – they also make use of more formal approaches to facilitate learning.
* work with people of all ages although many will specialize around a special age range e.g. children, young people or with adults. In other words informal education is lifelong education.
* develop particular special interests such as in children’s play and development; community development and community action; literacy and basic education; advice; outdoor and adventure activities; arts and cultural work; and youth work.

Other educators may work in similar ways or share some of the same characteristics. What we are talking about as ‘informal education’ may well be described in Scotland as community education or community learning, in Germany as social pedagogy, and in France as animation. Similarly, informal educators’ concern for justice and democracy may well bring them close to popular educators in South America.

Here, then, is something of the promise of informal education. In daily life we all act as educators from time to time. But there is also a need for specialists – educators who are skilled in, and committed to, working with people in everyday situations so that life can be more fulfilling and all can share in its fruits.