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Informal learning: a discussion around defining and researching its breadth and importance

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Informal learning has often been seen as formal learning's 'poor cousin'. Our paper explores and discusses new and different ways of thinking about defining, valuing and researching the breadth and importance of informal learning in diverse national and cultural contexts. This includes a consideration of the power relations that can act to devalue informal learning. It is underpinned by a recognition that not only do a relatively small proportion of adults currently engage in formal learning, but those who do tend already to be dedicated and successful lifelong learners. It leads to a discussion about how informal learning might be framed as part of the solution to adult exclusion, seen to be aggravated by unnecessary adult educational hierarchies, accreditation, assessment and formality.

Introduction

Our paper proceeds from a brief review of definitions of informal learning to examine and focus on the conceptual terrain and power relations surrounding learning in/formality. At its core is a critical reflection and discussion of our role as researchers into informal learning. Our essential argument in this paper, using insights from other researchers and reflections from our own research, is about power relations and the central role power plays in the value and identity of both formal and informal learning (with an emphasis on the latter).

Power is a central concept in understanding the formations of social difference and inequity. Power is connected to meaning-making, social relations and the ways in which certain discourses gain hegemony, the formation of policy and the ways that certain identities are legitimated and privileged over others and valued across educational contexts (Burke & Jackson 2007). Power operates across all levels of social life – individually, institutionally, regionally and nationally. Identities are always tied to shifting power relations. For this purpose, we find Foucault's (1977) theory of power useful in understanding and conceptualising power as discursive. As educational researchers, we are interested in the way power is linked to wider structural inequities in education and what we see as adult educational hierarchies or power differences. We also recognise that, as researchers in the field of higher education, when we work at defining informal learning, we take up a complex and a contradictory position. While we provide evidence in our paper that academic and practical opportunities for informal learning through adult and community education (ACE) are shrinking in Australia, we highlight the need for greater acknowledgment of the value of informality in learning.

Defining and theorising informal learning

From the 1960s, Tough (1967, 1971) began working in Canada with the notion that adults can teach themselves, what he originally called self-teaching, and published as *Learning without a teacher: a study of tasks and assistance during adult self-teaching projects*. Basically, Tough showed that most adults set themselves projects to undertake and, as part of these projects, need to learn new things which they very often do without recourse to a teacher. This form of learning is both intentional and unintentional and occurs as a by-product of the project-orientated activities. His research into this idea spread over two decades as he sought evidence and began to theorise what became one of the most cited threads of informal learning.

Coming from a United Kingdom perspective, McGivney (1999: 1) in *Informal learning in the community*, determined that:

There is no single definition of informal learning. It is a broad and loose concept that incorporates very diverse kinds of learning, learning styles and learning arrangements. Informal learning can be unpremeditated, self-directed, intentional and planned. It can be initiated by individuals (for example in the home, in the workplace); it can be a collective process (arising from grassroots community action or social protest), or it can be initiated by outside agencies responding to perceived or expressed needs, interests or problems. These may include educational providers who wish to offer previously excluded groups learning experiences in their own environment.

Having acknowledged many different definitions, McGivney broadly defined informal learning for the purposes of her report as:

Learning that takes place outside a dedicated learning environment, which arises from the activities and interests of individuals or groups but which may not be recognized as learning (learning by doing, listening, observing, interacting with others, and so on). Non-course-based but intentional learning activities (which might include discussion, talks or

presentations, information advice and guidance) provided or facilitated in response to expressed interests and needs of people from a range of sectors and organisations (health, housing, social services, employment services, education and training services, guidance services) (McGivney 1999: 1–2).

The conceptual terrain around learning in/formality

Colley, Hodkinson and Malcolm (2002) provide a particularly rich and comprehensive analysis of the Anglophone literature of the conceptual terrain surrounding learning in/formality. It is important from the outset to acknowledge the impact of positivist and rationalist thinking (well before the recent debates about the value or otherwise of informality) that led to the valuing of formal, structured learning over what was perceived as common, simple or everyday informal learning. Formal learning, as Bernstein (1971) noted, opened up high status knowledge, particularly if it was located within schools or universities, and especially if it was seen to be propositional, accumulative and generalisable. Non-institutional learning, even if it was formal, tended to be overlooked or dismissed. Colley, Hodkinson and Malcolm (2002: 2) observe that very few authors feel the need to explicitly define the terms, nor view them as problematic.

Table 1 is drawn from the extensive literature review by Colley, Hodkinson and Malcolm (2002) which contrasts characteristics and features of both formal and informal learning. Many are presented as binary opposites.

Table 1: Possible ideal types of formal and informal learning (Colley, Hodkinson and Malcolm 2002, Table 7, pp.14–15)

Formal	Informal
Teacher as authority	No teacher involved
Educational premises	Non-education premises
Teacher control	Learner control
Planned and structured	Organic and evolving
Summative assessment/accreditation	No assessment
Externally determined objectives/outcomes	Internally determined objectives
Interests of powerful and dominant groups	Interests of oppressed groups
Open to all groups, according to published criteria	Preserves inequality and sponsorship
Propositional knowledge	Practical and process knowledge
High status	Low status
Education	Not education
Measured outcomes	Outcomes imprecise, unmeasurable
Learning predominantly individual	Learning predominantly communal
Learning to preserve status quo	Learning for resistance and empowerment
Pedagogy of transmission and control	Learner-centred, negotiated pedagogy
Learning mediated through agents of authority	Learning mediated through leader democracy
Fixed and mediated timeframe	Open-ended engagement
Learning is the main, explicit purpose	Learning is either of secondary significance or is implicit
Learning is applicable on a range of contexts	Learning is context specific

UNEVOC (2008) has gone further to distinguish informal learning from other forms of learning, namely formal and non-formal education as presented in Table 2.

Table 2: *An overview of different conceptions of formal, non-formal and informal, as applied to education and learning (UNEVOC 2008, Table 1: 6)*

	Formal education	Non-formal education	Informal learning
Green, Oketch & Preston (2004)	'organised' and "intentional" learning whose outcomes are accredited'	'results from organised activities within or outside the workplace which involve significant learning which is not accredited'	'that which occurs "unintentionally" or as a by-product of other activities OECD (2003). New classifications of learning activities are currently being developed for the EU Adult Education Survey and these will form a good companion to ISCED definitions for informal and non-formal learning, especially for the developed world.' (see below)
Tight (2002)	'Formal education is that provided by the education and training system set up or sponsored by the state for those express purposes' (Groombridge 1983: 6)	'any organised, systematic, educational activity, carried on outside the framework of the formal system, to provide selected types of learning to particular subgroups in the population, adults as well as children. Thus defined, non-formal education includes, for example, agricultural extension and farmer training programmes, adult literacy programmes, occupational skill training given outside the formal system, youth clubs with substantial educational purposes, and various community programmes of instruction in health, nutrition, family planning, cooperatives, and the like.' (Coombs & Ahmed 1974: 8)	'The life-long process by which every individual acquires and accumulates knowledge, skills, attitudes and insights from daily experiences and exposure to the environment – at home, at work, at play: from the example and attitudes of family and friends; from travel, reading newspapers and books; or by listening to the radio or viewing films or television. Generally, informal education is unorganised, unsystematic and even unintentional at times, yet it accounts for the great bulk of any person's total lifetime learning – including that of even a highly "schooled" person.' (Coombs & Ahmed 1974: 8)
		'education for which none of the learners is enrolled or registered' (OECD 1977: 11)	

	Formal education	Non-formal education	Informal learning
Eurostat (2004)	<p>'education provided in the system of schools, colleges, universities and other formal educational institutions that normally constitutes a continuous "ladder" of full-time education for children and young people, generally beginning at age of five to seven and continuing up to 20 or 25 years old. In some countries, the upper parts of this "ladder" are organised programmes of joint part-time employment and part-time participation in the regular school and university system: such programmes have come to be known as the "dual system" or equivalent terms in these countries.'</p>	<p>'any organised and sustained educational activities that do not correspond exactly to the above definition of formal education. Non-formal education may therefore take place both within and outside educational institutions, and cater to persons of all ages. Depending on country contexts, it may cover educational programmes to impart adult literacy, basic education for out of school children, life-skills, work-skills, and general culture. Non formal education programmes do not necessarily follow the "ladder" system, and may have a differing duration.'</p>	<p>'intentional, but it is less organized and less structured ... and may include for example learning events (activities) that occur in the family, in the workplace, and in the daily life of every person, on a self-directed, family-directed or socially directed basis.' As defined in the report of the Eurostat TF/ MLLL (paragraph 32, page 12). The UNESCO manual for statistics on non-formal education (page 6) reads:</p> <p><i>'Informal learning is generally intentional, but unorganised and unstructured learning events that occur in the family, the workplace, and in the daily life of every person, on a self-directed, family-directed or socially-directed basis.'</i></p>

Tables 1 and 2 suggest that formal, non-formal and informal learning can be characterised and differentiated from each other. Formal and informal learning in both tables are presented as polar opposites with non-formal learning taking up characteristics of the middle ground in the UNEVOC model. Of the four definitions of informal learning provided in Table 2, informal learning is regarded as unintentional, often occurring as a by-product of other social activities. It is a lifelong process, that is unorganised, unsystematic yet it accounts for a great bulk of any person's total lifelong learning. Faris (2005) in Duke, Osborne and Wilson (2005) reviewed studies in Canada and Australia and suggested that up to 70% of the learning that occurs in workplaces is of this nature (p.30). Informal learning occurs through all kinds of activities and in a wide range of social contexts such as families, workplaces, communities and leisure activities – through the daily lives of every person.

Analyzing the power relations around in/formality

One of the numerous traditions within adult education and adult learning can be characterised by its tendency to encourage adult learners to be analytical and critical about all things familiar and which tend to be taken for granted. This critical tradition asks learners to consider power relations as they are perceived or manifested within existing relationships and cultural practices. Freirean educators (Shor 1992) call for a remaking of the world yet, when it comes to informal learning, many of these educators join others across the adult education field in the uncritical acceptance of informal learning as unproblematic. Colley *et al.* (2002) explain that when the terms informal, non-formal and formal are added as qualifiers to the concept of learning they are often added without definition or explanation as to what they are understood to mean. Accordingly, the contested and blurred understandings of their meaning are ignored. These authors suggest that it is very useful (and indeed, necessary) for readers to see how different authors are

using these terms along with the conceptualisation of learning that they are utilising when they use these terms.

Hager and Halliday (2006) state they have never come across adult educators who have not been able to distinguish between the notions of formal and informal learning. For them and most others, the differences are clearly distinguishable and apparent. Billett (2002), for example, provides one of the exceptions in the literature, when he argues against the unquestioned acceptance of the terms formal and informal learning and their associated meanings which depict learning that occurs under the guidance of the teacher as the positive benchmark. Billett contrasts this against, and in opposition to, learning which occurs through the efforts of the learner. Or putting it more directly, when learning occurs through the self-direction of the learner or as part of an activity undertaken by the learner alone, this is described as 'informal' learning. Might 'natural' or 'everyday' be just as suitable as qualifiers for this learning?

Coffield (2000: 8) urges us to rethink how we think about informal learning:

Informal learning should no longer be regarded as an inferior form of learning whose main purpose is to act as the precursor of formal learning; it needs to be seen as fundamental, necessary and valuable in its own right, at times directly relevant to employment and at other times not relevant at all.

Coffield raises the point that sometimes informal learning will be seen as relevant and other times not so with regard to the social activities or practices where the learning arose. This is a crucial point. Hager and Halliday (2006) in their work on 'recovering the informal' explain that a key feature of informal learning is that it is indeterminate. They also suggest that informal learning tends to be opportunistic, ongoing. Where McGivney writes about the motivations that drive informal learning and its alignment with different forms of progression, these educators write about its alignment with external and internal goods.

A critical reflection on our role as researchers into informal learning

Having identified some of the power relations around analyses and definitions of learning in/formality, it is appropriate for us to take the advice of some of those cited above and to explicitly state our view of learning, so that readers can understand the way in which we think and use these terms in our research into adult and community education. We lean towards a Vygotskian-based, social constructivist perspective of adult learning (Kozulin 2003), that is, where some acceptance can be given to the fact that individuals learn in social situations, in particular places and contexts, making their own culturally negotiated meaning and understandings – where learners are always learning, through activities and guidances, though this can often be in indeterminate ways.

By way of an example, imagine a traveller, who arrives at a large railway station in a foreign land where there are several ways to ensure that they arrive at their final destination safely and efficiently. Three obvious strategies are that they can either ask someone who might know for some assistance, they could catch a taxi and anticipate that the driver would know or be able to find out, or they could obtain a map and use it to find their way on their own. All three strategies are about seeking and obtaining forms of guidance. Similarly, as part of learning to learn, it is the learner's role to develop and find ways of guiding their learning as required. The motivation for learning is important and needs to be taken up by the learner. A useful way of understanding some of these motivations is through McGivney's notion of progressions. She argues that learning is aided by connection to forms of progression. These she describes as being either individual, social, educational or economic forms of progression. Hager and Halliday (2006), working instead from a philosophical foundation, name these as external and internal goods.

In our academic role as Australian researchers of Australian adult and community education, we are part of both the solution and the

problem of formality. On the one hand, we share the concerns raised by Colley, Hodkinson and Malcolm (2002: 5) in the United Kingdom that '... changes to the funding regulations for education, and for adult education in particular, have imposed increasing degrees of formality on areas of informal learning'. In recent decades, state and federal government pressure in Australia for adult education to increasingly become user-pays, vocational and outcome-based has squeezed what Colley, Hodkinson and Malcolm (2002: 21) described as 'the 'politicized' and 'aspirational' strands of ACE' into an increasingly small envelope. In 2008, ACE as a discrete, state-supported sector characterised by its learner-centredness and informality is hanging by a very narrow thread, in the very few Australian states where we perceive that the thread has not already been severed.

On the other hand, as a contradiction, one of us (Golding) has assisted with a Victorian state project (A-Frame) to develop a mechanism to formally recognise and validate informal learning in ACE settings (ACFE 2002). Using the A-Frame as a template, ACFE (2008) recently moved to define all learning as either accredited or pre-accredited on the assumption that it

... assists teachers, learners and providers to think through what will be learned, for what reason and how teaching and learning will occur. Importantly it addresses the pathways and future options that flow from learners' achievement.

In part, this project is in recognition of alternate but not necessarily mutually exclusive pathways assisted by what McGivney calls 'progression', but in which she distinguishes different forms, namely economic, educational, personal and social. Recognition and acknowledgement of those skills and knowledge which others will financially reward, what McGivney describes as 'economic progression', is a most desirable outcome for many learners, especially male adult learners, though it is not the 'be all and end all' of adult learning. After all, this is just one of the reward systems

or progressions in play. While it is the one most supported by the interests of the neo-liberal state, others are possible. For starters, McGivney has identified three other forms of progression worth exploring beyond the economic and as mentioned above these are educational, personal and social.

We also recognise our contradictory roles as university-based researchers imposing formal research techniques and discourses in order to explore and formally report on the informality of adult education. While one of our recent research interests has been the informal learning potential of the embryonic and highly informal, Australian community men's shed movement (Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey & Gleeson 2007), we also see the potential for it to be colonised by a neo-liberal skills agenda which, with the support of data generated by our research, would push it towards more accreditation, evidence-based practice and formality.

We particularly acknowledge the contradictions inherent in this recent research into community-based men's sheds. That research intervention is far from benign in terms of its impact on what we perceive to be its current informality. Community-based sheds come close, on almost every 'ideal type' criteria in Colley, Hodgkinson and Malcolm (2002, see Table 1) as 'informal learning'. And yet our research (Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey & Gleeson 2007) presupposed learning in a postulated (but very loosely coupled) sector where learning is only one of many possible ways of framing, researching and measuring participant activity (the others including community contribution and development, happiness, masculinities, sociality, wellbeing and health). By subjecting participants to formal surveys and interviews presupposing learning in our community men's sheds' study, we have at best produced, and at worst manufactured, learning-related participation and outcome data. These data are now in the public domain and able to be used by governments to justify, support and regulate shed practice.

The positive side of this research has been through the assistance it has provided to those working in the field to use the evidence to support policy initiatives, networking and funding applications.

Discussion

Informal learning as food for thought

Over the course of adult life, serious social and political issues can rise to prominence in a sudden or abrupt manner. Issues of particular significance to this discussion include those that arise that people have not been fully aware of during their learning experiences at school. For many adults, such issues include sustainability, global warming and climate change. For those adults who completed their formal schooling some considerable time ago, understandings about these current and critically important issues are often reached or at least enhanced through informal learning in an out of school context. Such understandings can be developed through discussions and explanations given through the media, through reading newspapers, listening to the radio or through watching television programs.

In this context, many adult educators are familiar with the work of the cultural theorist Raymond Williams. Williams' cultural theories are considered to have had a profound impact upon the field of adult education (McIlroy & Westwood 1993). In particular, Williams argued that the media has the potential to be utilised in the service of a democratic and lifelong community education (Inglis 1995). Williams saw this as a participatory, everyday, ongoing and therefore a social and culturally relevant form of learning. However, it is also important in this context to recognise that current media manipulation by refined 'spin doctors' has made much public media (including media about adult education) suspect as a source of educational information without considerable critical appraisal.

To summarise our thinking and to round off this discussion, we have come up with what we regard as a useful, albeit value-laden,

analogy between learning and producing food. Formal learning is akin to large-scale food production where there is an emphasis on commercialism, standard labelling and accreditation, processing, quality assurance and packaging. Producers of both food (and learning) at this large-scale end are particularly concerned with efficiency, economies of scale, throughput and consumer satisfaction with a well-marketed product and with brands that are recognised by a range of institutional and government stakeholders.

By contrast, informal learning, like informal, backyard and community gardening, is more organic and 'home grown'. The emphasis is on small-scale production of diverse items for their own use, informal barter or exchange with personal, social and community spin-offs. There is more emphasis on the personal, hands-on, collaborative, activity-based joys (and difficulties) associated with the process of informal production and less emphasis on a standard product as an end in itself. The non-standard products of both informal learning and home gardening, without formal product accreditation, have limited currency as saleable items in the commercial marketplace but are recognised for their organic and holistic nature. Here, the power imbalance is also tipped toward the discourses of product, and economic value in line with neo-liberal economic values.

The analogy is useful in that, in both cases, what is produced formally and informally – learning and food – are superficially similar products. What differ are the processes, context, content and purposes associated with production. Each of these four factors also appears in Colley, Hodgkinson and Malcolm's (2002) typology of learning in/formality. We perceive an opportunity to take our analogy further than the act of production to suggest that the *value* of informality extends beyond the act of production in each case to the act and experience of consumption. Highly processed food and vegetables from the home garden have a different and unique

taste, shape, smell and feel. The rewards, feelings and outcomes from personally completing an accredited, fee-for-service course and treated as a client or student are likely to be qualitatively different from those of learning informally, being treated as an equal participant in a shared activity, being collaborative, being mentored or mentoring in a community setting.

Our fundamental argument is that informality in the context of education and particularly adult learning is currently undervalued in economic terms. In other words, it holds less value and is less powerful by locating it outside policy priorities, and therefore situating it as excluded and a less economically profitable counterpart to formal learning. It may be timely for policy to re-examine and revise the value of informal learning which, we would argue, is currently dis/identified through hegemonic discourses and policy contexts that constrain, devalue and reduce opportunities for different learning preferences, opportunities and possibilities to be presented to different learners.

The value of theorising and researching informal learning

Formal learning is widely researched in part because of its ease of definition and analysis, but also because it is the domain of educators, providers and sometimes government funding where efficiency and standardisation are seen to be important by institutional stakeholders. These stakeholders have relative degrees of state-sanctioned power that support them researching their work. In fact, to support such research is in part to work at exerting degrees of control, power and influence. The work that occurs in these institutions becomes aligned to a shared agenda of interests, and we would argue educational priorities. In fact, some who work in the adult and community education sector might argue that there is a requirement to share these economic interests and agendas or get out and make room for someone who will. Learners, too, are required to share the aligned interests by way of 'skilling up', arguably

taking up the policy-driven identity of formal learning through skills acquisition. It should be noted, however, that no regime of power is ever absolute and resistances occur, and that academic research is often the realm used to document (and therefore participate in) these power struggles.

The notion of resistance can be seen to support what Foucault (1988: 11) described as 'spaces of freedom' where 'changes can still be made' despite economic drivers. Weedon (1997) claims that individuals are both the site and the subject of a struggle for their social and political identities. In their resistance and struggle to remain informal, the value of informality in learning can speak back to the current neo-liberal discourses through re-fashioned discursive sites and informal educational practices. This resistance acts to legitimise informal learning through discourses that speak back (Foucault 1978) to neo-liberal reform through the value and legitimacy of informal learning spaces that can engage, invigorate and reconnect learners.

Our paper is therefore an attempt as researchers to acknowledge the power imbalance that exists in the educational policy discourses, devaluing and excluding informal learning, as well as to acknowledge informal learning where there is much that is positive and valuable to be encouraged and included. In an attempt to remove ourselves from the prescriptive and powerful roles as researchers, we go back and re-look at a previous paper (Foley, Golding & Brown 2008: 3) where we noted that one of 'the standard academic rules is that academics show their hand in theoretical terms when undertaking and reporting research'. As in this previous paper, we seek to identify ethnomethodology (in other words '[studies of] how people "do" social life': Holstein & Gubrium: 483–505) as one of several useful ways of researching learning, particularly informal learning, and a way of allowing 'spaces of freedom' (Foucault 1988: 11) where learners can speak back for themselves.

We recognise and practise what we regard as the value of mixed method research that uses a combination of both qualitative and quantitative methods (such as in the community men's sheds' research (Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey & Gleeson 2007, but also in Golding, Brown & Foley, in progress 2008, and Golding, Foley & Brown, in progress 2008). However, like Garfinkel, we deny that on its own 'the social scientific formulation of objectively rational courses of action under "given" conditions is a useful or even workable procedure for the empirical study of social action' (Heritage 1984: 33) that we take to include education, particularly learning, and especially informal learning. We regard ethnomethodology in particular, as elaborated by Garfinkel in his suite of research over more than 30 years from the 1950s (summarised in Heritage 1984), as having particular relevance and explanatory power over learning *as we value it*.

Garfinkel, as Heritage (1984: 34) summarised,

... rejected absolutely the view that the ordinary judgments of social actors can in any way be treated as irrelevant or epiphenomenal [a secondary effect or by-product that arises from, but does not causally influence, a process] in the analysis of social action or social organisation.

This so-called ethnomethodological perspective holds that there is a

... body of common-sense knowledge and [a] range of procedures and considerations by means of which the ordinary members of society make sense of, find their way about in, and act on the circumstances in which they find themselves (Heritage 1984: 4).

As we demonstrated in our learning-focused analysis of community-based men's sheds in Foley, Golding and Brown (2008), we recognise that diverse individuals and groups more broadly are able to make sense of and explain their learning and the benefits they experience and enjoy from participating in that learning in the least formal programs, contexts and settings.

As we observed in Foley, Golding and Brown (2008: 3), we also recognise the power of narrative:

Narrative research relates to interpretative qualitative studies, in which stories are used to describe human actions. Narrative inquiry enables narrators, in this case the men, to tell the stories of their lives and experiences. According to Chase (2005, p.658), the narrative approach can be used to highlight narrators' 'identity work', 'as they construct selves within specific institutional, organisational, discursive and local cultural contexts'.

We always optimistically hope and expect that some of the narratives we write and interpret, as in our community men's sheds and men's learning research, are accessible and useful to practitioners and positively influence policy and practice in a range of fields (research, education, training, health and wellbeing). If it were not so, we would not continue to do what we are doing.

We went one step further in Foley, Golding and Brown (2008: 3) to claim that informants who narrate, in this case the men with whom we spoke in the community men's sheds' research, were

... doing more than naively telling us their stories as shed participants without our intervention. Similarly, we are doing more than passively listening. The men we interview are also actively locating themselves in and responding in narrative to our own (sometimes different) theoretical presuppositions about what sheds are and what their function is. It is possible that we have accurately interpreted what the men would have spontaneously told us about health, friendship and community in the shed. It is also possible that we have, through our three different academic interests and presuppositions, in effect created and selected sheds, interviewees and narratives that suit our individual purposes and that match our presuppositions.

Conclusion

Our conclusion from this extended discussion is that we tend, as academics, to choose theories of learning consistent with our value positions regardless of whether we are teaching or researching in formal or informal contexts. This conclusion is consistent with Colley, Hodkinson and Malcolm's (2003: 6) findings that all learning situations contain elements of in/formality that are interrelated in different ways in different learning situations.

These attributes and their interrelationships influence the nature and effectiveness of learning in any situation ... [and] can only be properly understood if learning is examined in relation to the wider contexts in which it takes place.

We similarly conclude that the task of policy and practice, and we would add research, is '... not to see informal and formal attributes as somehow separate ... and the task being to integrate or hybridize them' (p.5). Both 'informal and formal attributes are present and interrelated whether we will it so or not' (p.5). Given Colley, Hodkinson and Malcolm's (2003: 5) conclusion that 'in principle, any theory of learning can be used in any setting', we conclude that since we tend to place considerable value on the informal, we are inclined to place more purchase on 'theories which take a broad view of learning as social practice ... than those more centrally focused on individual development / cognition, or the acquisition of knowledge'. This conclusion aligns with the findings of Hager and Halliday (2006) that informal learning is particular and unique. They provide examples of how this occurs through leisure activities and continuing, work-related learning, particularly through survival when unemployed. For us, this points to areas for further, future research. We recognise and argue that informal learning can be located in particular times, places, communities, relationships and situations. Like Hager and Halliday (2006), we concur that informal learning is indeterminate, opportunistic and ongoing, and that it is fostered by alignment to external and internal goods.

We finally contend that there is a power differential that works to create a systemic devaluing of the least formal, informal and hierarchical education systems and sectors (and valuing/promotion of the most formally literate). This power imbalance is regarded as normal and desirable by most stakeholders and is legitimised through neo-liberal educational discourses such as standards, standardisation and accountability that permeate the educational structures in the contemporary Australian education system. We contend that the very nature of informal learning, particularly its unstructured and organic quality, works to dis-empower a range of adult stakeholders and diminish its value as a meaningful educational pursuit in a system that values highly structured, systematised, outcome-driven approaches to young people's learning. For all of these reasons, we regard formal and serious research into adult and community education as critically important.

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About the authors

Dr Barry Golding is an experienced Australian researcher in adult, vocational and community education with a specialisation in learner-centred, field-based research into equity and access. His growing research interest in men's learning has led to him facilitating an ongoing, collaborative, international research project investigating men's informal learning in community contexts.

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Dr Annette Foley is a lecturer and course coordinator in the School of Education at the University of Ballarat. Annette has worked across the TAFE, higher education, adult community education and private training sectors for over 25 years. Throughout her career, she has developed a strong research interest in the changing nature of VET/ACE policy and practice, and in community and informal learning and its links to health and well being.

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