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What is informal education?

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As informal educators we can find ourselves involved in various projects and activities.

Our job title may be youth and community worker, project worker, detached worker or drugs/alcohol worker, the list goes on. As for activities, these may include residentials, music groups, art, sport, discussion groups or one-to-one work.

Although our job titles and our tasks within the organisation we choose to work in may look different, our overall aim stays the same: *education*. All these projects and activities not only provide opportunities for us, and children, young people, or adults, to learn, but also an opportunity for us to reflect on and develop our practice. In this chapter we look at this central aim and at the different opportunities which our work as informal educators provides.

Firstly though, what is informal education? It seems far easier to define our work as informal educators by saying what it is not, rather than what it is. If we were a sculptor working on a block of stone, we would chip away the pieces we did not want, in order to make the statue that we have in our mind. As informal educators, we can often be seen doing something similar when we try to define our work: we choose the pieces that we think are important to our work, and chip away the others which for us are not so important. This creates difficulties when trying to define our work to others, because what is important for one worker may not be for another. Some of the pieces that get chipped away may include working as schoolteachers, social workers, probation officers, sports instructors or counsellors. We could go on defining our work by what we are not, but what we need to do is to look more directly at what informal education is and can be.

In this chapter, we will try to do just that. We will explore some of the characteristics of informal education and draw out some of the main themes that relate to our work, using examples of work with young people. This will hopefully create some discussion, and encourage us to think about ourselves as informal educators.

To start us off, we will explore what it means to be informal and work informally with young people.

What makes our work informal?

What is it that we do as workers that allows us to say we are 'informal educators'? A good starting point for us is to think about how we engage with and relate to the people that use our centre or project. For the most part we will be meeting and talking with people from the local area. If we think about how we do this, and how local people relate to us as workers, we can start to uncover what it means to work informally.

Q1: Think about how you meet and talk to people when at work. What makes this informal?

Here you might like to think both about your approach and the environment you are in. Jot down some words that bring to mind some of the qualities of being informal.

When we think about how we engage with young people at work we can start to see that the daily life of individuals and groups is a main focus for us as workers. It is this daily life that interests us, because this is where we begin to understand the young people we are working with. In order for us to do this we need to be approachable, friendly, open to talk, have a sense of humour and so on. So the words commonly used by various workers when thinking about how they go about 'being informal' seem to have a relaxed atmosphere and everyday feel about them. By associating our role with words like these and the ones you may have come up with, we can start to get to grips with what it means to be informal. These characteristics, and the ones you have probably named, also enable us to work better with young people.

For example, informally talking to someone about the lack of facilities in the area while playing pool is a way of getting to know both the person and the local area. For us as informal educators, finding out the interests of those we work with allows us to develop our work of fostering learning. We use a wide variety of tools in order to do this, and what we mean by learning can include becoming more confident, organised, expressive, or more skilled in practical subjects. As we shall see, working informally creates many possibilities for us as educators.

We all have some sense of what it means to be informal in our everyday life. If we think about how we interact with others outside work and how we act in different social settings, this gives us good examples of being informal: casual dress, ordinary locations, using first names and so on. Our experience tells us what being informal means to us, and this can also begin to suggest what aspects of 'being informal' it is appropriate to use in the work place. No doubt we all transfer what we perceive to be informal ways of behaving into our practice, but how do we choose between what is appropriate and what is not?

If you look back at Question 1, you can see that I asked you to connect being informal with being at work. In doing this, you were looking at being informal in a different way than if you were outside work. As informal educators, we are not just being informal without care or reflection; we enter our work place with an aim of working, or rather of educating, in an informal way.

One way of approaching this is to consider what 'being informal' means to those we work with. Most young people will enter the youth project in order to meet with friends, socialise and have fun. If we were to try and work with these young people formally, as though we were teachers in a classroom, we could imagine the outcome. In order for us to engage with these young people productively, we need to bear in mind why they come to the youth project in the first place. This means we need to be aware of our actions as workers, and how the particular environments we find ourselves in affect our work.

If we link the notion of the informal with education we can see more clearly what our aim is. Putting these two parts of the equation together gives us a better position from which to think about our work.

As workers our primary task is education. But how do we do this informally? How do we manage the task of working with young people educationally? We will now explore this theme a little further, starting with the ways in which we use the environment to further learning.

Educating by using the environment

Q2: If you go back to the words you used to describe meeting and talking to young people in Question 1, you may find that you were describing the environment around you as well as your interactions. Look back at your notes from Question 1 and see if any of the words you used are about the environment, or the setting, in which your work takes place.

If you go back to some of the words you used to describe meeting and talking to young people, you will probably find that it was hard to ignore the environment around you. You might have thought about aspects of the physical environment, such as the building, the furniture within it, the pool table, TV, posters on the walls. These help form the physical world around us.

Other environments you described could have been social, emotional or political. These have to do with the people who are in that physical setting: how they interact, their backgrounds, beliefs and states of mind, for example. These also form part of our world, in similar ways to the physical environment.

If we observe the everyday situations we find ourselves in at work, we can start to identify these different environments. For instance, if we look around our youth project when it is full of young people who are engaged in different activities, we will be able to observe a particular social environment. Although at times what is going on around us may seem chaotic and without any structure, we know as informal educators that this is not the case: people are behaving in predictable and familiar ways. The social environment is often more complex than we imagine, however, and there are new social and cultural norms that need to be learnt when entering into a new setting. As workers we need to understand these various processes, because they enable us to learn about other people's view of the world.

If we look at the example overleaf we can see how a worker is trying to develop a piece of work, using a given environment.

Example 1: coffee and *EastEnders*

Being friendly and talking about what is on television while having a coffee with a young person is a clear example of being informal. I am sure we have probably all done this, whether we have been at work or not. The difference though is that when we are at work our aims as workers enable us to decide how to develop this opportunity for learning; Depending on the television

programme, we could be talking about all sorts of topics. If we take watching *EastEnders*, for example, we could be talking about how the programme presents stereotypes; of people from different cultures. This would be a good question for us to take further. Here we could learn from each other about what we both think about this issue.

If we now place this example in a busy youth club where other young people are playing pool, table tennis, football, talking to other workers and within their own peer groups, we can see how this piece of work fits into a particular environment and relates to what the rest of the youth club is doing. Although this piece of work may seem relatively small when compared to other activities within the club, the important question for us as educators is, has some learning occurred? Young people may be involved in all sorts of activities, but have they learnt or experienced something new? These are questions we should ask ourselves when we are engaged in or have finished an activity or session.

Q3: I am sure have experienced being in a similar situation to the example above. Can you think of a similar recent activity you were involved in as a worker where a person or group of people may have learnt something new?

Here are my thoughts on the kinds of questions we might ask to decide whether an informal activity is educational, using the coffee and *EastEnders* example.

1. How did we get there ?

If we again at the example we can explore what was happening. Firstly, how did we get into the situation? As workers we do not just ‘happen’ to be around, as if we bumped into someone we know in the street. We aim to place ourselves in situations and intervene as appropriate. For example, as the worker, you may have seen a particular young person you wanted to get to know. One way of doing this could have been to make coffee and offer the young person a cup. Alternatively the worker and young person may already know each other. The worker might know that this particular young person likes watching *EastEnders*, and so this provides a good way in to starting a conversation.

2. Intervening: what did we do?

If we move on, we can see that in this example both people found something that they could engage with. Here it was talking about *EastEnders*, but it could be anything. Finding common ground is an important part of informal education, because here we begin to learn about, and work with, what people bring. The fact that the conversation moved on to stereotypes in *EastEnders* helps us to identify a clear topic for exploration, but these topics are not always so easily identified. In particular, conversation can often

switch from one subject to another. Talking about *EastEnders* could have been a ‘way in’ to a discussion about stereotyping, but the conversation might have led on to very different topics. For example, if the young person was sitting alone, there may have been a reason for this, which we as workers might want to explore. The point is that all these different approaches and observations that informal educators use are not just coincidental—we choose how to work with young people so that we can foster learning.

3. What tools did we use?

Where the conversation took place had an effect on what was discussed. Here, the TV was used as a tool to engage with a young person. The pool table, posters on the wall or even the weather are all tools or ways of using the environment around us to get to know people.

The topic itself is also a tool. Stereotyping is an interesting subject and will probably evoke different responses from different people. As informal educators we need to be aware of the many different processes that are involved when exploring such issues. Being aware allows us to introduce different angles to the debate. For example, if a debate on stereotypes is causing an emotional response, it might be useful to explore the social and political aspects of the topic: who decides how particular individuals or groups are portrayed, for instance? This might bring out different ideas and thoughts that young people have. Again, by doing this we are fostering an environment for learning.

Relationships: developing different approaches

Thinking about how and what we say when meeting and talking to people is important for us as informal educators. Reflecting on how well we relate to others enables us to develop our practice. The first interventions we make when building a relationship with another person can be difficult. Even when we have developed relationships, it takes a lot of work to sustain and develop them further. Being aware of what works best for us personally, and being sensitive towards other people and their different personalities, culture, or present situation, can make a great difference to our interventions. Weighing up the pros and cons of what we might say or do when at work may seem like something we do anyway, but how often do we think about our interactions until they appear unsuccessful?

Thinking about different approaches that we might use means that we are thinking about our practice as educators, and how we can work better with people. In doing this we are also developing our own body of knowledge for the future. This knowledge can either be used again ‘as is’ or adapted to suit a particular situation; either way we are developing our practice.

For instance, if you were approaching a young person, as in our *EastEnders* example above, would you:

- go straight over and sit down nearby?
- take a cup of coffee over and sit nearby?
- take the young person over a cup of coffee as well?
- ask ‘Would you like a cup of coffee/a game of pool?’

- suggest other games or forthcoming trips that are on offer?

Depending on your ‘style’ and ‘taste’, these are all possible approaches when thinking about intervening. Whether you know the young person, and the stage you have reached in your relationship, will also play a part when deciding which way to go. Only by making judgements and trying them out will you know or find out what will work well and what will not. Even if the response is negative, you have still found a way to engage with someone. For example, suppose you ask a young person for a game of pool and get the reply, ‘I don’t like pool.’ This still opens up an opportunity for you as a worker to build upon.

Q4: If you were in this situation what response might you think of?

One response that comes to mind is, ‘What *do you* like doing?’ Changing our approach and thinking on our feet enables us to learn about young people’s interests and what they might like to do. This example is very simple and it will probably need a lot of work to take the relationship forward, but it is from these relatively small interventions that we begin to develop areas of work and find out what people think and are interested in. Opening doors to new possibilities is something informal educators do quite often, but that is only the beginning. If we are to develop these opportunities we need to encourage both young people and other workers to get involved and take part in achieving goals.

If we think about our work and how we create opportunities and achieve some of our goals within the work place, building relationships and ‘getting to know’ young people are essential characteristics of informal education.

From our examples above we can see that beginning a relationship may need a push start (usually from the worker). We can also see that it is important for us to think about interventions and how the environment can be used as a tool for working. If we look at how we might do this, we will probably need to think about our approach, and what we will say, before making contact. The environment we are in will also probably have some effect on what direction we will take. We can then go on to talk and find some common ground from which to develop a piece of work. Finding something in common to talk about, or an activity in which a young person or young people are interested, enables us to get to know them better. We only have to think about how we build relationships with our friends or colleagues in order to understand the value of this way of working.

So far we have looked at being informal, developing work, and how we might do this, but what makes a *good* approach or a *good* piece of work? How do we evaluate what we do as workers? This is something we will now begin to explore.

Being ‘OK’ and beyond

Our initial interactions will have consequences for us to consider, as I have outlined already. These interactions also have an effect on how other people perceive us and relate to us. As informal educators we can reflect on our work and discuss issues with our colleagues in order to develop our practice, but what do the people we work with think?

When I think about how the young people my colleagues and I work with see us as workers, there is one phrase that springs to mind—They’re alright.’

Being described as 'alright' or 'OK' as a worker by young people has been a good indication for many informal educators that they have developed good relationships with the young people they are working with. There is certainly value in this as a guide to evaluating our work. Encouraging young people to get involved with various activities has an effect on how our relationships with them develop. The more involved we are with young people, the more contact we will have with them. Their response to us as workers therefore enables us to evaluate our work with more insight.

Some of the qualities which have been used to describe workers as 'OK' have been being able to take time to talk and listen to people, getting involved in what is going on, making things happen, being friendly and supportive, genuine and trustworthy. There are many others but these are some of the common things you will probably hear. No doubt you can add to this list, as different people will give you different answers. Because being 'OK' can mean different things to different people, it is important for us to find out what other people think.

But is this really enough to go on? The problem here is whether young people are choosing to describe us as 'OK' because of our personalities or because of our approach to the work we do. As we all have different personalities, it is probably more useful to focus on our work and ask what makes a good piece of informal education.

Q5: From your experience, think about what makes a good piece of work. What qualities would you associate with this? Thinking about what doesn't make a good piece of work may help. Try to focus on a particular piece of work as it was taking place and try to identify what you think was good (or bad) about it.

Instead of trying to guess what you might have put down as good qualities of informal education, we will explore another example. If we take a group of young people who want to go on a trip to the cinema, we can begin to look at what makes for good informal education. The cinema could quite easily be something else, but it is how we work together to organise the trip that is important.

Example 2: the cinema trip

If we split this example into two roads or ways of working, and take each of them in turn, we can see what might happen.

Way 1: So young people want to go to the cinema, what do we do?;

If, for example, we have a group of four young people we might want to get others involved. We could do this by asking young people ourselves. This would give us definite numbers, so when we flick through the Yellow Pages to find a suitable cinema we can ring up and book the seats. While we are on the telephone we can also choose the film we are going to watch. Once we have this

information, we can draw a poster and advertise it in the project.

Way 2: So young people want to go to the cinema, what do we do?

If we have a group of four young people we could divide up the various tasks between us. One of us could find out if there are others that want to go. We could flick through the Yellow Pages and choose together which cinema we want to go to. Someone could telephone for availability and book the tickets, but what film do we want to watch?

As Robert Frost said, 'Two roads diverged in a wood, and I took the one less travelled by, and that has made all the difference'.

As we can see from these two options, the second one stimulates more thinking. Involving the young people in the process of organising the trip will create more opportunities for learning. Decision making, choice, organising and responsibility can all be identified within this second example. It also holds more meaning, as young people can 'own' what is happening and can shape it to their needs.

The first option leaves all the work up to the worker, and takes away the opportunities for learning. Although the first one may take up less time and be more efficient, it does not foster learning within the group and therefore it is not informal education. Being aware of these differences is important because every so often we need to pull ourselves up, and say 'Is what I am doing informal education?'

Q6: If you now reflect on your answers to Question 5, can you see anything you might have done differently? Do you think the piece of work you thought about was informal education?

Reflecting on a piece of work we have done is probably one of the best ways of learning about ourselves as workers. Our past experiences of working with people are very valuable, because they allow us to see how little or how much change is needed in our approach.

What makes a good piece of work? I suspect that being able to identify clear learning, as I asked you to try to do in Question 3, is a good source from which to draw when evaluating our work. If we think about the last session we were involved in at our projects we should be able to identify some learning. Even if we cannot be one hundred per cent certain that learning has occurred, we can make informed judgements on how a particular activity developed and whether it was likely to foster learning or hinder it.

The difficulty with informal education is that the learning can be hard to identify. Practical activities like learning how to paint, play music, canoe or play football do not necessarily capture the spirit of informal education. What these activities mean, what young people feel and think, and how young people organise, work together and achieve goals, capture our attention. Exploring how young people see the world, and what they

think, arouses the interest of the informal educator. This process may take the shape of an hour-long session or a five-minute conversation, but if we have consciously fostered that environment for learning we are doing our jobs as informal educators.

Learning from each other

Learning from our colleagues and other workers in the field is another way to learn the craft of informal education. But what may be a useful approach for one worker might not be useful for another. Like our sculptor, we all have different pieces that will be left on the floor. Being aware of how we approach our work and talking about how and why we favour different ways of working enables us to understand other workers, while also learning about ourselves.

We have probably all witnessed a situation or intervention that we would have approached differently from another worker, but this is not to say our style or taste is the right one.

By observing work in this way, we are developing our own reference points to draw from when next faced with a similar opportunity.

As informal educators it is important to understand our role. Thinking is the only way in which to do this. We might work in different ways from each other, but education is our common focus. This is what connects us to other informal educators. Thinking and reflecting on our work gives us opportunities to question and develop our practice.

So far we have looked at how we approach our work and begin to develop it. We will now explore this further by looking at the potential opportunities for learning we are faced with in our projects.

Being aware of opportunities

As educators we are faced with dilemmas and difficult decisions all the time, so it is especially important for us to understand our role, and why we are there. For example, letting young people smoke cigarettes in the youth project when it is a no-smoking building may make you 'OK' with the young people, but is it 'OK'? Of course we shouldn't allow smoking in a no-smoking building, but the issue does not have to end here.

Issues such as this can be a common occurrence within the youth project, but for the informal educator they should not simply be viewed as headaches. Instead, they are an opportunity to reach some understanding with young people. Having no smoking in the building is a policy that may not change, but unless it is discussed it will surely never change. This raises an important aspect of informal education, that we foster environments for learning so that young people have an opportunity to express themselves. Taking part in debates like this raises awareness, and can activate the power young people have when deciding their needs.

As informal educators, then, we find ourselves working in various environments. Within these environments we work with young people in an attempt to identify and develop areas of work. Because we enter our project or centre with this in mind, we no

longer take the situations we find ourselves in, like the young people who want to smoke in the building, for granted. Talking and interacting with the people we work with provides us with opportunities for learning.

If we take two examples of opportunities that can be presented to us when at work, we can start to explore the processes involved.

Example 3: a discussion about alcohol use

Imagine a worker who is playing pool with young people, and socially interacting with them. What the worker will probably find is that various topics for conversation will emerge. If, for example, alcohol consumption is one of those topics, and has been raised by the young people, then the worker will have an educational opportunity which comes about quite by chance. By encouraging people to talk and become involved with this topic, the worker is then fostering learning. Sharing experiences and knowledge enables us to learn from one another. Although the physical environment such as the pool table, chairs, and the four walls around this group will not have changed, the social and emotional environments will.

If we compare this example with some features of informal education that Tony Jeffs and Mark Smith have highlighted, we can see how this process works. The worker as informal educator:

- joins in with an activity;
- uses an everyday setting where people have chosen to be;
- engages people in conversation; and
- seeks to foster learning.

(Jeffs and Smith 1996:6)

We can see from the example and the four points above that the worker is thinking about being an educator and how best to engage with the young people. Here the worker joined in with a topic of conversation that was raised by the young people, and encouraged others to participate.

Although we sometimes bring our own ideas and issues to talk about when talking with young people, engaging with what young people bring to us has great significance for us as educators. Within our work we can often identify certain topics or issues to explore, but we have to be aware of why we are choosing them. 'Going with the flow', and working with what young people bring to us, enables us to learn about what is important to them and holds meaning for the people we work with.

Opportunities like this may arise from various aspects of our work. Observing what is going on in the work place, talking to young people and other local people, talking to other workers, both internally and from other centres, and global issues all may influence

our work, but these all need to be thought about critically. It is important as informal educators that we consider how our work fits in with the everyday living of the people we work with.

If we go back to our alcohol discussion example, we can identify two different ways of moving forward from this point, and evaluate them critically.

Firstly, the worker has already engaged with this topic successfully over a game of pool, which means that there is potential for developing this topic in the future. This was done informally, without any formal structure such as a discussion group. Young people chose to engage with the issue around the pool table.

As workers we have a choice. We can either use this same setting for future conversation on this issue, or try to create a new one.

In our haste to develop areas of work we can often structure and formalise issues in ways that discourage participation. If the pool table setting is suitable for young people to engage with the issue of alcohol use, then why would we want to change it? But we could try and set up a new environment and structure a formal session around alcohol use if we wanted to. The difficulty here is that by gently exploring alcohol issues around the pool table, we are engaging with young people on their terms. If the topic of conversation changes to something else then so would we. By moving the issue to a structured session we could kill the interest and prevent any further work. This would also prevent other topics coming up, as the focus and content of a structured session would already be determined.

As informal educators we also have to consider who is defining this need for formal sessions. Who really wants these sessions, the worker or the young people? If we were to decide to plan and develop future sessions on alcohol awareness, who would do it, we or the young people? Also, what would young people learn from this? Would they learn about alcohol, or would they learn to keep quiet when we were around in case we tried to set up another session on another issue? The possibilities for all types of learning need to be considered.

Thinking critically about our approach and how we can successfully engage with the opportunities that are presented to us is an important and skilled aspect of our roles as educators. Rather than paying attention to the actual product of alcohol awareness, as a 'thing' that participants might 'hold' after a session, informal educators need to explore and think about the process of learning as a journey. For example, if the worker set up a session on alcohol awareness that took three hours, what would happen after the three hours were up? If the same worker kept the issue around the pool table, it could probably be raised and explored many times.

Education as process and product

At this point we can introduce two new concepts. We have mentioned them above, but have not explored them. These are *process* and *product*.

We can see these two concepts in action in Example 3 (p. 126). Working with young people around the table pays attention to the process of education. The worker is not trying to determine the topic for discussion, and does not try to predict the outcomes. By

‘going with the flow’ we can create a wider choice of topics. This we would call a process way of working, as there is no specific end in sight.

If the worker set up a session to explore alcohol use, then this would pay more attention to product. Here we would determine the topic for discussion, and try and predict the outcomes.

This limits the scope for other issues to be explored, as the session is specific. By predicting the outcomes we are making choices about what experiences and learning will be recognised.

This we would call a product way of working, as there are specific expected outcomes and a possible end in sight.

We will now move on to another example while keeping these two concepts in mind. What we will find is that we move *between* process and product when developing work, and that they are very closely linked. The next example develops the question of opportunity further and explores how we can move our work on over a longer period of time.

Example 4: the music session

As workers we have probably highlighted various needs to be met at our places of work. From a simple chat about music and what young people like to listen to, we may find that some would like to learn to play instruments. It is doubtful at this point that we would rush out and buy guitars and keyboards in order to meet this need, as this may not be what they want after all. What we might do is try to find out a little more, and ask other young people what they think of this idea.

Here we are starting to foster idea and use it to create environments for other young people to express their thoughts. These first steps are the beginning of a process. As in the last example, young people have engaged in a topic and expressed an interest. This means we have more scope for development. The shape of this piece of work will now begin to change from something that was quite unpredictable to something that is beginning to take a particular form.

By this we mean that a conversation, such as the one around the pool table, can twist and turn and change from one topic to another quite quickly. But having a focus brings us back to a particular task, and therefore structures the content of what we are engaged in.

Already we can see that process product have become linked. Young people are becoming involved in the process of learning how to meet their needs, but are also learning how to work towards specific goals.

Once we have explored the idea further and decided with the young people that a music session could be developed, we can start to explore other areas. Together with the young people, we could think about:

- the environment; where and when will the sessions take place?
- what musical instruments do the young people want?
- the cost, and whether we should raise funds.
- how will the young people learn the instruments?
- what else apart from the instruments will they be learning?
- group dynamics: different roles people might play.
- how can we encourage participation, and learning from each other?

All these areas offer an opportunity to us as workers to encourage young people to get involved and participate. This will not only develop our relationships, but will also enable both young people and workers to learn.

So far we know that it is possible to set up a session, but we now need to know specifically what instruments are needed. We would probably already have an idea by now, as young people would have expressed some preference, but involving young people as much as possible encourages ownership. The music session becomes part of something that the young people are creating, and so holds stronger meaning for them and the youth project.

If we think about the various parts of planning the session, there are many roles that young people could get involved with. For example, young people could:

- organise when the session would take place. This would involve negotiation, working out times, adding the times the centre's programme, advertising the sessions and so forth.
- work out the budget. Here young people would need to work out what money was available and ring round to find the prices of the musical instruments they wanted. This could involve visits to music shops and so on.
- choose learning materials. Young people would need to decide together what books or tuition guides might be useful.

These are just a few of the learning opportunities that we might identify from this example. As informal educators we need to pay attention to the learning processes involved. Here, these include decision making, democracy, conversation, and thinking.

What we can see here is that when we refer to learning opportunities we are also referring to the educational process. When we develop work we are concerned with what people think, therefore the process of learning, experiencing, and thinking new thoughts are important characteristics of our work.

Q7: Think about a previous session at work. Using the music group example as a guide, what balance of process and product can you identify within what was going on? Were there activities where you could (or could not) distinguish the two?

If you look back over some of the other examples in this chapter you will also be able to identify process and product. Take another look at our *EastEnders* and cinema trip examples, and see what you come up with.

If we briefly look at a familiar activity we can more easily identify process and product. For example, the rules of football are a product. We can hold them and use them to determine the game, but it is how we reach that point that interests us. Learning the rules has an end in sight, but it is up to us how creative we are before we reach it. In between learning the rules and knowing the rules we go through a process.

Also, we cannot determine how a team will play together. Organising, team work, group dynamics, all provide us with opportunities to continue this learning process. Although the rules may not change, the relationships and the development of the team will.

If we take our music session example, we can see that the worker could purchase instruments, set up the environment, and instruct young people how to play. This will 'do the job' in product terms, but it pays little attention to process, and to learning opportunities.

Approaching the work in this way does not invite young people to create the contents of the music session, and actively become part of and develop it. Rather, it invites young people to consume the contents of the session without much input.

Paying little attention to what people think does not stimulate thinking. The thoughts of others and how they feel are important aspects of our work. Our aim is centred around education, so unless we stimulate thinking, and this includes ourselves as well as young people, we cannot say that we are educators.

For instance, if as workers we look for learning opportunities, we will be interested in both young people learning instruments, and the various conversations that are going on in the room at the same time. Our difficulty here is what we choose to get involved with, as there can be many different things going on at once. Let us take it one step at a time, by looking at learning a musical instrument.

Learning an instrument has a clear aim, and involves learning certain skills and knowledge in order to continue. We can set goals and work towards achieving them. By doing this we are working with product in mind.

What is more difficult is working with the feelings, thoughts and attitudes that are woven into this process. This involves working with how young people see the world. Dealing with frustration when learning a new instrument and learning how to cope with new information means we sometimes need to support and encourage young people to stick with it. Once the learning process has begun, it will become easier to learn new information and deal with the experiences of playing an instrument.

This is one aspect of the session, but there are other questions to consider, such as how are young people engaging with the session, are certain young people dominating the group, do some young people need a little more support and encouragement to join in, and what does music mean to these young people? These topics give us more scope to work with.

Once the session is up and running, what next? Like our alcohol session, what do we do next to develop it? So far we have the music session as part of the programme in the youth project, and although the content is determined, it is open to change. This change allows us the freedom to explore new ground and develop the session further. Asking young people to reflect on the session so far and think about its future will enable us to work towards new goals, but there is a difficulty when we come to evaluate our work so far.

Evaluating how well young people have learnt to play musical instruments is relatively simple. We can look at where they started and measure their progress. This will give us a good indication of the skills and knowledge that have been learnt. This is the product from the session, and we can identify this learning quite easily and record it.

The difficulty comes when we try to evaluate the process of learning. How one particular young person dealt with frustration, and how participants experienced the music session are more difficult to measure. What young people have learnt apart from the instruments are areas that the informal educator develops an eye for. One way of developing this skill is through recording.

By keeping recordings we can start to build up a picture, and identify areas of work that we think are interesting and worth developing. For example, we can record how a session went and possibly identify new areas to explore. If at the end of a session we record that particular young people are working together on particular songs, then this could be developed. We might also note that one of the young people has become more interested in the session and spends more time learning to play. When the music sessions began, this same young person would walk in for five minutes, pick up a guitar, say it was too difficult to play, and walk out again. Here we can see a change, but we may not necessarily be able to evaluate it in terms of product, but more as a process.

These 'other things' that are going on within the music session are what we look for as informal educators. For this is just as important as learning the musical instrument itself.

Informal and formal education

What then is informal education, and how does it differ from formal education? Having got this far in the chapter, we can now explore this topic more clearly. As the music example shows, within a given session we may move between product and process ways of working, and we need to be able to evaluate both sorts of learning. We may associate formal education with particular settings, such as schools or colleges, and with a way of learning that emphasises product—learning an instrument, or the multiplication table—rather than process, the way in which that learning takes place. But John Ellis (1990) suggests that, even in the settings we work in, our working styles can move from formal to informal within a session or in different sorts of work. He represents this as a diagram,

on which our work may be closer to the informal end, at A, or the formal end at B, or somewhere in the middle:

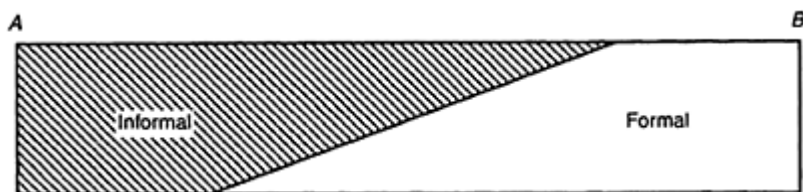


Figure 2.1

If we use our music session example and compare two different situations, we can see how the diagram works. Firstly, if young people are engaged in learning how to play the various instruments, then this would mean our session has moved towards B. Although we would probably not call ourselves teachers when showing young people how to play music, we are undoubtedly instructing in some way or another. While young people are engaged with learning chords, notes, rhythms and songs the session is more formal than informal.

But if the young people stop playing and begin to talk about the music they like, or any other topic, then the session will become more informal than formal. This move from B to A and back again can either happen quite quickly or quite slowly, depending on what we are engaged in at the time. So for us as educators, this learning process is best seen as a continuum. At times we are both informal and formal educators, and need to pay attention to both process and product.

Q8: Think about a piece of work you are involved in at the moment. If you think about where this work is taking place and what type of work it is, where would you position it on the diagram above? When you have done this, can you explain why you have placed it there?

Do you agree with Ellis that your work involves a mixture of product and process, formal and informal?

To end this chapter we can conclude that the artist will be left with pieces on the floor, but there will also be a sculpture. Within this sculpture there are the characteristics of the informal educator. As workers, we engage with people and foster learning. We aim to work with people and what they bring to the project. Our emphasis on relationships enables us to learn about the people we work with. We favour process over product, and move between informal and formal settings. We are concerned with the conversations that are going on just as much as we are with the activities: indeed at times we are more interested in the conversation. The use of conversation and talking is important if we are to work successfully with people.

So our reply the next time young people want to go on a cinema trip might be, ‘OK, what do we need to think about doing first?’ While the young people are working out their response, we will be thinking about ours, and developing the conversation. This is informal education.

Further reading

- Jeffs, T. and Smith, M. (1996) *Informal Education—Conversation, Democracy and Learning*. Derby: Education Now. This is a good introduction to informal education, and takes some of the ideas in this chapter further.
- Rogers, C. and Freiberg, H.J. (1994) *Freedom to Learn*, 3rd edn. New York: Macmillan College Publishing Company. I think that this book offers a good framework for exploring person-centred learning in formal settings. These ideas can also be transferred to informal settings, giving the reader a good perspective on the process over product debate.
- Smith, M. (1980) *Creators Not Consumers*. Leicester: NAYA Publications. This booklet also highlights the importance of thinking about our work, using the example of an ice-skating trip to explore ideas.
- Those of you that want a break from reading might like to watch:
- Dead Poets' Society* (1989) Touchstone Pictures. Directed by Peter Weir; written by Tom Schulman. This follows a group of students through their time at college, with Robin Williams as their inspirational teacher.

References

- Ellis, J. (1990) 'Informal Education—a Christian perspective' in T.Jeffs and M.Smith (eds) *Using Informal Education*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Frost, R. (1930, 1950) 'The Road Not Taken' from *Complete Poems of Robert Frost*, reprinted with permission in F.O.Matthiessen (ed.) *The Oxford Book of American Verse*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Jeffs, T. and Smith, M. (1996) *Informal Education—Conversation, Democracy and Learning*. Derby: Education Now.