

# The Limits of 'Informal Learning': Adult Education Research and the Individualizing of Political Consciousness

Rachel Gorman  
OISE/University of Toronto

**Abstract:** Based on participatory research with workers with disabilities, this paper argues that the concept of informal learning does not provide an emancipatory way forward for adult education theory and practice. Rather, it individualizes collective political movements, bolsters the cult of credentials, and further excludes highly marginalized groups.

Informal learning, conceptualized in contrast to formal (school-based) and non-formal (organized, non-credit) learning, has gained currency in adult education literature. A central theme in the recent literature on informal learning is the rationale for, and the practice of, recording previously unrecognized learning experiences. Adult education theorists describe two overlapping purposes for researching informal learning: first, to identify more efficient ways for employees to learn at work and for the employer to realize the benefits of this learning (Watkins & Marsick, 1992) and second, to value the learning experiences of socially marginalized groups. This second project has gained momentum in recent years, with the documentation of informal learning leading to educational credentials, as seen in the explosion of *prior learning assessment* programs in further and higher education. Some theorists also hope this documentation will provide the rationale for increased workplace democracy and participation in decision making (Livingstone, 1997); and the recognition of the educational value of social movement activities (Foley, 1999). There are, however, problems with using the concept of informal learning to provide away forward for marginalized groups. Theorizing 'the learner' as an autonomous, competitive individual will not address the ways gender, race, and ability oppression play out in people's lives. It is also uncertain whether increasing the marketability of marginalized workers by emphasizing their learning achievements will decrease the exploitation and oppression that these workers experience (Tobias, 1999). Based on participatory research with workers with disabilities, I argue that the concept of informal learning does not provide an emancipatory way forward for adult education theory and practice. Rather, it individualizes collective political movements, bolsters the cult of credentials, and further excludes highly marginalized groups.

Recognition of informal learning- and its institutionalized process, prior learning assessment, is on the surface a way of levelling the privilege of credentials, and a way of helping workers get credit for what they know. It is important, however, to ask to what end are we interested in defining and quantifying informal learning. Livingstone (1997), argues that recording previously uncounted knowledge and skills reveals that employers under use their workers' skills, and that workers have many of the skills required to participate in the decision-making process at work. Another reason for recording informal learning, in the same vein, would be to combat the notion that there is a skills shortage in the labour market. Livingstone (1997) argues that the opposite is true- that unemployed and underemployed workers have many skills that are not being used. This is in fact true of many underemployed people with disabilities, however, I would argue that their underemployment is not simply a result of their learning not being recognized. A second flaw in the rationale for credentializing informal learning is that 'socially excluded' or marginalized people would presumably also have been excluded from the

experiences through which people gain marketable skills. If we want to recognize informal learning for the purpose of decreasing social exclusion, we are quickly thrown into questions about what kinds of experiences to value, and whether we intend to privilege experiences of integration into mainstream society. If we shift the focus from *social exclusion* to *oppression*, then we are talking about something that impacts life experience- something that harms the individuals and communities. Shifting the frame from exclusion to oppression requires us to go beyond valuing a different kind of experience to a recognizing that oppression includes experiences of violence, isolation, and poverty. In other words, it has a material basis. When people have been excluded from workplaces, they may not have the knowledge that comes from being in a workplace. When people are socially, economically and politically excluded, how can their life experiences be counted up and presented for credit? Wilma Fraser (1995) points out that “[f]or those at the margins of political, economic and social power, the notion that they ‘are what they have done’ sounds more like a slap in the face than a term of encouragement...” (Fraser, 1995). The literature on learning de-politicizes ‘learners’, and ignores ways that learning is organized by the social relations that the ‘learners’ exist in.

There are several problematic assumptions built into theories of informal learning, the most obvious of which is the notion that informal learning is self-directed, and that home is a space where learners can take control of their own learning agenda. This notion contains a set of assumptions about gender, race, class and ability. For example, Foley (1999) describes a family gathering in order to give two examples of informal learning. The first example is a group of male mine workers discussing and critiquing management practices. While this discussion is going on at the dinner table, two women share a recipe for cake (Foley, 1999, pp. 1-4). This account indicates that a highly gendered process is taking place, but Foley does not refer to gender. This story indicates a dialectic between what things are learned, and the time and space (physical and intellectual) available to the learner. The male mine worker in the account has retreated to a safe place to reflect on his work experiences, while the women in the story are still ‘at work’- they are not free for critical reflection on their own workday, instead they are learning to make cake. Home is not a neutral space from the standpoint of disability either. For example, ‘home’ may be an institution or group-home. Furthermore, people with disabilities who live in private homes may have support workers or family members organizing their time and space. At the other extreme, ‘home’ may be a place of isolation, and deprivation.

The second problematic assumption is that informal learning is an individual process. This implicit notion of the ‘individual learner’ is part of larger shift from education to learning (Ramdas, 1999), which depoliticizes learning. Applying theories of informal learning to social movements makes the theorization of political consciousness almost impossible. In his book on informal learning in social movements, Foley (1999) does not sufficiently deal with the power relations of race, class and gender in the cases he provides. Church, Fontan, Ng and Shragge (2000) have raised a critique of the individualized concept of informal learning, in which they posit ‘social learning’ as a way to reintroduce notions of diversity and community, however the analysis lends itself more readily to a social work perspective on the benefits of socialization and social integration than to an analysis of political learning. Their account of workplace learning among psychiatric survivors depoliticizes a highly politicized group.

With a view to addressing some of these issues, I interviewed working and underemployed artists and performers with disabilities who are affiliated with a theatre advocacy group. Members advocate for the inclusion of people with disabilities in the arts (as artists and audience members), arts education, and the workplace. I am a non-disabled ally of the group,

and I have worked and performed with its members for the past three and a half years. Approximately fifteen artists have been involved in the group since its formation eight years ago. I interviewed four current members. These participants were able to provide a basis for considering informal learning from the standpoint of social and economic exclusion. Also, because the participants are part of the same advocacy group, the interviews as a data set can provide some clues about the collective and political dimensions of learning. Due to the politicized nature of being a performer with a disability, the participants are all at various times activists and spokespeople. All of the participants asked that they be credited when they are cited. In conducting the interviews, I used the same open-ended questionnaires on learning practices, and time-use surveys as the *Working Class Learning Practices* (WCLP) project, a study of informal learning at six unionized work sites led by David Livingstone.

I have chosen Dorothy Smith's (1997) standpoint method to analyze the interviews for three reasons. I originally adopted it because I was trying to uncover what was happening in people's lives that contradicted the literature on learning. Smith's standpoint method "begin[s] in people's experience" and "deals with what people do in the concrete settings of their lives, and how they talk about it" (Smith, 1997, p.128). Second, I found her notion of relations of ruling to be extremely helpful, since it allowed me to approach participants' stories both as testimony, and as evidence of power relations. Third, her notion of a 'trajectory of consciousness' provides a tool for acknowledging the role of ideologies in the reproduction of unequal social relations. Ideologies surrounding people with disabilities are particularly insidious, and include ideologies of individual deficit, dependency, and differential social worth. Using Smith's (1997) framework, participants' testimony can also be used to develop a critique of ways that the literature on learning is classed, raced, gendered and ableist; and ways that the literature assumes social exclusion and underemployment are results of a lack of learning credentials. The individualized concept of informal learning removes the learner from her social context, and her day-to-day life situation. Employing standpoint method to understand the data can also move us beyond a critique of individual notions of learning, to offer a theory of how people who experience disability oppression both *learn to engage in*, and ultimately *learn through* collective struggles against oppression.

Participants' stories reveal experiences of segregation and discrimination within formal schooling, and ways that disability intersects with notions of work and career. Participants described different ways that learning occurs: through individual survival, through collaboration, and through collective creation. Three of the participants had extremely limited access to informal learning opportunities at paid jobs, however they were able to document learning experiences in non-profit organizations. Since all four participants had post secondary credentials, it would seem that structural ableism, rather than lack of individual credentials, may be the cause of their underemployment. This finding echoes Robert Tobias' prediction that "[t]he vast majority are likely to become disillusioned with a search for qualifications within a shrinking global labour-market" (Tobias, 1999, p. 117). From this perspective, the project of valuing the life experiences of marginalized groups becomes nothing more than a way to incorporate them into the global market as 'skills' and 'knowledges' that can be put to use in capitalist work relations. The research process itself proved to be problematic, as it defined in advance that consciousness, or the process of 'knowing' was to be counted as 'learning'. The WCLP interview questionnaire asked respondents to document informal learning that was identified by the respondent as learning *at the time of the interview*. This is an important criterion, because it asks participants to retroactively consider our previous experiences, in a

world that is increasingly driven by what is called a 'knowledge economy'. Disability rights activist Spirit Synott (see quote below) told me she was accustomed to recounting her life experiences, including her advocacy experience, as a process of skills acquisition, because she is trying to compete in an ableist labour market. In one of the other WCLP sites, a union local president told me that the previous union leadership had been recruited into management because of their skills in contract negotiation and knowledge of labour legislation. These stories indicate how an individualized theory of learning encourages the fragmenting of knowledge created in collective social movements into individual skill sets. The process of reconsidering one's life experience and political commitments as ways to remain competitive in selling one's labour can be interpreted as *alienation*.

Marx theorizes that alienation results when a person is separated from her material world because she does not have control over the work she engages in, and more importantly, she has no control over what she has produced. She is also separated from her fellow human beings, through competition, and through the impossibility of most forms of cooperation (Ollman, 1971, pp. 133-4). In order to see the role learning plays in alienation, we must consider how these new 'learnings' are deployed within capitalist relations of production. The documenting and credentializing of learning is underpinned by the logic of *human capital theory*, which assumes that the more you have learned (or the more capacity you have for learning), the more of an asset you will be for your organization. In a human capital formulation, the worker is compensated for the use of her critical thinking through higher wages, and a higher position. Critics of human capital point out that if the life experiences and learning of marginalized workers were recognized, they could attain equality with the higher paid managerial employees (Livingstone, 1997, p. 11). However, this critique leaves the organization's ownership of workers' learning unchallenged. In a Marxist understanding of relations of work, the worker cannot be confused with the idea of capital. To understand the relationship between the worker and capital, we must recognize that *labour power is a commodity* in the capitalist mode of production. As a commodity, labour power is subject to the law of supply and demand, and workers are in direct competition with one another to sell their labour. In this configuration, knowledge and skill acquisition can become part of the competition. The more the concept of 'learning' becomes synonymous with market requirements, the more it becomes commodified, and alienated from the learner.

Having such a difficult time finding work opened my eyes to how people view people with disabilities. I've got a *great* resume, with an excellent volunteer and paid work record, so getting job interviews was no problem- they'd be on the phone so fast it wasn't funny. But as soon as I arrived for the interview, they would come up with imaginary difficulties. I would give them solutions for those difficulties, but it was like pulling teeth to get work (Synott, 1999, interview transcript).

Taking 'human capital' as the theoretical framework for understanding the role of learning in the political economy, gives a contradictory analysis to the results gained from a 'labour power as commodity' framework. If we take a 'human capital' approach, we assume that the greater one's learning capacity, the more wages one will be able to earn. If one subscribes to this understanding of learning, and one is concerned about equity, one might suggest several strategies: increase access to learning; document and give credit for informal learning; and increase workers' opportunities to use their learning at work so that their learning capacity and skills can be recognized. If we take a 'labour power as commodity' approach, however, we

recognize that workers are not paid according to their intrinsic ‘worth’. As a commodity, labour power is subject to the requirements of capital. From this standpoint we can see that recognizing informal learning merely expands the sphere that capital can exploit, which on a grand scale, increases the alienation and exploitation of human beings. These contradictory results are obtained by taking a dialectical approach to the issue, that is, looking below the surface appearance to the underlying relations. On the surface the first set of strategies seem logical, however, without an analysis of both exploitation of workers in the capitalists political economy, and an understanding of how disability oppression unfolds in relation to exploitation, it is difficult to explain why Spirit Synott’s (quoted above) credentials aren’t getting her a full time, well paying job. Using the standpoint method to examine stories about work and learning reveals that the notion of ‘social exclusion’ draws our attention away from recognizing social relations of oppression *and exploitation*.

Listening to respondents’ stories led me to posit three types of non-school-based learning: survival, resistance and struggle. *Survival* learning is how individuals develop strategies to cope in a world that has been constructed to exclude them. Individuals may figure out a coping strategy on their own, or may learn about it from other members in their community or social group. *Resistance* learning is how an individual or group develops strategies to resist the ways that the world has been constructed to exclude them. *Struggle* learning is how a group develops an understanding of how their oppression has been constructed and reconstructed, and how a group develops counter-arguments and strategies to dismantle the oppression. Resistance is about meeting and opposing oppression in specific places that it affects you, while collective struggle is a process of identifying and seeking to change the social relations of oppression. It seems the concept of resistance is much more prevalent than the concept of struggle in social movement learning theory. Much of this can be traced to the popularity of Foucault’s (1995) notion that multiple pathways of resistance exist on equal and opposite vectors as the multiple pathways of power. I would like to stress that it is important for people concerned with social justice to be able to make a distinction between *resistance*, which is about meeting and opposing oppression at the specific sites where it is manifested, and *struggle*, which involved identifying, grasping, and changing the conditions that produce the oppression that individuals and groups experience. Reflecting on his thirty years of experience as a disability rights activist, Kazumi Tsuruoka notes that

The movement always focused on ‘the self’- talking about it as a group, but always the self. Like self expression- we write plays where disabled folks tell people how they feel. It’s easy to talk about getting out of the institution, and other safe issues like ‘we want to get into buildings’ and ‘we want to work’. Since the 70’s we’ve been talking about transportation and living on our own. What we need to focus on now is interpersonal relations, and political leadership, and mentoring our youth. That’s how we will build the disabled movement (Tsuruoka, 1999, interview transcript).

I am not advocating that we should call engagement in political struggle ‘learning’. I am suggesting that when learning theorists refer to ‘learning from experience’ and ‘tacit learning’ they are not talking about experiences of collective struggle; and when they talk about the content of learning, they are not talking about political consciousness. I am suggesting that this is the direction our research must take in order to counter the idea that human learning is for the purpose of competing in the job market. I propose instead a theory of learning that emerges from an understanding of consciousness, from the rich tradition of radical education theory and

practice, and from participatory research methods that do not claim to be neutral. *Consciousness-raising* and *critical education* are the educational legacies of feminism, of trade unionism, of anti-racism, and of revolutionary struggle. Although feminist and Freirian education have been staples of adult education theory in the past, they have been steadily disappearing from the literature through the past decade (Ramdas, 1999). Feminist consciousness is rooted in collective debate, community problem solving, and solidarity. Consciousness-raising is a collective, grounded, group-defined process that is bound up in working toward a better existence for the group- *as a group*, not as the sum of its competing parts. Informal learning defined as skill acquisition and achievement is the antitheses of consciousness-raising. Bertel Ollman urges us to recognize the vast qualitative difference between individual and group consciousness, and the differences between mechanisms of change in consciousness (or the processes of learning) for a group, and for an individual. Group consciousness, whether it crystallizes around ideas of class, gender, race, nationality, ability, or sexuality, is always a dynamic, dialectic phenomenon. It is not a static or passive set of ideas, but a process or movement. Consciousness, then, has a direction, and can be progressive or regressive, and is ever moving toward or away from goals of democracy, justice, and equality (Ollman, 1993, pp. 147-179). By seeking to record examples of individual, politically neutral learning, the informal learning project becomes a *regressive* force in the struggle against social exclusion.

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