

Dossier “Informalisation of Education”

INTRODUCTION

New Informal Ways of Learning: Or Are We Formalising the Informal?

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Abstract

Informal learning is currently seen by some authors as a shift in current educational systems. Based on a trend instigated by connectivism, whereby informal networks are created between people who help each other to learn, it seems to be an alternative to traditional ways of teaching and learning.

New technologies are key to the development of these informal learning models. Thus, digital Open Educational Resources (OER) and, more recently, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) are two different yet related ways of making such development possible. While still emerging and growing, some of these ways appear to be attempts at formalising the informal. Based on traditional

transmissive models, some of the models that have been developed are simply makeovers of the old ones, albeit using new technologies to achieve their goals.

This article presents a critical review of the latest developments in informal learning, and points out the need for evidence-based research to establish what actual learning can be attained informally.

Keywords

informal learning; user-generated content; OER; MOOCs; sustainability; learning evidences

Nuevas formas de aprendizaje informales: ¿O estamos formalizando lo informal?

Resumen

En la actualidad, algunos autores ven el aprendizaje informal como un cambio en los sistemas educativos actuales. Basándose en una tendencia instigada por el conectivismo, por el que se crean redes informales entre personas que se ayudan unas a otras a aprender, el aprendizaje informal parece ser una alternativa a las formas tradicionales de enseñanza y aprendizaje.

Las nuevas tecnologías son claves para el desarrollo de estos modelos de aprendizaje informal. Así, los recursos educativos abiertos (OER) digitales y, más recientemente, los cursos abiertos en línea y masivos (MOOC) son dos métodos diferentes, si bien relacionados, para hacer posible este desarrollo. Aunque todavía están en emergencia y crecimiento, algunos de estos nuevos métodos parecen intentos de formalizar lo informal. Basados en modelos de transmisión tradicional, algunos de los modelos que se han desarrollado son solo transformaciones de los antiguos modelos, aunque utilizan nuevas tecnologías para conseguir sus objetivos.

Este artículo presenta una revisión crítica de los últimos desarrollos en el aprendizaje informal, y señala la necesidad de realizar investigación basada en pruebas para establecer qué aprendizaje real puede conseguirse informalmente.

Palabras clave

aprendizaje informal; contenido generado por el usuario; OER; MOOC; sostenibilidad; pruebas de aprendizaje

Introduction

The reform of traditional education and training models is currently the topic of much debate. The convergence of formal, informal and non-formal education elements was one response to the need to reform professional training. The ever-changing context of learning technology applications has made this even more essential, and has been featured in recent work by Attwell (2010a), Cross (2007) and Kamenetz (2010). Similarly, Siemens (2005) considers informal learning to be an overarching feature of the entire learning journey. A key feature of professional training and development reform is personalisation: adapting policies to meet the specific needs of each individual, according to their approach to learning. This has raised the profile of Personal Learning Environments (PLE) (Attwell, 2010b) highlighting the move towards each individual taking decisions regarding the most appro-

priate models and learning resources; individuals are now charting their own learning trajectories – a departure from the constraints of formal, institutional models. According to Walsh (1999), expertise and knowledge are being transformed and now function in different ways, due to the open channels of communication that are available online. According to O'Reilly (2005), Web 2.0 is the ideal environment for this.

The rapid expansion of social networks within the Web 2.0 context is part of this phenomenon. Cross (2010), Downes (2007) and Siemens (2004) have all described the benefits of informal learning, underpinned by connectivism. The possibility of creating networks of virtual contacts and online communities, the ability to access content and information not physically available to us, and participation in experiences developed by professionals in remote contexts have meant that each individual can now become a communication node that simultaneously gives and receives. Great emphasis is placed on the potential and benefits that such learning networks can offer to professional development. In this context, it is clear that the use of technology in education and training extends and enhances the potential learning spaces available for professional development and the updating of skills. Also Williams, Karousou and Mackness (2011) have highlighted the importance of emergent learning in the ecology of Web 2.0, considering it as the self-organised interaction between different people and resources, which make the process and the learning unpredictable.

Currently, the most important challenge in these experiences is to obtain evidence of actual learning from them. It is not enough to say that people will learn from being interconnected. This is a necessary yet insufficient condition for learning (Selwyn, 2010). People need to know what they are actually learning, which competencies they are attaining, and how they can demonstrate what they have learnt. Because of this, some authors are sceptical about what the actual potential of informal learning is. Williams, Karousou and Mackness (2011) argue that access to digital information and social networking is not necessarily transformed into learning. Similarly, Wiley and Hilton III (2009) suggest that people could be navigating through interesting and relevant learning material, although they fear that the materials they are using to learn with might not offer them the precise knowledge they need.

Emergent ways of informal learning

Open Educational Resources (OER) have been the trigger for a very important shift, which could even be considered as the formalisation of informal learning. As Friesen (2009) says, it is now taken for granted that every higher education institution will have a set of OER and provide free access for everyone who wants to use them so that they can find out a bit more about the university, the knowledge it is producing and the way it is being taught.

However, the use of OER has not already been as great as expected, maybe because some concerns have been voiced about the quality of informal ways of learning. But it is not clear how quality can be assessed and assured. While most OER are used because they come from a well-known institution, this does not guarantee their intrinsic quality. Although one of the weaknesses

of OER is that they may not have been evaluated from a learning perspective, content is not the only concern. Indeed, others have been expressed about teachers, trainers or facilitators, no matter what name is used to refer to them in non-formal or informal learning scenarios. In fact, Redecker et al. (2011) assert that with the rise of ubiquitous learning, trainers will need to receive better training and recognition.

The emergence of user-generated content initiatives, in which the content is not delivered to learners but constructed jointly by them, the growth of Open Educational Practices (OEP) and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC), and the creation of new providers of self-education solutions such as the OER University, Peer2Peer University or the University of the People are shifting known scenarios to other domains of a much more uncertain nature. Conservative institutions, particularly universities, are challenged by this trend. Learning becomes increasingly informal as people develop complex networks to help each other, thus intensifying the perception that education and training are no longer exclusively provided by institutions, since both can also result from collaboration between individuals and their specialised networks.

While some high-ranking universities such as MIT or Harvard have signed an agreement with Coursera, a company that is providing a platform for MOOC to be delivered to anyone, anywhere, through a traditional conductist approach (Bates, 2012), others have founded new organisations to provide learning, as is the case of Udacity.

While 'MOOC' has been the buzzword for 2012 (Daniel, 2012), such courses have become a major challenge for most universities in the United States and a big concern for others elsewhere, who have been wondering what to do to react. At this very moment in time, some are trying to replicate what the Americans have done, thus running a clear risk of being a poor copy of the original. Others seem to be aware of the fact that they can add value to the Open Education Movement (OEM), not simply by delivering content, but by providing support, guidance, feedback and student networking (Butcher, 2011).

Independently of MOOC, education institutions will need to experiment with new formats and strategies for teaching and learning to provide relevant, effective and high-quality learning experiences (Redecker et al., 2011).

The current discussion addresses the function that universities should have in this new context. Some consider that the accreditation and credentialisation of knowledge should be the clearest function of universities. However, others emphasise the content provision function or the learning support mission of higher education institutions. Further analysis will need to focus on the particular interest that publishing companies have in finding their way into university functions. Pearson has already started by offering Coursera an assessment system.

The informalisation of education seems to be an opportunity for business, especially for these kinds of companies coming into the higher education system. It may be somewhat difficult to conceive of the focus of education shifting from universities to companies as a result of open education, so further research on this issue will be needed too. In the meantime, an analysis of the business models currently used is of considerable interest.

The need for sustainability

In a study whose preliminary findings were presented at the European Foundation for Quality in e-Learning (EFQUEL) Innovation Forum, Yves Punie from the Institute for Prospective Technological Studies (IPTS) said that open education business models are in flux, with lots of experimentation and no established model apart from institutional, philanthropic and/or government/public funding (Haché & Punie, 2012).

The same study points out that there is a lack of literature and evidence on business and sustainability models, especially on real cost-effectiveness. They surveyed 14 initiatives, of which four were sustainable (balance of costs and returns), one had positive returns, and nine had costs higher than returns. The authors of the study also highlighted the fact that founders need to shift their practices from funding the creation of OER to investing in the adoption and re-use of existing OER, and also to take into account assessment, certification and accreditation.

Oddly, analysis of the sustainability issue in new ways of learning is something that is missing from most of the research that has been conducted. The failure of a project's sustainability or business model is, by definition, not the subject of research for that project (Friesen, 2009).

This number of the *Universities and Knowledge Society Journal (RUSC)* contains several wide-ranging articles on the informalisation of learning. Their broad approaches to the topic mean that there are still a lot of different conceptualisations of formal, non-formal and informal learning. The nature of their findings and conclusions is quite extensive too.

Josianne Basque suggests a conceptual tool – a collective knowledge map – that links intentional yet non-formal professional learning in the workplace, leading to the externalisation and sharing of tacit expertise in a university. Coughlan and Perryman are concerned about the poor impact of OER and OEP outside the higher education sector. Grounding their arguments in theories of informal learning, they propose a shift from the current focus towards a needs-led approach. A self-educating community of open practice and informal learning nurtured by collaborating academics is the basis of their model. Don Olcott, Jr introduces an approach for conceptualising the use of OER in non-formal education, arguing that the process for evaluating non-formal activities should be similar to the basic design principles used in formal education. It is an interesting approach because it tries to bring consistency to the issue of how non-formal education is used. He also states that further research on OER is needed to maximise their actual potential. By taking an in-depth look at the professionalisation practices of university lecturers, José Tejada suggests that professional sectors probably have a greater interest in the potential of non-formal and informal ways of learning. He is in favour of the creation of training networks that could develop into advice and support networks to help groups of lecturers and individuals as well, and points to internationalisation as an opportunity to broaden lecturers' perspectives.

Conclusions

Research on the informalisation of learning is still in its infancy. A better classification of approaches and experiences is also needed. OER are providing an enormous opportunity for practice in non-formal contexts, and MOOC will have to be analysed in depth to establish whether they represent real opportunities for learning in informal scenarios, or are simply attempts at formalising the informal. Concerns about their main aims and their sustainability are still on the agenda. What is clear, however, is that informal learning has found a perfect ally in ICT in general, and in online learning in particular.

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