

Futurelab Roundtable Discussion on Informal Learning

15 October 2008

We know that only 15% of young people's time is spent in schooling, and that there are increasing pressures upon this time in schools. There are also concerns about the quality of children's educational experience outside school. As such, we are beginning to witness calls for a '100% curriculum', in which the goals and activities of the school are continued into the remaining 85% of children's time. This one-way flow from school to home, however, raises a number of concerns for those educators who have researched informal learning:

1. There is evidence that young people who do not succeed in school may benefit from being able to learn in different ways outside the school setting.
2. There is evidence that many young people are engaging in rich activities outside the school setting, and that there is a failure of formal education to understand and value these activities.
3. There is evidence that the disconnect between formal and informal learning approaches may impact negatively on those from lower socio-economic or ethnically diverse backgrounds.

In October 2008, Futurelab hosted a roundtable discussion to probe these issues and to develop a better understanding of appropriate policy in relation to children's 'non-school time', with the following people from the education research, practitioner and policy sectors taking part:

- Sir William Atkinson, Headteacher, Phoenix High School
- Professor Sir Al Aynsley-Green, Children's Commissioner for England
- Hilary Hodgson, Head of Education, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation
- Professor Martin Hughes, Graduate School of Education, University of Bristol
- John Morgan, Institute of Education, University of London
- Estelle Morris, Baroness Morris of Yardley (House of Lords)
- Vanessa Nicholls, Director of Crime and Drugs Strategy, Home Office
- David Puttnam, Lord Puttnam of Queensgate CBE (House of Lords)
- Jo Shuter, Headteacher, Quintin Kynaston and Pimlico Schools, London
- Janey Walker, Head of Education & Managing Editor, Commissioning, Channel 4
- Dr Leila Walker, Senior Researcher, Futurelab (Chair)
- Dr Felicity Wikeley, Department of Education, University of Bath

Following is a summary of the thoughts and opinions expressed by the group, which all participants have agreed can be disseminated.

Relationships

Informal learning fosters valuable adult-child relationships – adults are perceived in very different ways when interacting with young people in informal activities, even if these same adults are also working with them in a formal capacity. Typically, in informal settings, adults are more likely to be seen as experts in the activity being undertaken, eg sailing but, in a formal setting, they are more likely to be seen as teachers rather than experts in the activity, eg maths. Children need to be able to relate to teachers (and other adults involved in education) as human beings first and foremost, with relationships built on mutual respect – and this means teachers taking risks and changing their identity to become co-learners rather than 'knowledge holders'.

The value of informal learning

Informal learning is valuable because it is, by its very nature, not formal and, as such, fosters a wide range of valuable skills and behaviours that can be transferred to more formal settings - not least of which are improved self-esteem and a greater tolerance and respect for others. Young people value informal learning because it is actually 'owned' by them and tends to relate to their own experiences and interests in a way that formal education often does not. However, young people often don't realise that informal learning is valuable and this may be due to the rigid measures in place in formal education - we need to widen our understanding of what success means and, when considering the value of informal learning, ensure that we don't apply the same forms of measurement as with formal education.

Formal education

Schools/formal education should be open to being influenced by and recognising the types of learning approaches seen outside school. Informal learning manages to find a trigger that 'switches people on' to learning, and formal education would do well to mimic this effect, but schools need to take chances to make this happen. We need to ensure that teachers continue to be passionate about young people so that they can inspire them - and maybe the recruitment and training of teachers needs to change to make this happen.

Knowledge and curriculum

In this increasingly technology-enabled world, we need to change our concept of curriculum and base it around topics that children want to learn (those that are relevant to their lives and experiences), as is the case with informal learning. Only when this is done (in collaboration with teachers and other education stakeholders) are we really able to say that we are personalising learning.

Society's view of children

More and more, we are seeing fewer opportunities for rich learning experiences outside school, fuelled by society's increasing intolerance towards young people (eg 'hoodies' stories in the media), fading trust between the generations, and safety concerns (where we should be equipping young people to deal with potentially unsafe situations, both on- and off-line, rather than shielding them from these experiences completely). We need to recognise that some 'hanging around' is extremely beneficial (Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that children have the right to play), and we need to help young people to learn from and reflect upon their 'hanging around'.

Education and exclusion

A range of factors affect the quality of learning experiences, both inside and outside school, available to young people. We need to think and work hard to ensure that issues such as social class and ethnic background do not continue to have a negative effect on young people's education. We need to ensure that the inequalities that exist in formal education are not duplicated with informal learning - widening the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children.

Technology

We need to support children to use the technologies that they use outside school in formal education, eg computer games, DVDs, mobile phones and particularly, as a key medium for children and families, TV. This will require both schools and local authorities to take more positive views on the educational value of social technologies such as mobile phones.

Policy

In order to make a real difference and recognise the value of out-of-school learning, the policy sector needs to nominate a person to work across government departments, with an associated budget, to lead on this area of work.

Appendix – Questions considered:

1. What do we know about informal and out-of-school learning? What does it offer of value to young people?
2. Should schools attempt to make informal learning visible?
3. What can schools learn from informal learning practices?
4. Do children have a right to spend time being 'unproductive'?
5. What relationship between schooling and children's lives outside school should be promoted?