

Informal or Formal Learning

Cook, Pachler and Bradley (2009) suggest that the key defining aspect of informal learning is one of agency: that is who determines the learning goals. They view informal learning as a natural activity by a self-motivated learner. This could be in a group, without a tutor being aware of such activity; it could be either intentional or tacit learning, in response to some stimulus; it could be what they term 'serendipitous', without the learner necessarily being aware of what is being learnt.

So, who determines the trajectory and outcomes of learning – the institution, or the learner? Should learning only be intentional, or is incidental learning equally valid? Formal learning provides the structure, signposts, and scaffolding for a beginning learner. Informal learning, on the other hand, builds on the foundation of existing knowledge, and a sense of context that provides the framework for understanding.

Some working definitions for formal, informal and non-formal learning have been provided by The European Commission on Education and Training. The question of whether these are seen as a blueprint for further work, or as a way of recognising the needs and progress of the individual, rather than those of the organisation, is yet to be resolved. What is of further concern is that these definitions (and embedded assumptions) are predicated on both a utilitarian basis (*recognised in the labour market and by society in general*) and are restricted to adults.

“Learning that takes place in formal education and training systems is traditionally the most visible and recognised in the labour market and by society in general. In recent years, however, there has been a growing appreciation of the importance of learning in non-formal and informal settings. New approaches are needed to identify and validate these ‘invisible’ learning experiences.

However, definitions and understandings of what counts as formal, non-formal and informal learning can vary between countries. At European level, the following definitions are used:

Formal learning is typically provided by education or training institutions, with structured learning objectives, learning time and learning support. It is intentional on the part of the learner and leads to certification.

Non-formal learning is not provided by an education or training institution and typically does not lead to certification. However, it is intentional on the part of the learner and has structured objectives, times and support.

Informal learning results from daily activities related to work, family life or leisure. It is not structured and usually does not lead to certification. In most cases, it is unintentional on the part of the learner.”

The meaning-making process of Braided Learning is emerging from the observation of online communication, as communities of professionals mature in digital competence (Haythornthwaite, 2007). These first three stages of Braided Learning were established when the communities being researched were only using email. The process showing how social interaction can translate into professional action relates to the four socio-cultural communicative strata identified in multimodal theory: discourse, design, production and distribution (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001). As the MirandaNet participants have expanded and developed the range of technologies and affordances used, so the concept of Braided Learning has accommodated these and expanded into the liminal spaces that are no longer constrained by temporal or physical boundaries, and are therefore truly mobile.

This extension of Braided Learning theory builds on evidence that the praxis of those participants in the liminal space of the MirandaMods is one that constructs knowledge: ‘the working heuristic of discovery’ (Bruner, 1974). They take for granted the constraints and difficulties within which they work. What they produce is a result of their discovery of the ways in which the information given, created and found, with the tools in their hands and the time available – all transmuted into their knowledge creation. The artefact they create is in the Representational Space, and the manifestation of their conceptual development.