

*Educación popular, which is characterized by features such as learner-centred learning, recognizing the social context and building on learners' individual experiences, has proved to be a successful learning approach in Latin America. In his contribution, Bernd Overwien, who lectures at the Education Department of Berlin TU, explores the question of the extent to which these positive experiences can be made use of for adult education as a whole.*

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## **Informal Learning and Educación Popular**

In the 1970s, Ivan Illich was already seriously criticizing the dominance of school education and pointing to the consequent devaluing of other forms of learning. Meaningful learning was, he argued, defined purely in terms of school attendance, and its value in terms of grades and certificates. He counters with the following observation:

“Learning is actually the human activity that least needs manipulation by others. Most learning is not the result of teaching. It is rather the outcome of unhindered participation in a meaningful environment.”

Ivan Illich's stress on the subjective role of learners gives rise to the question to what extent learner-centred approaches to learning such

as educación popular provide a "meaningful environment" for informal learning. The assumption is that educación popular is successful because it opens up nonformal learning to informal learning, thereby making fuller use of skills, including learning skills, which people have to a greater or lesser degree acquired in everyday life. The linking of education with its social context is, moreover, something that is emphasised both in educación popular and in informal learning (although to a smaller extent). It is true that informal learning does take place in schools (e.g. through the hidden curriculum), but little reference is made to the lives of people who are not members of the middle classes. In educación popular, on the other hand, there is direct reference to the resources and skills of the people addressed.

In the opening pages of the UNESCO Faure Report, which appeared in the 1970s, it is observed that informal, non-institutionalized forms of learning predominate in large parts of the world, where they are still the only type of education available to millions of people. The following statement is then made with regard to "modern" societies:

"It is a fact that the child – and the adult – receives a large part of his education directly from his environment, his family, his environment. What he learns from this is of that much greater importance because it determines the ability to take in school education which, in turn, provides the learner with the framework that enables him to arrange the knowledge gained from his environment in concepts."

Over and above these considerations, which are occasionally overlooked by educationists, it is stressed that "education" was part of daily life in all societies until recently, whether in the family or in groups, in the performance of joint tasks, in the relationship between master and apprentice, or in play. Faure examines the significance of this fact for school education. The discussion here centres on the extent to which educación popular makes use of these forms of learning.

As Freire has suggested, informal education works differently from school education. The latter follows the banking principle, according to which a learner takes in new knowledge in exactly the same way that money is paid into an account. Learners are thus regarded as "empty shells" which need to be filled. Learners are objects. Traditional education pays too little attention to the question of what learners have already learnt about a particular topic. Learning is presumed to be exclusive and to take place within a pedagogical hierarchy: at one level, the teacher, who passes on knowledge, and at another, the learners, who take in knowledge. However, in a society which provides a wide range of learning opportunities, it is quite probable that learners will already have experience of learning about widely varying topics in some other way, and this knowledge is thereby debased. By contrast, learning is seen in educación popular as a continuous process of confrontation with the world that is accessible to the individual. Both the learner (the subject) and his or her environment are changed in the process. Learning is no longer a mere agglomeration of knowledge, but a constant process of reshaping that knowledge.

Informal learning in daily life is largely uncontrolled. What has been learnt previously about a topic is often a main prerequisite for further learning. This points to the significance of the directions which someone's life has taken. Informal learning is marked overall by many chance events. Learning takes place in the prevailing social, family, communicative and productive contexts. Informal learning also occurs in family conversations, for example when one generation learns from another, or in other group exchanges. Within cultures in which writing does not play an essential part, conversation is no doubt one of the most important forms of informal learning. By way of example, mention should be made of the "griots" (story-tellers) of West Africa. The stories told are internalized and may be used by the hearer in a modified form to provide himself or herself with skills. Identification with "informal teachers", and hence the belief that is placed in them, play an important part in the learning process. The individual ability to choose

from among the resultant range of learning opportunities acquires crucial importance. Informal learning is also both a prerequisite for and a continuation of formal and nonformal learning. In informal learning, connections are made to other learning processes as the basis for deeper learning. Ideally, formal and nonformal learning experiences will have influenced informal learning and provided structures for the perception of everyday reality.

The concept of informal learning is frequently used in the theoretical context to describe what will not fit elsewhere. Definitions of the term "informal learning" generally start from the way in which learning is organized, and designate learning as informal if it takes place outside formal institutions and nonformally organized processes and is not funded by these.

Informal learning also comes up in the debate about "lifelong learning". The important question is asked, to what extent informal learning can be coherent. The coherence of informal learning is no doubt always dependent on the coherence of the subject matter in the learning environment. If someone, for example, visits an exhibition, the learning effect will depend in large measure on what system is used for the arrangement of the exhibition. Other significant factors are the viewer's previous knowledge and the learning context. It is of considerable relevance whether the learner's learning structures (perception, ordering, evaluation and ability to reflect) coincide with the structures of the subject matter, in this case the exhibition. To take another example, if, in discussing with an older person his or her experience of the past, someone learns something about a particular aspect of history, the degree to which what is learnt can be systematized will naturally depend on whether the older person is systematic in his or her account. Prior knowledge is on this occasion necessary for coherence, and in this case for the integration of what is newly learnt. Since this prior knowledge, like any other, connects with other learning experiences, some sort of system for self-learning also needs to be developed as

early as possible. Lastly, learners must be able to frame questions for themselves and thus to distinguish what is important from items that are not of immediate or indeed of any interest to them. We may therefore put forward the theory that some form of system must be the starting point for informal learning if it is to last. Such a system is closely linked to the relevant personality and its social environment. In the context of educación popular, the coherence of a piece of learning will depend on integration into the social context and links with the generative topics identified.

Another matter that needs to be discussed in this context is the role of the teachers. Assuming that informal learning is increasingly admitted to the learning process, will teachers in future be chiefly organizers of learning? Will they monitor and support learners or groups of learners more than they do today, and explore sources of knowledge with them? How will they be enabled to make themselves and learners aware of everyday informal learning in order to exploit its potential? Does the role of educators in educación popular not go a long way towards meeting these requirements? Finally, the members of a learning group have to be clear from the outset that they already know something, and that they have relevant knowledge drawn from experience and can generalize from it. The seals and certificates of formal education are nonetheless withheld from them.

As a matter of principle, the notion of informal learning takes the viewpoint of the learner, the subject, as its starting point. If the participant is not trusted, he or she will be given no latitude for informal learning, which will itself be accorded little value. Educación popular does trust the participant as a matter of principle. Learning that starts with the learner is part of the approach. This applies not only to literacy courses and other topics for adults, but also to work with children and young people. The children's movement in Latin America, for example, which is part of educación popular, relies throughout on the continual construction of relevant learning environments. If people are to organize

themselves so that they can represent their own interests, this can only come about through concentrated informal learning. With the aid of politically and socially motivated educators, children and young people have made their own learning space, the purpose of which is that they should support and learn from one another, tell of experiences in their daily work and thereby strengthen feelings of solidarity and their own worth, and that they should be enabled to represent their own interests. Learning thus takes place both through exchanges of experience and by other means such as the organization of demonstrations, production of newspapers and discussions with the press and local politicians. The preparation of all these activities demands closely supported group work, the conduct of which is nonetheless largely in the hands of the children and young people. The educators see themselves as "facilitators" in the spirit of educación popular. Informal learning, it is clear, cannot be separated in this context from social learning. For work with a wider public, for the preparation of cultural activities, and for the expression of political opinions, a high level of informal learning is required.

Because of the differences in the structure of society, it must be assumed that effective informal learning calls for an even greater degree of organization in the countries of the South than in those of the North. In addition to organization of a political and social nature, this may come about through integration into the world of work, either production or service activities. This need not necessarily occur at the individual, micro-enterprise level, as has been seen in the experience of the "Organizaciones Económicas Populares" in Chile, which were part of the resistance to the Pinochet dictatorship. The OEPs were founded by the inhabitants of poor neighbourhoods with the aim of producing and distributing goods and services. They set out quite deliberately to pool the funds and skills of the individual members of the organization. The activities went beyond mere production for survival, so that members could strengthen their own identity, play a part in changing political and social structures, and improve their quality of life. It was not only a small

group of inhabitants of the slum areas of Santiago de Chile who were involved. In 1982, there were some 280 OEPs in the region of the capital. By 1991, the number had grown to almost 2400, embracing around 80,000 people. Common vegetable gardens and soup kitchens were set up, together with cooperatives in various fields of work, social housing construction groups, and groups concerned with alleviating members' debts or with health care. What all these groups had in common was that their economic activities were based upon an economy of solidarity.

Informal learning is to a greater or lesser degree structured in accordance with the participant's own structures or those of the newly created, or existing, learning environment. The effectiveness of informal learning thus depends very heavily on key skills such as the abilities to organize and communicate. It should also be stressed in this connection that earlier learning experiences are not always suitable ground on which to build. Teachers may, for example develop structures which do not facilitate the meaningful integration of what is learnt informally. The question arises as to whether previous learning experiences can be corrected. In the future, it may be that learning which focuses on the learner will move in a more strongly individualistic direction, into what today is separated from learning and regarded as a therapeutic activity.

Informal learning is not necessarily reflective learning. It is also not always conscious learning. It often consists simply in becoming practised in certain techniques or ways of behaving. The opportunity for educational action lies in making these methods of learning useable. Informal learning frequently only becomes productive when it is accompanied by reflection and association, that is, when the individual person becomes aware of the various elements of the informal learning process. Only when acquired patterns of behaviour and certain techniques are questioned, can further learning take place. Links with previous

knowledge are required if insights are to be gained that take the learner further.

It should have become obvious that educational action often means merely providing the stimulus for the reworking and exploitation of previous learning experiences, giving new impetuses along the way, so to speak. This may occur through the comparatively formal learning of necessary factual knowledge and the development in the abstract of natural laws. Often enough this is necessary, but it does not contradict what has been said above. An electrician, for example, would face considerable difficulties in dealing with many practical working situations without a knowledge of Ohm's law. He should also know the conductivity of particular materials. Similar examples could be adduced for numerous other occupations. The question, however, is always how people managing their own learning can learn this "content" and connect it with the knowledge they have acquired elsewhere. It is evident that gaining a certificate at the end of a course of mechanical learning says nothing about what skills a person has acquired or whether these will endure. Skills do not become active until connections are made. The focus is indeed on this point in the Freirean approach to education. The educational process of becoming aware, and a division of roles which generally deviates from that which prevails in formal education, lead to the acquisition of the key skill of "being able to make connections".

It may be a commonplace in adult education to postulate that there should always be a link between learning and the learners' world of experience and that a more abstract learning process must be made possible through a joint practice of learning. In formal education, especially when the division into subjects is quite rigid, the same argument is far from self-evident, and this applies equally to universities. It is of course obvious that the possibility of linking in to the learners' world of experience ceases after a certain time in engineering, for example, or chemistry, but it is possible to connect with learners' learning habits. In the past there have been plenty of successful attempts to carry out pro-

ject-based teaching and courses in fields of learning that were usually far removed from the everyday world, by employing informal learning methods and habits. In the universities, these attempts have never been particularly widespread. In schools, it is still only individual teachers or teaching staffs who are working in this direction, in which increased amounts of work may be called for, although this is certainly influenced by the inadequate conditions of school teaching. A cognitive, demagogic approach which ignores pupils' learning potential still predominates, destroying rather than building up the key skills that are so eagerly demanded by the politicians.

There are other experiences. In the context of a teaching project on bilingual education, a team of teachers began implementing the principles of educación popular in one Berlin school. They started from the recognition that the anthropological concept of culture is an essential instrument of Freire's political literacy, and that the focus is on everyday culture. The teachers proceeded on the assumption that Turkish pupils were disadvantaged and oppressed in German schools because their language and everyday experience were ignored. The aim was to raise awareness of everyday culture and, by taking it as the starting point, to achieve greater self-confidence and willingness to learn. The foreign children's everyday problems and conflict situations were also intended to become part of the learning process. A first step was to make the link with the pupils' mother tongue. On this basis, the children started making surveys among their parents and fellow pupils in order to capture their everyday reality. The children in the first grade then worked on problems such as their living conditions, which they, in contrast to the teachers, did not regard as particularly problematic, and on the relationships between individual family members, i.e., on social relations within the family. Further problems, which were expressed in the choice of key words, were how to deal with fear of the dogs that are everywhere in Berlin-Kreuzberg and, at a quite different level, everything to do with sheep and the major social event of the sacrificial feast. Another important topic for the children was the punks that are

to be met with in Berlin-Kreuzberg, a group who are regarded by their parents with considerable prejudice.

The most productive topic was nonetheless parents' jobs. The effects, such as the mother's absence or the father's return home from work, were discussed in lessons. More extensive work was done on the key situation "Father comes home from work". Role plays showed up the family's feelings and problems. Further surveys of parents led to a partial removal of the restrictions on conversation within the family since communication of this sort does not conform to usual everyday customs. This very "holistic" form of supplementary literacy was obviously successful.

The positive effect of this approach can perhaps also be explained by the fact that the teachers moved over, so to say, into the children's world of experience and culture of informal learning. Their everyday culture, seen as a nexus of social conditions, associated with traditions and confronted with the interculturalism of Berlin-Kreuzberg, is the field in which they learn informally outside school. If the school does not connect with this learning, the children are necessarily disadvantaged. If the children's everyday culture is blanked out and overlaid by a "culture of silence", then the learning experienced within their everyday culture will also be affected. Their informal everyday learning within the family and their social environment will be devalued. Becoming aware of these relationships is thus also important for informal learning, which thereby acquires value in the learners' own eyes. It should also be noted that a large part of learning during socialization takes place through dialogue. Hence, the Freirean approach directly connects with the life histories and worlds of the learners. Informal learning is also largely learning by imitation. Imitation, however, means not only direct replication but also varying degrees of copying of complete or partial sequences of actions. Besides the proximity of the learning process to learners' lives, communication also plays an essential part – and although it may seem somewhat crass to mention this fact, it is neces-

sary in the light of the general obsession with school learning. Large parts of this communication, of these dialogues, form part of informal learning.

The role of the teacher in Paulo Freire's pedagogy is marked by reticence. She or he creates an atmosphere of dialogue and is ideally drawn closely into the process of recognition that is encouraged, together with the learners. The problem formulation method that is used to this end is based on the learning experiences of the learners. The informal learning that is familiar from everyday life has a similar basic structure. In education that follows the banking principle, on the other hand, the teacher is the purveyor of objective knowledge, to the creation of which neither he/she nor the pupils have usually contributed. What obtains then is a relationship of power in which the learners are passive objects of the teacher's action. The relationship between teachers and learners roughly sketched out here is a reflection of basic structures. We may proceed on the assumption that discussion of educational reform has led to other ways of proceeding among many individual teachers. Procedures that call for active involvement are often practised. Nevertheless, the basic principle described by Freire still prevails. The reality is passivity among learners, especially in formal schooling. Particularly in adult education, and notably even in vocational continuing education, the situation is often different. Interestingly, in the wide range of literature about learning in organizations and learning organizations themselves, Paulo Freire is often referred to as an inspiring educationist with a learner-oriented way of working. In line with Freirean thinking, the question naturally arises as to why in-company continuing education has not moved away from relationships of power. Without pursuing this question further, it is fair to suggest that only those learners are called for in today's highly complex production and service industries who are prepared actively to engage with new problems and issues. This may mean a measure of personal liberty for learners, but equally demands a comparatively democratic and open learning environment for the learning process.

Let us return to the question of whether Freirean pedagogy is particularly suited to making links with informal ways of learning. The break from the traditional pupil-teacher relationship that has been outlined above is certainly a prerequisite. The use of dialogue as the principle of learning in the learning situation we are considering does connect with the learning experiences of those involved. It is obvious that much informal everyday learning occurs through dialogue. The inclusion of this method of learning in a conscious attempt at education thus makes the link with learners' learning experiences, so that superfluous barriers to learning are at least not set up in the first place. In the Freirean approach, teachers act rather as coordinators, increasingly withdrawing from the process of learning through dialogue. The participants are ultimately intended to organize their own learning. The use of dialogue in the group enables learners, by learning informally, jointly to draw closer to the object of their process of recognition. The learning process takes place in this case between the subject of the learning (the learner) and the object of learning, but also between subjects. If we assume, with Freire, that becoming aware and thereby gaining a new perspective of the mutability of the world is a step towards liberation, then we can also say that this recognition is a prerequisite for all learning that is truly self-directed. It is indispensable for learners to develop structures that will allow them to arrange what they have learnt in some kind of order.

In view of the increasing abandonment of traditional modes of living, educational practice also faces the task of opening up access to realities that can no longer be experienced directly. In this attempt, it should be remembered – and it is all too easily forgotten – that traditional methods of learning still exist, despite the ubiquitous presence of school in industrialized and less industrialized countries. Although it may rightly be suspected that these traditional methods lack structure or may even be counterproductive in passing on outdated values and norms, they should not be seen merely as obstacles to any intended educational intervention, but as methods of learning that may have a mutually pro-

ductive interrelationship with the intended learning, whether formal or nonformal. If learners are not viewed simply as passive recipients (objects) by educational institutions but as active learners (subjects) in relation to their own educational development, then the integration of informal learning into the consciousness of teachers and learners is unavoidable. It is obvious that informal learning is very largely tied to previous learning and prior experience, and hence plays a part in defining life histories through social reality.

In educational discussion, the concept of informal education, and hence informal learning, has long served as a catch-all term for whatever does not fit elsewhere. This may be because informal education has been thought insufficiently susceptible to planning. This in turn is connected with the fact that educational planners have based themselves too much on objective needs and too little on the potential of learners. In the UNESCO Faure Report, however, which appeared in 1972, specific suggestions are made as to how to encourage self-learning. The charmed circle of educationists has obviously not taken such suggestions sufficiently seriously, though even then there was discussion of the need to manage a flood of information. In the quarter century since that Report was drafted, the information available has expanded exponentially. It is no accident that research in the field of adult education, vocational continuing education, and latterly initial vocational education, has to adopt informal means of acquiring skills and knowledge. Especially in computer learning, meaning both learning by means of computer and learning to master technology, informal learning provides an appropriate way of acquiring relevant skills.

To date there is little educational research on the questions raised here. The need for it is obvious.