



## **Cultural Catalysts in Informal Lifelong Learning: Learning and Teaching Throughout Life**

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### **Abstract**

*Major components of Lifelong Learning are learning through various ways during the entire lifespan. Informal learning, in particular, takes place daily in all kinds of situations, permeates all activities and influences people of all ages and walks of life. This presentation focuses on informal learning's role in preparing people to be both students and teachers of others. It analyses the "learn by example" approach, in which life lessons pass on from generation to generation. Certain cultural products and processes, such as literature, proverbs, tales, work as cultural catalysts by facilitating learning through dialogue and the development of lifelong learning skills. An alternative interdisciplinary tool 'Idiolect Definition' is used to analyse selected texts, clarify the practice of dialogue and learning skills.*

### **Introduction**

Living. Learning. Combinations of these two words, such as 'learning to earn a living', or 'life lessons', point out their close connection. The notion that throughout life one continually learns, as well as that by learning, life becomes fuller and better, makes it necessary to draw attention not only to formal, but also to informal ways of learning, fundamental, necessary and valuable in their own right [3]. Being part of learning partnerships or following the route of self directed learning, benefiting from intergenerational learning or having access to modern technological educational solutions, it is clear that there are multiple ways leading to information, learning, knowledge, but it is always easier when there are suggestions on how to use the 'colourful' map of learning experiences.

### **Informal Learning**

Its versatility makes it attractive, as well as difficult to be adequately researched. Informal learning is so diverse that people often do not recognize the learning activity although it arises from their interests and takes place outside a dedicated learning environment [6] [10]. Its intrinsic value can lead to personal satisfaction and helps people share their expertise becoming not only lifelong learners but also lifelong teachers to each other. As it builds on people's strengths it also helps address people's more problematic areas. Often it is used to compensate for poor formal learning experiences and lead to exploration of new learning opportunities. Learning interventions in the workplace, which include informal learning practices, can help make tacit skills more explicit and "positive deployment and recognition of capabilities gained through informal learning in and out of paid work sustains learning and contributes to positive learning outcomes" [8] (p. 2). Eraut [7] has pointed that an environment that encourages and supports a person to respond to a challenge can help boost the person's confidence and motivation to learn.

Similarly to the technological term 'broadband', informal learning is 'wideband'. It covers the whole spectrum of settings and means - family, school, workplace, company of friends, social events, museums, libraries, clubs, media, Web- to name just a few. According to [5] it can contribute to indicators such as better relationships between people from different backgrounds in their local communities, civic participation and volunteering, adult participation in sport, use of libraries, visit to museums or self-reported measure of wellbeing.



Informal learning does not take place in a vacuum, but is interrelated with everyday living, family, workplace and seen within a broader framework, constituting a vital part of the lifelong learning culture. Either learning from others, or learning with others or learning on one's own developing the conditions of a positive learning environment fosters the continuous learning, growth and reflection of people [9]. As Costa and Kallick [4] state "educators must persist in developing self directed learners in an other-directed education era...We want to see students develop a love of learning and not feel solely dependent on the judgment of others to determine the value of what they are learning".

## Cultural Catalysts

Cultural catalysts pass and capsule the common sense and life lessons learnt in a society. In our age of global mobility and communication there is a special value for the use of cultural catalysts in informal lifelong learning. Cultural catalysts provide informal lifelong lessons by teaching common sense. They are messages that travel across time and place, and are used in the socialization process. They can be expressed through art, literature, tales, proverbs, stories, talks, poems, songs. Cultural catalysts become important as they are messages that can pass through boundaries and reach people of different countries, generations or cultures. They refer both to the cognitive and the emotional level and they motivate their 'reader' to enter a dialogue with them, even if this is only a virtual dialectic process, present also in monologue. This dialectic process can be facilitated by using a qualitative analysis tool, the Idiolect Definition (ID) [11]. Words have a dictionary definition, which explains their literary meaning. But, beside that, people attach personal meaning to words according to their own unique individual experience, giving them a new perspective. ID follows the speaker's line of argument, which expresses the new meaning attached to a word, and through that a speaker's or a group's individual experience.

The reader-analyst using the ID approach does not need to have any previous experience in language mechanisms, but follow the natural language mechanism. So, the reader has to answer two questions in relation to the theme under discussion:

- a. What's New and stays with you? The reader searches for the new and unexpected meaning of a word, which might add to the reader's knowledge, feelings or action level.
- b. How does the New come to you? The second question searches for the argumentation that justifies the associations he makes with a word. So, the reader searches for the stepping stones, the argumentation, which clarifies the explicit or implicit arguments, which usually take the format of 'not A, but B, ... so...therefore', terms such as 'always', 'never', repetition, paraphrases, metaphors, personifications, rhetorical questions etc. Textual evidence supports the answers to these questions and they can be used as a basis for dialogue with other readers.

As an example of informal learning which is easily understood by both adults and children are Aesop's Fables [1]. With the help of the ID this paper analyses two fables to present Aesop's approach to learning. In Aesop's Fables learning comes through action and knowledge is a product of trial and error. Although the fables are entertaining, they have a clear teaching purpose and lead to self reflection.

## The Two Crabs

*One fine day two Crabs came out of their home to take a stroll on the sand. "Child," said the mother, "you are walking very ungracefully. You should accustom yourself to walking straight forward without twisting from side to side."*

*"Pray, mother," said the young one, "do but set the example yourself, and I will follow you."*

Example is the best precept.

In this fable the answer of the young crab stresses the relationship between the words 'example' and 'follow' and refers to the imitation of patterns of behaviour and of role models, such as parents, who usually point out to children what they ought to do. The New that comes through the young crab's answer is the succinct observations that come from the younger generation and not from somebody who is old and wise, according to a stereotype. The young crab observes that it is easier to observe and analyse somebody else's behaviour rather than our own. So, people can become judgmental of other people, concentrating on others' mistakes, and not being aware of their own wrongdoing.



The fable focuses on learning by example and points the significance of habit. As Aristotle [2] in the *Poetics* (p. 8) had stated “First, the instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood, one difference between him and other animals being that he is the most imitative of living creatures, and through imitation learns his earliest lessons...To learn is the liveliest pleasure...Thus the reason why men enjoy seeing a likeness is, that in contemplating it they find themselves learning or inferring, and saying perhaps, 'Ah, that is he'.”

This unexpected relationship between the two words takes the form of a statement, which basically agrees with the statement of the mother crab. But instead of replying to that statement and using the ‘I’ person, it continues using the ‘You’ person form –‘you do’, ‘you set the example’. Even in the phrase ‘I will follow you’, the actions of the Other become the example and take precedence over the behaviour of the young crab.

## The Crow and the Pitcher

A Crow, half-dead with thirst, came upon a Pitcher which had once been full of water; but when the Crow put its beak into the mouth of the Pitcher he found that only very little water was left in it, and that he could not reach far enough down to get at it. He tried, and he tried, but at last had to give it up in despair. Then a thought came to him, and he took a pebble and dropped it into the Pitcher. Then he took another pebble and dropped it into the Pitcher. Then he took another pebble and dropped that into the Pitcher. Then he took another pebble and dropped it into the Pitcher. Then he took another pebble and dropped that into the Pitcher. Then he took another pebble and dropped it into the Pitcher. Then he took another pebble and dropped that into the Pitcher. At last, at last, he saw the water mount up near him; and after casting in a few more pebbles he was able to quench his thirst and save his life. Little by little does the trick.

The unexpected element in this fable is the phrase ‘a thought came to him’. Aesop has described crow’s many efforts to drink water and the despair he felt by not succeeding. The breakthrough came through intuition to use of the pebble as a tool. The solution is as unexpected as most solutions in a problem. The creative thinking in problem solving lies in seeing ordinary things in an extraordinary way and thinking outside the box.

The new meaning comes through the repetition of the phrase ‘then he took another pebble and dropped that into the Pitcher’. It illustrates the boring, but necessary following of a sequence of actions in order to achieve a goal.

## Conclusions

Informal learning is the oldest learning mode. This paper focuses on a specific area of it, the cultural catalysts, which ‘teach’ life skills through material which is not primarily educational, such as art, literature, proverbs, fables. Analysing their meaning and format can widen our understanding of common threads among cultures and timelines and broaden our knowledge base. Their endurance through time and acceptance as distilled common sense makes them worthy of closer and more systematic analysis, which helps us reflect on things, otherwise taken for granted. Thus, ID can be a useful tool not only for teachers or researchers, but to all who wish to undertake the effort of tapping and understanding life skills lessons given in multiple forms. It can be used in self directed learning or in mutually benefit endeavours, such as intergenerational learning for reading between the lines, briefly and concisely summarising the life skills lessons. It is an approach aiming at empowering the learner to become an efficient reader aware of the potential of texts, the hidden life skills lessons in them and the attitudes that shape our perspectives.

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