Informal learning in older adults – the Doing2Learn journey

Brec’hed Piette, Sheila Hughes and Shan Ashton, Bangor University, Wales, United Kingdom

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The focus of this paper is informal learning in adults, especially adults over the age of 50. We will report on work that was carried out as part of a Grundtvig funded project – Doing2Learn. The project was a collaborative one between six institutions based in Finland, France, Romania, Slovakia, Italy and Wales who worked together over a period of two years (2008-2010) to develop new approaches in informal learning designed to engage the older learner. Each institution had their own group of learners, mainly people over fifty with limited educational qualifications and no recent experience of lifelong learning. The approach developed in working with the Doing2Learn group in North Wales was rooted in community development practice and on work undertaken in a previous Grundtvig older learner’s project (www.cross-cooking.eu) & work done for Carnegie Trust UK’s Rural Action Research Programme (Ashton & Collis 2010). Work undertaken in a previous project (funded by HEFCW and the ESRC) through the Welsh Education Research Network (WERN) whose aim was to develop and improve approaches to researching and evaluating informal learning (Piette 2009) provides a useful counterpoint around which to further explore informal learning in the older adult. The WERN project was undertaken by staff working in Lifelong learning units in three different Welsh universities – Bangor, Swansea and Glamorgan. The main activity of this project was the sharing of experiences, and the building of research capacity in lifelong learning, specifically in relation to informal learning.

In recent years the educational policy emphasis in the UK has been primarily on vocational and employment related accredited learning, and there is little state funding now available for any other sort of adult learning. This has led to a diminishing emphasis on informal learning in policy documents, and a lack of awareness (among policy-makers at least) of the links between informal and formal learning. The situation in Wales is similar to that in the rest of the UK but needs to be considered separately as educational policy and funding in the UK is devolved to the separate administrations of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. In part due to extensive and successful lobbying of Welsh Assembly Government ministers and senior civil servants by NIACE (National Association for Adult and Continuing Education), UALL (University Association of Lifelong Learning) and other organisations, there is somewhat more sympathy to a broader view of lifelong
learning in Wales than is perhaps the case in England. For instance a recent (2010) Welsh Assembly Government publication on adult and community learning indicated that a small proportion of the budget for adult and community learning could be used for non-accredited learning, including informal learning (although it needs to be noted that the budget for adult and community learning is small and has been cut in recent years. The same document, drawing on research carried out by Schuller and associates (2004) also recognised the wider benefits of learning:

those who take part in learning in adult life are more likely to have flexible attitudes, and are less likely to be intolerant of the views of others or involved in crime. (2010 p.4)

The importance of learning in later life is also featured in the Welsh Assembly Government’s ‘Strategy for Older People in Wales’ (2008), which says that:

Older learners are also an integral strand in DCELLS’ work on an adult community learning strategy (ACL). Recognising barriers faced by some learners including older people in many instances, this work will take account of formal, informal and non-accredited learning offered through the community learning route.

Among researchers, the study of informal learning has generally been at the margins of educational research (Duguid, Slade and Schugurensky 2006). This is partly because informal learning is often not recognised as learning and may take place away from traditional educational environments. This is perhaps particularly the case when learning is part of other activities within groups and communities, for example voluntary work or community development activities, and may not in fact be recognised by those participating in it as learning at all. Research into informal learning has also been bedevilled by problems of definition and identity (Malcolm, Hodkinson and Colley, 2003) For instance, how can informal learning be defined in a way that is inclusive, but not so broad as to be meaningless? There is in fact no agreement on the definition of informal learning, but an interesting one is offered by Cullen et al (2000):

the active engagement by citizens in the construction, interpretation and often, re-shaping of their own social identity and social reality.

This definition emphasises the transformative and empowering nature of informal learning, and as such is quite an appropriate one to use in the context of the Doing2Learn project.

However despite these problems, research into informal learning has increased and approaches that use, for example, a ‘learning journeys’ approach have identified the importance of informal learning as a starting point of ‘journeys’ towards accredited learning, employment and voluntary work (for example, Burke and Jackson 2007,
Connolly, Rees and Furlong, 2008). While this increase in research interest in informal learning is to be welcomed the idea of a ‘learning journey’ is itself potentially problematic in that the idea of a learning journey would seem to presuppose an individualistic approach to learning. As Harrison (2003) says:

learner as a traveller suggests a certain category of person: an autonomous and enterprising individual, rationally choosing the mode, pace, direction and destination of their learning journey.

Harrison goes on to argue that the ‘learning journey’ approach, particularly when applied to informal learning is potentially appealing to policy makers as it can be fitted into a model of adult learning based on credit accumulation and transfer, targets and learning outcomes. This approach to informal learning is reflected in the language used in the WAG document on Adult and Community Learning mentioned above which gives as an example of the kind of informal learning it wishes to support, the provision of ‘tasters’, that is as a step (probably a fairly short and cheap one) towards undertaking the main part of an individual’s learning journey’ which it can be assumed is accredited provision and a qualification.

A different approach to informal learning begins with community, with emphasis on collective reflection, narrative, dialogue, transgression and building resilience (Rahman 1993; Gilligan et al 2006; McNair 2000 – cited in Ashton & Collis 2010). This approach involves working with groups to develop learning activities that can play a part in the social and economic development and regeneration of a community. This is known as a ‘community development approach’ which has as a defining feature, the development of programmes of learning in dialogue with communities and participants (Tett 2010, p.25). These two approaches to looking at the impact of learning, that is the impact on individuals, both in terms of wider benefits of learning, and employability, and the impact on communities and their economic and social regeneration were discussed extensively by participant in the WERN Informal Learning group discussions. Although there was clearly some tension at a research level in trying to measure both these types of potential impact it was fairly clear that in many instances informal learning has the potential for on the one hand, helping individuals on their ‘learning journeys’, and, on the other, for developing the capacities of communities and community development on the other. The example of the Doing2Learn project demonstrates this.

Informal and experiential learning, intercultural exchange and understanding and the adoption of new media and ICT skills were key elements of the Doing2Learn approach. It enabled the older people to build confidence and communication skills within an informal atmosphere and to build informal supportive learning networks. Using the traditional knowledge and practice of the older participants as ‘hooks’ to capture their interests and existing skills and traditions, learners were introduced to the possibilities of using new media and ICT as tools for recording and sharing their content through, for example, podcasting, webcasting, blogging, digital photography
and digital film. Gradually with the support of the mentors and peers, the learners interacted with technology and became more confident and able over the duration of the project in using ICT. Once the learners felt confident, they then set about creating their own ‘how to’ courses taking an area of their interests. An e-platform was developed specifically to support the new content and to enable inter-regional learning and mentoring across the partnership.

Some useful examples of these informal learning courses involved developing innovative approaches to share cultural traditions amongst the different country participants. When the groups of learners came together at a learning week based in Wales, which took place during the second year of the project, they were keen to exchange and share their different cultural traditions. Not all of the groups could speak English and recognised that this may be likely to create a barrier. Some of the learners had brought examples of fine lace making, needlework and traditional costumes. It was interesting to witness how the learners made efforts to overcome language barriers by ‘acting’ out the processes of how the needlework was created by making various kinaesthetic gestures in order for the other participants to gain an understanding of the processes involved resulting in such beautiful final products. The emphasis on experiential learning that had informed their experiences served to help them to develop innovative approaches to barriers in communication.

Even more illuminating was how in an effort to break down these language barriers a learning community was being created. The Romanian group for example, had prepared in their own country, a demonstration of the lace making process captured on camera and transferred to video clips. Although this activity may seem almost second nature nowadays to many users of ICT, for this group of older learners who had previously never understood how a mobile phone or video camera worked, or been aware of its further potential, this was a major skills development. Being able to take photos with either mobile phones or digital cameras and upload them to a web-site then to create the video clips with an accompanying oral commentary in Romanian using English sub-titles (which they explained they had tried to translate for themselves after having informal English lessons) allowed them to create and share a record of what was for that community, a very important tradition. The effect this had on the individual learners was one of high personal achievement, a sense of pride and bolstered self-esteem, but something more than this took place - the impact of this knowledge sharing allowed the whole community of participants to benefit and there was a real sense of building social and community capital from this activity and other examples like it. The activities during the learning week were measured using Participatory Evaluation methods. This method proved to be a very successful way of capturing and measuring the informal learning process in this situation and can add weight to other methods of research around informal learning which is often regarded as being a difficult concept to measure. The research approach adopted throughout was participatory action research (PAR) methods which according to McNiff (2002), is at its core, a way to increase understanding of
how change in one's actions or practices can mutually benefit a community of practitioners. It was problematic in use, not because of the learners but because the mentors and project managers had specific views of ‘academic’ research and found adapting to this quite different method difficult. Nevertheless its use did achieve results (see the project video at www.doing2learn.eu).

Both the learning and application of learning enabled greater social inclusion of older populations. It also helped to create a useful bank of knowledge, skills and competencies to improve their skills and employability as individuals and also to develop communities of practice. These learning communities operated both at a local level within each country and through transnational meetings and ICT, they were also developed at a pan-European level. When discussing community learning, community is too often taken to refer to a geographically located community. One of the interesting possibilities offered by the Doing2Learn project was that of using ICT to develop learning communities that crossed geographical barriers but which were based on shared interests and experiences. The transnational element of the project enabled this to take place at a wider European level, across borders and other boundaries which allowed the participants to explore different approaches and solutions to the same problems.

Such developments are essential as Europe is getting older and there is a need to promote and develop older people’s capacity to continue to work and learn for as long as they want and to make an active contribution once they retire. The specific knowledge, skills and competencies of older people could be particularly useful in a society striving to attain sustainability and greater social cohesion, although their abilities are often overlooked and ignored by a society intent on the ‘new’. Older people’s contributions are easy to ignore as they have not adopted the skills and competencies needed to participate fully in modern knowledge economies, in a more or less borderless Europe and its myriad cultures and languages. That is why it is important to create an environment where such learning is possible, so as to ensure the visibility and accessibility to local and traditional knowledge, to enable the participants to build value in their own knowledge so enabling older populations to overcome barriers to and find the joy in learning and in contributing to the learning of others.

Another useful example of how informal learning crossed geographic barriers took place during a Learning Week in Wales. This included a visit to a rural community enterprise called Cwlwm - a wedding planning service based in rural North Wales which is the initiative of six local women from farming households who as well as working on family farms have carved out a successful wedding planning business. The six women each have experience in their different fields and can offer a range of wedding services - stationery, harpist, dresses and outfits, flowers, wedding cakes, and samplers. They have adopted an existing but redundant old mill building in their local village and came up with an innovative idea of using the building as a focal
showcase where their individual skills and talents are collectively displayed under the same roof. Being a rural community enterprise the success of the business depends on the women reaching a wide audience. The Cwlwm group have created a website to promote the wedding service and it is very successful. The European learners were thus able to witness an example of something they could replicate as they had similar skills and lived in a similar area. This example is a valuable one of a community initiative that can cross geographical barriers.

In Wales the policy document ‘Delivering Digital inclusion – a strategic Framework for Wales’ (2010) discusses the importance to individuals and communities and the need for them to engage with digital technology. It points out that older learners are nearly twice as likely not to use the internet as young people. It recognises also however, there are specific challenges facing older people and particular barriers to overcome including issues around:

- Lack of skills and confidence
- Negative attitudes to computers and internet
- Lack of appropriate support

On a trans-national level, the EU Policy document ‘Ageing Well in a Digital Society’ (2010) advocates that:

- ICT can help the older individuals to improve quality of life, stay healthier and live independently for longer. Innovative solutions are emerging to help counteract problems related to memory, vision, hearing, and mobility, which are more prevalent with age. ICT also enables older persons to remain active at work or in their community. Their accumulated experience and skills is a great asset, especially in the knowledge society.

The Doing2Learn project provides a useful example of how informal learning can bring about change for the better and can be seen to directly support both the Wales and EU policies. The learners were involved in the creating of digitised ‘how to’ courses which supported and promoted new skills of older learners, built confidence and encouraged positive attitudes towards ITC. The content of the digitised courses was based on their traditional knowledge, thus giving it space and value in the modern world.

This reinforces the notion that informal learning is of key importance in building individual skills and confidence and promotes the transfer of knowledge between individuals, peers, families and friends and that of the wider communities – local, regional, national and international and by doing so can build and sustain community resilience and capital.
For researchers and practitioners, it also highlights the importance to continue to build up the bank of evidence of the social and educational benefits taking place within the informal learning arena in order to ensure that such evidence is not always anecdotal. There is a danger that policy makers when they are aware of the benefits of informal learning may just recognise the value for individuals as a first step on what is seen as a learning journey for individuals to learn new skills and gain qualifications. The Doing2Learn project demonstrates that informal learning can have a much broader impact than this, and this too is a feature of informal learning that needs to be recognised by policy-makers.

References


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