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The Iceberg of Informal Adult Learning

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Allen Tough is Professor Emeritus at the University of Toronto. Until the end of the 1970s, Professor Tough's research focused on the adult's successful efforts to learn and change, particularly the 70% that are self-guided without relying much on professionals or institutions. His two best-known books from this research are *The Adult's Learning Projects* and *Intentional Changes*. The following is taken from a talk given by Allen Tough in February 1999 at the NALL Annual Conference.

It doesn't seem to matter where you are or what group you study, you get a very similar picture of informal adult learning.¹ Informal learning just seems to be a very normal, very natural human activity. But it is so invisible, people just don't seem to be aware of their own learning. They're not aware of other people's learning, educators don't take it into account and so on. People are spending 15 hours a week at it on average, and yet it's not talked about, it's not recognized, it's sort of ignored or invisible.

One of the basic, one of the most important findings is the number of people who have done some sort of intentional learning in the last year. It's somewhere around 90%. You often hear adult educators wringing their hands and saying, "oh, how can we motivate people to learn, I can't get people to learn." And I say, nonsense, people are already learning. Maybe you can't motivate them to learn what you want them to learn, but they're motivated to learn. A lot of adult educators perceive adults as not normally learning. You have to somehow motivate them or force them or persuade them to do this thing. Well, they're already doing it, they just may not be doing it the way the educator wants them to do it.

I was also fascinated by the 10% who had not learned anything intentionally in the last year. As an educator I want to get everybody to learn, and I was worried about this 10% who weren't learning. I asked the interviewers to tell me about those individuals and we did some later studies. What we found was that these people are quite content. That seemed to be the key word, *content*. Their life was sort of together, they'd done lots of learning before. They learned how to raise their kids or do their job or whatever, but now they're just on a plateau, life is good, they're content. Right now *they just don't see any need to learn*. I find that fascinating, and it changed my stereotype.

Another finding that seems to be right across the three decades is the range of things that people are learning. The 15 hours a week estimate isn't aimed at learning only one thing. Often with large groups, I ask people to jot down their own learning efforts in the last year and then share their lists with the group. It's a very empowering exercise. What fascinates me is each of those lists has enormous diversity. Many of the lists have something physical

¹ We started our definition of learning with 'learning episodes', any period of time in which your primary motivation is to gain and retain certain knowledge and skill.

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on them, exercise or a new sport or something like that – or a health thing. Many of them have something around money, running their finances, RRSPs. Of course, lots of work-related things are claimed for most occupations. Usually something about raising kids or relationships with spouse or something like that. So you get this range for each person in one year. We as educators often don't think about the enormous range of what any one person is learning, but it's quite extraordinary.

Another finding was when we looked at all learning efforts, including 'professionally planned' or 'academic or institutional' or whatever you want to call them; formal learning. We found a 20/80 percent split. We found about 20 percent of all major learning efforts were institutionally organized, like a driving school instructor or piano instructor, something like that. It was one-to-one, but it was still somebody you paid to teach you, so it was a professional, formal situation.

The other 80 percent was informal. We didn't know what to call it. That's when I came up with this idea of the iceberg as a metaphor, because so much of it is invisible.

When we looked at the informal part below the surface of the ocean, we distinguished three kinds of "planners":

- 73 percent of all adult learning is planned by the learner himself or herself. The learner decides what to learn, how to learn it from one episode to the next as they go along
- 3 percent was with a friend, a relative, a next-door neighbour or a co-worker teaching you something
- 4 percent was a peer group, a group of peers who get together and learn something without using any kind of professional assistant

One of the other things that we noticed is that informal learning is a very social phenomenon. What I found was that you interact with an average of 10 or 11 people while you're learning one thing, just over the course of weeks while learning that one thing. In fact, *there may actually be more social interaction in informal learning than there is in classroom learning*, which again shatters one of our stereotypes. You know, you go to school to be social and if you're learning at home you're not social. In fact, my wife Cathy and I have struggles about this. If I'm on a computer and interacting with 20 of my colleagues around the world by email, is that social or not? She thinks I'm just being totally *unsocial*. I say, no, I'm inter-acting with 20 people.

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Let's look at a list which comes from the survey by Patrick Penland in the United States.² Penland was a library school professor who wrote about librarians as learning consultants. He was very intrigued in our early work and did a door-to-door survey. He had 1,501 participants, a good sampling. One of the questions was “why do you prefer to learn on your own instead of a class or course?” People were handed a card with these items printed and from the card they selected which items were most important for preferring to learn on their own, instead of in a class or course.

Can you guess which are the four items that most people in Penland's survey chose, the most common four? Which do you think are the least common?

1. Transportation to a class is too hard or expensive.
2. I don't have enough money for a course or class.
3. I don't like a formal classroom situation with a teacher.
4. Lack of time to engage in a group learning program.
5. I wanted to learn this right away and couldn't wait until a class might start.
6. I didn't know of any class that taught what I wanted to know.
Desire to put my own structure on the learning project.
7. I wanted to keep the learning strategy flexible and easy to change.
8. Desire to use my own style of learning.
9. Desire to set my own learning pace.

Let's just look at the first: “transportation to class is too hard or expensive.” How many picked that as one of the most common ones? Maybe half of you. And the next one, “I don't have enough money for a course or a class.” Okay. These were actually the two *least* common items, which totally breaks the stereotype.

² Reported in Patrick R. Penland, *Self-planned learning in America*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 1977.

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Everybody says people don't take classes because they don't have money or they can't get there, *but that's not what people themselves said*. In fact, this whole list is in *reverse rank order*. The four at the bottom of the sheet are the four most common, (j) being the most common of all.

I bring this sheet not just for the fun of it, although it is a fun exercise, but also because I think there is something really deep underneath it. Look at those four that got the most people saying, "yeah, that's why I didn't take a course or a class," those four at the bottom of your sheet (j) (i) (h) and (g). They seem to have something in common. People seem to want to be in control. They want to set their own pace, use their own style of learning, they want to keep it flexible. In other words, they perceive courses and classes as inflexible. They want to put their own structure on it.

This is really fascinating. Those are things that as educators we don't pay any attention to. We don't think of learners as even noticing those things or caring about those things at all. What adult educators so often put their efforts into is the transportation and the money: can we make courses more accessible by making them cheaper, or putting them into places that people can get to? It turns out that's not what people are saying at all. They're basically saying, "you know, I could get there, I could find the money, but it's just I don't like the way you learn in courses and classes, it's not my way of learning, I want to do it my way."

One other thing I want to mention is the types of work-related learning that we've found. What kinds of learning do people do related to work? My guess is that the most common kind of learning is related to a person having a task to perform. They learn in order to do that particular task. For example, they have to have a report on the boss's desk next Monday, they have to operate a new machine, or they're a union steward and there's a new issue that they have to learn about.

We found in the research that people often learn in order to perform a task *better*. They could do the task, whatever it is, without learning. But they don't want to *just* do it, they want to do it better. So they learn in order to write a good report, in order to learn to run the machine properly and safely, in order to handle the union issue in an effective manner. It's not that people learn because they can't do it otherwise, they learn in order to do a good job. That's the most common reason.

We find this reason not just in work-related issues, but in raising kids, renovating your basement, all kinds of things. That's one of the reasons it's invisible I think. It's one of the reasons the iceberg metaphor works. People think: "I wired my basement," "I dealt with the union issue," "I wrote the report for my boss." They don't think: "I did some learning in order to do that task," they just think of the task. You know, "I raised my kids," they don't think about what I learned in order to be a better parent.

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Another kind of job-related learning is where new things come along that have to be learned, new ways of doing things. This is a more general thing, for example trends in a field. In studies of managers' learning, this is what they don't find time for, because there's always fires to put out. They're always learning what they have to learn in order to do that task next Monday. They don't find much time to learn about trends in their particular business or field, but that is another kind of learning.

Another kind of job-related learning that happens a lot is sharing among co-workers. That's hardly ever been studied. There was one small study of people in a meat-packing plant who were working on an assembly line. They found that when the person beside me is away, *I am able to step into her job*, because I've been watching out of the corner of my eye for the last few weeks. This doesn't even *fit* our definition of learning because it's not a very *intentional* sort of learning. It's just part of normal human curiosity to notice what the person beside us is doing and this is how we learn how to do things.

There may be a lot of learning from other people at work that's just part of being together and talking at coffee break. This may be a little less intentional than our definition, but still very important.

Next Steps in the Study of Adult Learning

I just have five next steps, five places I hope we go next.

For me, one of the fascinating questions is our over-control. It seems fairly well documented that in fact we over-control. We as educators, as parents, as supervisors, we have this tendency to over-control. We want our kids to grow up to be flexible, healthy, creative citizens, and how do we achieve that? Well, we micro-manage them, we make sure that every single minute they're doing something creative and flexible and healthy. Then we wonder why they don't gain the skill to make their own choices.

We do the same with our learners in a classroom. We set all the objectives, we tell them exactly how to learn, and the more I listened to adults talk about their own power and their own skill and confidence at learning, the more I began to question my teaching approach. Why was I making these choices for students? And, of course, I shifted toward being more learner-centred and letting learners make a lot of their own choices.

But what nobody has studied yet is why we have this tendency to over-control. What is it that makes us want to control more than is actually useful for our own goals? Our goal is to get people to learn and yet to do that, we sort of force them to do all these particular steps. If we just free them up, what we find is that people learn more and they learn more enthusiastically. The energy is enormous because they're excited about what they're doing. So we actually accomplish more learning by being freer.

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The second suggestion I have is how can we get people to successfully learn about social and global issues? This is something I want people to learn. As a futurist, I worry about where our world is headed. I think that without enormous learning in society, we're not going to change enough, we're not going to change fast enough. I see the need for learning at the societal level as well as at the individual level.

The third point is the Worldwide Web. I see the Worldwide Web as the most exciting development in adult education in the last 30 years. As educators of adults, we need to take the web very seriously, because it's being used by more and more people as one of their key ways to get information, whether the information is good or bad. The web fits beautifully into informal learning. You don't have to go and sit in some course at 7:00 o'clock on a Thursday evening, you can do it anytime you like. There's been relatively little research on the web and what it's doing to adult learning, let alone its potential. I think the potential is absolutely enormous.

I have two other suggestions. The first is: we find that people are really surprised when we interview them. They're surprised that they've done so much learning and they're surprised at all the different methods they've used. You wouldn't believe how many interviews start off with us explaining what we want to study. They'll say, "oh, not me, don't study me, I haven't learned anything since I left school," and they're sincere. And we say, "oh well, can you think of anything that you've tried to learn, any kind of knowledge or skill or understanding," and eventually they start to remember some things that they've been learning in the last year. By the end of the interview, we had a lot of people thanking us for the interview. People said, "you really opened my eyes, I had no idea I'd learned all these things in the last 12 months." They had a list of five or six things that they'd learned, and they'd say "I had no idea that I used so many different methods."

So – and this is part of the iceberg phenomenon – not only are we as a society (or as educators) *oblivious* to informal learning, we don't even notice our own. That's right, people don't even notice *their own informal learning*. So what do we do about this? I think it's really empowering and helpful and supportive to encourage people to look at their own learning.

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