



# Uncovering Hidden Learning

Informal Learning within  
Virtual Social Learning  
Systems

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# Virtual Social Learning Systems

Web 2.0 technologies with a sharing, participating, and collaborative focus.

Users have their 'say' as opposed to being 'told'.





**‘Classical’ view of traditional education;** The content and skills that experts feel every person should know are presented as; *‘factual “truth” compiled in curriculum standards and assessed with high-stakes tests.’* (Dede 2008, p.80).

Truth?

- politically motivated inaccuracies (Matusevich 2006)
- bias against women (Zittleman & Sadker 2002)
- bias against minorities (Moore 2005, Hogben & Waterman 1997)
- failing to accept contributions made by other cultures (Lewis 1999)

**Web 2.0 View;** Wikipedia is peer reviewed by those whom the community of contributors view as having an unbiased perspective. Thus; *‘Expertise involves understanding disputes in detail and proposing syntheses that are widely accepted by the community’* (Dede 2008).



# Informal Learning

Informal and Formal Learning is often seen in terms of 'paradigm wars'. Their definitions bring with them arbitrary lines of demarcation and potentially false dichotomies.

Trinder (et al 2008);

*'Formal Learning... leading to certification or an award of qualification or credit.'*

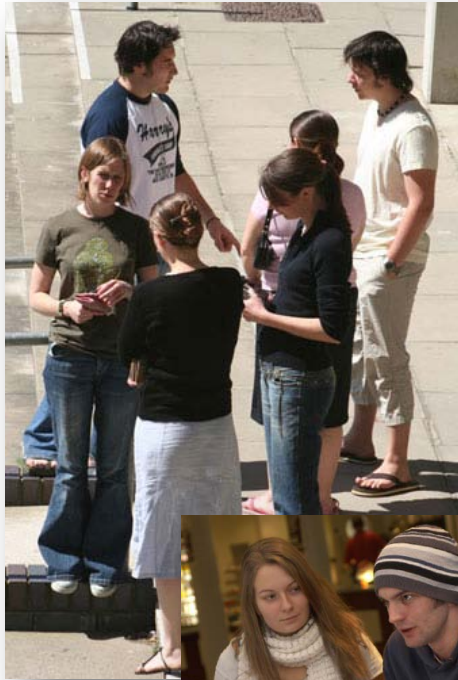
*'Informal Learning... does not lead to certification.'*

Environment Factor: 'School' = Formal (worthy)

'Not School' = Informal (worthless)



# Informal Learning



People are the environment



# Informal Learning

Stern and Sommerlad (1999) argued that rather than a definition it may be better to consider a continuum with informal learning as learning that comes closer to the informal end compared to the formal end of the continuum.

Learning



This research suggests that in reality the activity of learning dances, sometimes wildly, like electricity sparks across the continuum often arcing back and forth from one end to the other.



# Case Study One

thedigitalfix

A DVD Forums (Membership 66,000)

*carrot\_girl posts: 'Have you ever been in the situation where you simply can't do a piece of coursework?'*

Despite this being a forum based on an interest in DVDs what followed over the next four hours was an asynchronous discourse of constant sharing, negotiation, re-contextualisation and readjustments from which knowledge was built.

From struggling with a piece of coursework on her MA in Librarianship, carrot\_girl was taken from no understanding to producing a solid assignment submission.



## Case Study Two

Internet Forum to compliment a College Evening Course.

The forum space was intended as a means by which the tutor could share materials with the students and they in turn could share materials with each other.

What quickly became surprising was not only the response to student coursework related problems by their peers but how such help often went beyond the constraints of the course syllabus into richer and often more complex areas.



# Case Study Three



ELGG virtual social learning system created as a complimentary element for the Foundation Degree in Project Management (in association with BAE Systems).

Within virtual social learning spaces created within formal face-to-face learning settings, most informal approaches are of the request for help variety often limited to that which can be answered quickly.

- AS *'what is the thing at the back of your assignment what you put your models/diagrams in can anyone tell me. thanks'*
- LH *'It's appendix'*
- AD *'Thanks [LH], was trying to think of that too :).'*



## Case Study Four

*future!*

ELGG virtual social learning system created as with the intention of providing an informal environment for students on several related foundation degrees. Again short helpful postings were evident.

Use was however limited and after comments such as that below came to light, further investigation revealed most of the group had already been active on an outside forum for years.

- *'I liked the look of ELGG but I was already doing all my discussing with the others in STEAM.'* (Student GD6)



# Findings / Themes

- Requests for help are the predominant flash point for informal learning
- Informal learning extends beyond the request originator and immediate respondents in a discourse
- Question and Suggestion appear to elicit the most sustained discourse of high cognitive value with several strong examples
- The interactions themselves and relationships appear to be a central instrument for (and feature of) learning and the conditions of informal learning.



# Findings / Themes

- The research tentatively points to an inverse correlation between the opportunities for face-to-face communication and use of the virtual social environment
- It is possible to posit that had the ELGG environment been introduced to the learners of Case Study Four at induction it is more likely to have become embedded as part of their learning lives.

Case Study One reveals the thought, trust, honesty, respect and sheer energy people do put into Web 2.0 enabled discourses.



# Conclusions

The desire to seek out opportunities for informal learning may suggest that humans are naturally designed, as Dewey (1916) and Vygotsky (1978) posit, to learn as part of a social process and this desire stems from failings within the formal learning environment to engage with learners socially.

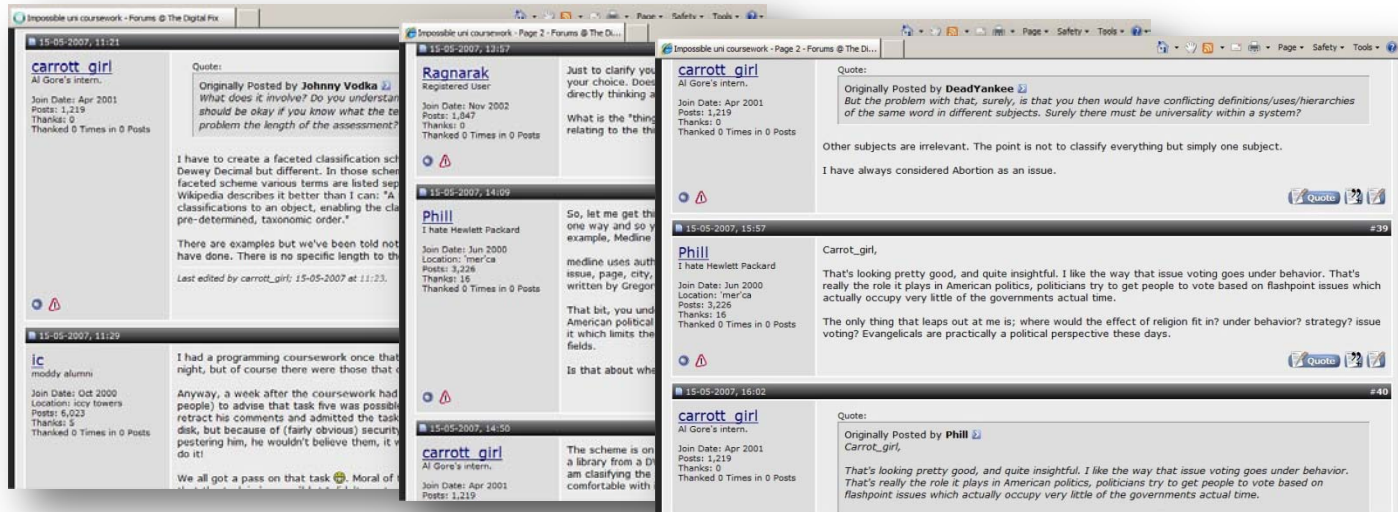


understanding is socially constructed



# Conclusions

The project provides clear indications of the importance of informal learning within formal learning situations and highlights the usefulness of making informal learning discourses visible.



The findings and literature suggest that such visibility could improve the student experience, improve teaching and provide a cost effective means for flexible delivery.



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