



Comparing Methodologies in Nonformal Education¹

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Nothing else in this compilation deals directly with the characteristics of nonformal teaching. All else is focused on the idea of nonformal education, and especially its purposes, and role in the development process. To help in closing this gap, this original and somewhat short piece was prepared. Unlike the other inclusions, it is not a reprint or restoration. It is less concerned with the competitive debate over formal versus nonformal education and gives a picture of the teaching processes and facilitator's role.

Learning is Everywhere Always

Many innovations slip onto the scene with little fanfare. Others force their way into common acceptance and practical use only after ponderous promotion and all sorts of drum-beating. It is not clear whether nonformal education is truly an innovation, but those most directly participating in it are true believers. Most of the strong supporters and especially those who are writing about it share similar backgrounds and characteristics. Many have been innovative educators, particularly "adult education" practitioners. This fact alone helps to explain the prominence of attention to issues common to teaching older learners. It is not surprising that most of the literature concerned with nonformal education is more specifically focused on out-of-school and in-service education issues and constituencies. A valid criticism of the nonformal education literature is that it gives more attention to *promoting* nonformal education than it gives to spelling out its methodological uniqueness.

That so little has been written about the actual teaching practices recommended for nonformal education is a fair criticism. It is true that most of the discussion has focused instead on the "sales job" for the nonformal approach. Is there some reason for this apparent bias? Yes, and it is easy to understand. Most of the methodological territory is not new. Nonformal education in its many actual uses is not new to adult educators. The literature of adult education methodology is already in common use. In fact, the more well-reasoned complaints about the "nonformal education hype" have come from this sector where skepticism has been most evident.

Educators engaged in adult education are a much smaller set than educators serving as classical "school teachers." Most professionals who define themselves as teacher education specialists are similarly committed to teachers who are teaching children. The more recent growth of the professional training and in-service education demand from the technical, industrial, and business sectors has added to this shift. The change has not been a move *away* from childhood education; rather it is an increased emphasis on adult and professional education added to the continuing expansion of formal higher education. The adult education literature has been seen as being exclusive to that field because of its apparent uniqueness. Not much of it has spilled over to affect and improve educative practices common to ordinary classroom teaching. For some, the most significant impact of the nonformal education frontier is that it is the dramatization of the importance of needed changes in educational practices and standards whether the context is formal or nonformal.

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The social distance between teacher and learner is overdue for reexamination. For nonformal education, a standard practice is to avoid the terminology of *teacher* and *student*. Instead, *facilitator* and *participant* or *learner* are commonly used as typical in adult education. The concept of teacher role is also different. Whereas in schooling the teacher is primarily “the one who knows,” in nonformal education the facilitator is the one who assists others in the discovery process. More precisely, the facilitator is the one who helps lead toward new understandings. Note the shifted emphasis when the facilitator is included as one more person who is also learning.

Changes in the Learner’s Role

Practices in nonformal education are commonly collegial. The difference is not simply matter of age! One of the reasons that elementary school is a happier place is that the teachers are generally more genial, emphathetic, and relational than in the upper grades. Surely younger children are more easily led by kindness. They are less inclined to assert themselves in conflict-oriented ways. Relationships and learner roles in nonformal education are more similar to what primary teachers learn to expect. This factor in particular demands more careful attention if formal education is to be improved.

The tendency in formal education is to move year by year into greater emphasis on control. The learner’s role in a restrictive relationship is increasingly stressed. The control factor alone accounts for much of the tension in formal schools. Methodologically, nonformal education as generally practiced is more collegial and less control-oriented.

The tension between teachers and students is exacerbated by the privileges of status. Teachers generally play the teaching game from the power level. The evaluation system is a power tool. Control of schedule and agenda is a power tool. Teachers generally control the learning process. Their rights to sort out and control learners are rarely challenged. Nonformal education generally transfers much of this responsibility to the learners; self-evaluation is more common. Decisions about such simple matters as what to do next are shared, not imposed. The teaching style, then, is more collective and less coercive. The tools and symbols of authority and power are exercised in a more egalitarian framework. Responsibilities for decisions and their consequences are much less like a power game. The competitive advantage based on position, rank, and authority is minimized.

Contrasting Methodologies

Comparing formal and nonformal education reveals greater differences in conceptual structure and style than in methodology. Differences can be seen in the roles of teacher and learner as well as in contrasts of structure of the learning environment. Perhaps even more important are the consequences of these differences, purpose, motivation, and standards of outcomes. Consider the evident differences and then reflect on the value of the consequential outcomes:

Style of Procedure

Respect is a key component of nonformal methodology. Cultivating respect should be the major motive and first value to be sought in each learning encounter. Respect for each participant in a learning experience is a mutual commitment. Verbal apology for violating this value should be a definite and sincere consequence of any violation. It should become a habit that is so predictable that it will be a conscious barrier and constraint against offense. Other than this concern for preserving the quality of the dialogue, coercion should be carefully avoided. The facilitator uses encouragement and constructive commentary to motivate, not negative criticism and punitive actions. Learners are encouraged to provide comments and suggestions. Facilitators accept criticism with constructive spirit and are ready to enter into interactions with an eye toward constructive debate. The presumption that the teacher is always right is carefully avoided. The shared-level style

of verbal interaction may prove to be difficult to learn, especially if age-difference or difference in levels of experience are substantial, but superior age, education, or experience should not be seen as entitlement to talk down to a learner. Facilitation procedures are essentially invitational. The fact that students have *chosen* to participate in the experience is respected.

Institutional goals and values should be observed by all persons in the learning environment. In cases of dispute or non-responsiveness to these standards, orderly processes for clarification and further discourse are available and open, but not commonly needed, because the group's consensus is adequate to return the group to forward motion.

Conceptual Structure of the Learning Environment

Differences can be seen in the roles of teacher and learner as well as in contrasts of structure of the learning environment. Nonformal education uses a less rigid schedule along with a more flexible variety of instructional materials. The skills needed for effectively using the nonformal environment are more demanding. While the nonformal facilitator may appear to “wing it” more than the school teacher, the guidance of the nonformal learning situation requires delicate handling and surely more continuous reading of the clues from the pattern of interactive flow.

Comparison of Formal and Nonformal Learning Experiences

A. *Formal Learning Process.* The formal teaching and learning process commonly begins with a specified textual introduction. The teacher's first task is to identify a sequence or series of factors that will connect the text with the assigned topic and its implications. All facets of importance are assumed to be available in the text, and will be identified and noted for further consideration. The sequence of exploration and interpretation is systematic and controlled. The text or a specially prepared document will provide the steps to be followed. Discoveries will rarely deviate very far from the path outlined in the text or assigned reading list. Constructive conclusions will be compared with the assigned sources for validation.

Creative teachers, of which there are many, invent procedures and strategies that embellish their formal teaching in numerous ways. Formal education thrives on the ingenuity of creative teachers. But within the four walls of the formal school, there are limits. Every teacher comes to realize that there are restrictions and constraints that work against change. Schooling is thus more predictable, more habituated, and more traditional because it is committed to a system that discourages invention. The key to this system is its rigidity and sameness, from hour to hour, day to day, and even from place to place. Teachers and pupils conform; it is less risky and “safer” to do things in the customary ways, with minimum nuance.

B. *Nonformal Learning Process.* Nonformal education by contrast moves beyond the four walls. Its “classrooms” tend to be open to the real world of experience; its lessons are drawn from lively reality, and its commitment to invention and discovery is rarely suppressed. Nonformal learning processes are less bounded, less restricted, and less traditional. For example, a common teaching-learning technique is “building thought-chains from spontaneous starts.” As learners reveal their current thoughts, the facilitator persistently asks, “So where does that take us?” Distinguishing between relevant and irrelevant contributions becomes a group-task.

Learners are encouraged to share insights and especially to suggest new ways to comprehend the issue under discussion. Discussions will focus on new connections emerging in the learners' judgments as they discern the more significant issues and ideas.

Learners are expected to reflect on meanings and to search out sources, including background, propositions, and reasoning that related to the insight. Verbal communication is encouraged because it is basic to sharing the discoveries and thus gaining new learning outcomes.

Observing competent adult educators, whether in formal or nonformal situations, can reveal some common characteristics. These will add up to a vital contrast in methodology. A few specific examples follow. Many of these factors are unique to nonformal education; all are valuable guides for facilitators:

1. *Listen very carefully.* Although a thoughtful teacher will be always thinking ahead, it is very important not to lose contact with what the learners are saying. To lose some part, or even to lose the tone, of the comments from the learners is apt to result in serious gaps in the facilitator's part of the dialogue.
2. *Avoid the use of yes/no questions.* The tendency to start discussions and even to preface attempts to keep the discussion going smoothly by asking trite questions that seem to predict their own response is a habit that must be broken. Any contribution from the facilitator should be carefully calculated to open the conversation further, not to shut it down. The facilitator always expects at least a sentence or two of expanded response from the learner after every question. Asking a question that elicits a simple and likely predictable response is not a constructive move. The facilitator develops the habit of avoiding asking questions or making comments that can be answered in only a few words.
3. *Listen for comments that expand understanding and create space for the new thoughts they bring.* An experienced facilitator will be alert for clues to ideas that will weave threads of nuance into the discussion. The point here is to avoid grabbing control by changing the subject; instead to be very attentive to possibilities for deepening or providing more breadth to the flow of thought.

Responsiveness to a learner's subtle shifts and twists of thought is the doorway to more advanced and more careful reasoning. A competent facilitator will carefully resist predicting responses expected from a learner. Avoiding the tendency to pre-judge comments from others requires discipline! The facilitator also learns not to seize some stray remark and to make it fit his or her own presuppositions. The key is to stay "on track." An effective facilitator will not control the discussion, but and instead may guide and shape it, always seeking to find new pieces to add to the maturing ideas.

Following is a synopsis of the nonformal educator's perspective of learning:

Life is Real Because of Learning

Discovery *is* learning
Imagination *is* learning
Showing *is* learning
Explaining *is* learning
Reasoning *is* learning