

Study on the move, for everyone, anytime, anywhere!

A source book for informal learning



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Learning to the power of ten – who is offering more?

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The “discovery”

The discovery of the item happened in passing by: in front of the convention centre in San Antonio, Texas, was a more than 25 metre broad map inserted in the forecourt. I literally stumbled across the lines and only after a few steps got the general idea that it was a map.

I found myself in New York looking towards San Francisco. I am crossing over the continent and reading the names of the states. I am “flying” towards San Antonio and I am wondering how long the distance is that I have passed in reality by plane. I see children who hop on one leg from one state to another, singing the names of the different states. This was the moment when I achieved the enlightenment: education as in passing by – “learning en passant”.

The diversity of learning

Self-directed learning – intended and (more or less) supported

I came across this new direction of thinking in the book of the Canadian Allan Tough “The Adult’s Learning Project” (1979). In a research project he asked adults: “Have you learned something in this past year?” The answers were mainly no, only if the respondents had participated in school-like activities. Changing the technique of the question just a little bit, Tough gained astonishing results.

He asked for defined competencies that have been gained - “Have you learned how to wallpaper?”, “Have you learned something about diseases?”, “Have you learned something about parenting?” - and suddenly the respondents started bubbling.

They did not talk about participating in school-like activities but about knowledge and abilities they had gained. And he came to the result that adults from all social strata spend almost two hours every day in “learning projects”, of which 80% take place without any professional pedagogical guidance. This is questioning our idea of learning in a provocative way: is “real” learning only connected to diplomas and certification or can we also talk about learning when you are learning something “just for fun or for the use”?

With this a new direction of thinking was established in two different ways. While the traditional approach of education concerned future goals to be achieved and deficiencies to be overcome, now the starting point and the perspective had changed.

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You concern the adult's abilities today and then you go back to the past with the question: which were the situations in which they were learned? And this opens a new class-building experience to a variety of learning possibilities and learning sources which only received little remark so far. Within the andragogical discussion, the change of the perspective from "teaching to learning" was debated. But also another thing had changed: the perception of "different" learning objectives. Knowing how to wallpaper, knowing about a diet, knowing how to bake cookies – so far those learning objectives have hardly been considered as "serious" or "right" learning objectives. The expansion of this perspective is being documented by the reporting system of further education (cf. Kuwan) which documents attended further education events and also informal professional further education activities since the middle of the 90s: reading textbooks referring to the occupation (52%), self-learning by observing and trying (50%), short-term events like speeches and half-day seminars (37%), instructions from co-workers or supervisors (34%).

Learning "en passant" as not intended or partly intended learning

I went to the Grand Canyon as a tourist to see something but not to learn something. And still I left with gained knowledge. The museum where I bought a postcard offered models, videos and flyers that the tourist took while passing by. Again and again little groups gathered around a ranger who would explain the things that could be seen or even not seen. And at different spots, information panels provided botanical, geological or biological information.

Pearl Harbour wasn't far away. It takes me only a few minutes to get there by bus. How else should I spend the rest of my day? At the kiosk of the memorial place of the outbreak of the Pacific war of the USA during World War II, I bought a copy of the Honolulu Star-Bulletin from December 7, 1941, which reports on the bombing by the Japanese which had just taken place. This newspaper "taught" me more impressively than my history book could. It took my breath away watching an old couple throwing a floral wreath into the inner harbour and then searching for the name of their son on the panel with the names of the people who had died on that day. Suddenly war and death are no more abstract items. I had learned something.

"Siehe die Wohnung Gottes bei den Menschen. Den 8. Mai 1868" (translator's note: "The home of God is among mortals"). I read this inscription written in familiar squiggled letters on a wall of a church. Unordinary – the church was located in San Antonio, Texas. Why a German inscription? Why this date? Why those squiggled letters that I know from my home church? I enter the church and find a familiar native interior with a Way of the Cross inscribed in German, familiar saints – and a(n English) flyer (please donate 50 cents), in which German immigrants report about their home town, their hardships, and that for the first time a sermon was held in English in this church in 1908 (before that only German was spoken). This learning episode lasted 10 minutes - but I am still thinking of it today.

Enough with the examples, but what they show is a different understanding of learning than shown in the five approaches above.

- The contents were different. It was not the historical facts I could have learned better from a “real” history book that I memorised, but the authenticity of a bulletin copy, the image of an old couple who could be grandparents who still mourn for their son. It was not the geological layers of the Grand Canyon that I learned primarily, but the unforgettable inebriation of the eyes that takes one’s breath away.

However, at least for those examples I added some traditional knowledge and abilities using traditional learning sources (experts, lexicons, geological/historical textbooks) or some not-so-traditional ones (newspaper, postcard, or flyer).

- The motivation was different. I didn’t go to those places to learn something, at least not in the first way. So besides learning that is explicitly intended, there is also learning that I “pick up along the way” – sometimes even learning that I would rather have avoided (e.g. what do I have to do when I don’t catch my connecting flight).
- The way of learning is different. There was no class and no autodidactic self-organised learning. And none of those situations lasted a lesson or even seven hours – not even when I add up the time as learning episodes for reading the flyers, discussing them or looking things up in a lexicon.

However, I was using resources that institutions had prepared with the aim of teaching and which seduced me to learn. Because the small “museum” at the edge of the Grand Canyon (maybe it was built to make the people buy souvenirs) with its models and artefacts and the movie theatre at Pearl Harbour (which included a souvenir shop and experts from the local historic society who also offered you supporting membership) which showed in documentaries what had happened there were obviously established by subject-matter experts and mediation experts with the intention to teach – which I gratefully adopted with the feeling of “being taught”.

All of those examples show: Learning takes places in the whole width of life; some things daily, others along the way, some things in learning situations, others in live situations lifelong and lifewide. And therefore besides the item “lifelong”, the item “lifewide” was devised.

The variety of learning – summarised in the concept of “lifewide education”

With the concept of “lifewide education”, which I published in German for the first time in 1995, I wanted to point out the variety of the different forms, ways and occasions of learning. I distinguished between two forms of intended learning (externally-directed institutionalised and self-directed autodidactic) and three forms of not-intended learning (see chapter 1). For the part of the not-intended or only partly-intended learning, I chose the item “learning en passant”. Choosing this item had to do with the experience of stumbling over the US-American map mentioned at the beginning.

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What I liked about this item was that it expresses activity, advancement, moving oneself to meet things and people and to move on. This association describes better what is meant than all the items which were used so far for this kind of learning, like non-formal, informal and not-intended, which only define negatively what is not meant.

Still we need to be warned against a partial romantic view of lifewide learning. Because not only good things but also wrong and bad stuff is being learned en passant: querulousness of the state, political radicalism, religious fundamentalism. How, why and wherefore to lie, to betray, to elbow, to resign, to disregard others and to persist with our own prejudices is what is being learned en passant in biographical life situations. While the curriculum of learning provided by institutional ways, contents and aims are being chosen rationally and responsibly, there is no normative regulation for individual learning.

Everyone can choose what he or she likes; there is no one to help during a dry spell, with meanders and kneejerk reactions. This is a general lack of all subject-focused educational approaches. In addition, completeness and uniformity are not the strengths of learning en passant; common and obligatory contents cannot be achieved, many things stay situational, individual, and incidental. If accuracy, completeness of uniformity/obligingness is intended, learning en passant is not the right way. Complex systematic and highly standardised contents are also not adequate. Only very few people learn a foreign language en passant – a dictionary and a few lessons at an adult education centre help to make a different start ... but on the other hand “being an active citizen”, “solidarity”, and “charity” cannot be learned without a lot of learning en passant. However, the concept of lifewide education is also useful to explain unrequested learning results because it explains how they contradict the declared and requested learning results that come about. The perception and explanation might help to avoid unrequested results.

“How do people reach what they know, what they are able to do and what they are?” This was the initial question. This question turns out to be generative because it helps to identify and describe different ways of learning, situations of learning and ideas of learning. “Learning en passant” was integrated into the concept of “lifewide education”.

The next step: “compositional learning”

What is not expressed in the structural scheme of lifewide education in the different boxes and what is only hinted in the lower caption (and which then was not the focus of my attention) is that those forms do not exist isolated from each other. Especially didactic approaches only focus on the consideration of only one field (“How do I organise a course?”; “How do you support autodidactic learning?”) In the reality of the lives of adult learners, learning often takes places within the interaction of job, free-time, family, fun, pressure and unavoidable laughing, crying and boredom. Especially the biographical approach of andragogy pointed out the integration of the context. If you take a closer look, the examples above also show interaction of different learning occasions, learning aids and learning aims: postcards, movies, speeches, trial and error, reading, doing.

The learning projects described by Allen Tough also prove the use of different learning sources. But our own experience is enough to confirm the composition of different learning sources. If you go for a learning task, often a variety of learning possibilities are being discovered. You suddenly meet “partial experts” who share their experience, you find relevant magazine (articles) at the train station kiosk or at your hairdresser, you use instruction manuals and product inserts, you try and get the help of others, you find web pages and support groups – and you find the offer of the regional further education institutions.

But it could also be the other way round: You start with a further education class – and afterwards and along the way you start activities that continue the learning. In an interview within the research of compositional learning, a respondent describes her way of learning photography, which was started through an acquaintance: “I went to a photography class for six Saturdays, then I just started to take pictures straight on.... Luckily I could ask my acquaintance. He really helped me a lot. And of course I had to try it over and over again to improve, to try something new. Then I bought a magazine on photography.... Latterly there was something about a famous photographer on TV. That is, what I have been trying” (Ellner 2000, p. 39 et seq). Participating in a class, trying, asking a friend, reading magazines, watching TV, trying again: those are all interacting elements of the “composition”.

Implication for practice: to see, use and support lifewide education

A “didactic of lifewide education” cannot be accomplished here. But a few proposals shall be given on what these theoretical conceptual considerations could mean for the practice of adult education.

1. Can you “do” learning en passant? – Definitely. Not in the way that you drum learning success into the learners – this is also not possible with instruction-oriented or training-oriented forms of learning. And certainly – it has already been mentioned – learning does not have the inescapability and the commitment of institutional curricular learning. But it is possible to arrange situations in which learning en passant and lifewide learning will take place and which support the probability of the success of learning en passant and lifewide learning.

2. Recognise learning when it takes place: a parish festival, works outing, talking in the cafeteria; those are all activities which cause learning as a secondary effect. Learning in an unusual form is often not recognised as learning, and therefore not used and valued. Two examples: The participants of a class are exceeding their break because they are having a lively discussion of a topic from the class. Does the teacher consider this as a disturbance or a chance to learn? It is even more difficult to recognise learning when not only the form but also the content is different from the official curriculum. If participants of a course are being accommodated in a hotel by their employer, what do they learn about the appreciation of their company? The other way round: who has to be accommodated according to the travel expenses rate of the civil service (46 D-Mark per night), and what

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does he or she learn about the appreciation of their employer? And do we recognise how, like this, the learning bureaucracy mentality is “being taught” en passant?

3. Learning as trying something in and carrying something on: If learning takes place within the context of life, if it ties in with existing things and lays the basis for further learning, then this leads to macro-didactic as well as to micro-didactic results. The participant-oriented theory has claimed to “pick up the learners from where they are”. The questions and problems of the learners are not established this way. Only learning possibilities for existing questions and problems are being offered. More attention needs to be drawn to (informal) learning parallel to the curriculum within and outside courses and also continuing after the completion of a learning sequence.

4. Complete the existing, recognise what is lacking: Some situations of everyday life pose the question: What shall this weird fountain tell us? And now learning something or nothing is a matter of low threshold, because learning support is easily available. A flyer which can be taken from the box beside the fountain leads to learning. Other offers can be added (see Wolf). City trails, nature trails, the flyer at the entrance of the church are all learning accesses – whereas those media can be designed more or less to support learning. The learning impulse has already been given; only the learning access has to be completed.

5. Give impulses, “provide learning occasions”: Learning exchanges, counselling offers, hotlines, project and support groups, a calm place to talk, putting in touch with contact persons – all of these are new tasks for a culture of learning within the perspective of “lifewide education”. Therefore there will be new tasks for institutions and teachers of adult education “to provide learning occasions” that go beyond the offer of classes.

Task and aim of this approach of lifewide learning is to support a learning-friendly environment and therefore to invite people to walk the path of lifelong and lifewide learning. This is not a brand new idea for the ecclesiastical educational institutions. Some of this had already been thought and done “en passant”. The explicit appreciation can strengthen and support an existing approach. You can find a full version of the speech and the bibliography on the documentary DVD.

About learning organised by institutions – in a traditional or “non-traditional” way

Learning idea 1 – externally-organised, institutionalised, closed learning:

The learner needs to go to an institution to complete a given curriculum (traditional learning being present at an educational institution). Driving schools, dance schools, and music schools can thoroughly be included here.

Learning idea 2 – externally-organised, institutionalised, open-approach learning:

The learning offer goes to the learner; he or she can choose the place, sequence and time but not as much the content, as in distance learning/distance study “Universities Without Walls”. Locations for learning can therefore also be libraries, parishes, do-it-yourself stores, doctor’s practices or private houses. But the learner doesn’t choose those places himself or herself; they are arranged for him or her. Those learning offers within the externally-organised setting can leave the learner more or less possibilities to decide on the own ways of learning. But the decision whether this is possible or not is not up to the learner but to the teacher or the institution.

Learning idea 3 – externally-organised, institutionalised; content-open learning:

Here the learner can also decide on content and emphasis of contents. Within traditional academic studies, for example, this way of learning is implied in writing the thesis where the topic and form are chosen by the student and only formal standards are obligatory. While learning ideas 1 and 2 can conclude with a qualification certificate, this is not intended as much with content-open offers.

Learning idea 4 – existing knowledge and abilities are being certified:

While the former learning ideas assumed that the learning process of the learners had to be organised, it is being assumed here that adults have gained knowledge and abilities already in different ways: with not completed academic studies, with adult learning courses, with professional further training, with hobbies or during their free time. This “assessment of prior learning” can either happen by collecting certificates or by demonstrating knowledge and abilities in an exam.

Learning idea 5 – intended, autodidactic, self-directed learning:

With the intention of gaining a certain knowledge or ability, learners often use a variety of resources – magazines, friends, salesmen, craftsmen, instruction manuals, trial and error, but also (partly-)institutionalised learning offered by building centres, libraries, educational institutions – completely or partly: you stay away when you get what you wanted. The intention is not a certificate with an exchange value, but a utility value or “just because it is interesting”. The learner “composes” his or her forms and ways of learning from these resources and decides on contents and aims himself or herself.

Learning idea 6 – partly-intended learning:

There are actions which are not intended for learning but which include or demand learning: you explicitly go for a journey, a concert, a hobby or a citizens’ initiative. You accept the learning that happens or is even necessary for this.

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Later, you still know exactly on which occasion you gained the knowledge and ability, but this part of learning would not have been enough for you to carry out the action. You remember the activity but the part of learning stays implicitly hidden. Often there is no defined learning aim for this kind of partly-intended learning – only afterwards do you realise what you have learned from visiting a concert or a support group.

Learning idea 7 – not-intended learning:

There are external incidents (“critical personal experiences”) which are not planned and not expected, and which lead us to question old things and to develop new perspectives, which “teach” us something whether we want it to or not: an accident, a crisis situation, a map on which you stumble. Those changing incidents can involve a shock or fun and the time to cope with this can take a few moments or several years. The cause situation stays identifiable in the memory.

Learning idea 8 – not-intended hidden tessellate-learning:

If you consider what a person is able to do – not what he or she needs to be taught – then you discover knowledge, abilities and attitudes of inexplicable origins. They could be complex phenomena (being a parent, taking responsibility) but also simple skills (opening a new bottle cap). Obviously it had been learned at some point (maybe transferable skills, maybe principles or structures) but neither learner nor observer are able to identify the situation in which this has been learned.

Learning idea 9 – compositional learning:

Many learning results do not occur from a single learning attempt but from a combination, a “composition” of different learning sources, from intention and coincidence, from self-directed and submitted, from offered and befallen. This “composition” is created by the individual learner according to his or her abilities and needs.

Learning idea 10 – learning as an “open project”:

Learning can also be seen as an “open project” of singular and unpredictable elements, compositions and results. Not in the forecast but only in the review can the sense of learning lines be discovered. However, here you also depend on the coincidental learning possibilities which decide on whether the open learning project fails or leads to an essential gain.

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