

## What does informal education contribute to the *debate* about the wider aims and practices of education?

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### ***Presenters:***

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### Introduction

Informal education with young people has been largely marginalised as a specialist area of study within philosophy of education. This symposium seeks to show the potential insights such a perspective can bring to the wider aims of education. Drawing on different philosophical traditions and areas of educational concern (upbringing, democracy and personalised learning), the presenters will consider how the perspective and professional concerns of informal educators contribute to our analysis of education and educational matters.

Informal education with young people in the UK is most often expressed in the term ‘youth work’, though this vocational group does not have the same homogeneity as ‘teaching’. The last decade has seen a rise in the role of the State in youth work and the development of a statutory basis for the youth service (often embedded in ‘Integrated Children’s and Young People’s Services). There has also been the development of ‘extended schools’, which has required inter-professional working between schoolteachers and youth workers, amongst others. However, the majority of youth work still occurs outside of direct state control, and is often associated with special interest groups or grassroots community organisations (faith communities, armed services, first aiders, uniformed organisations, etc.). In many cases, these groups are staffed by part-time volunteers with a range of educational qualifications (or none). Further, youth workers tend to experience a greater degree of flexibility in their day-to-day practice compared with schoolteachers. These institutional contexts, have given rise to particular educative concerns, practices and perspectives.

The three fifteen minute presentations will stimulate debate on their specific content *and* the broader concern with informal education’s contribution to the debate about the wider aims and practices of education.

### 1. Upbringing, families, communities and the State

Schools are institutionally (and often physically) ring-fenced, specialising in the task of ‘education’. However, this education is rather impoverished focusing on the needs of the State for suitably qualified technicians to perpetuate a capitalist economy (both as producers and consumers). This should not surprise us, as these educators disassociate themselves from the community task of ‘upbringing’ then there is little left for the school to become. Informal education has historically located itself in the life of local communities, often drawing educators from those communities. It has sought to articulate in action ‘that it takes a village to raise a child’. Further, it has sought to enable young people to *see the point of* their education, and start ‘from where they are’; matters alien to most schools.

Drawing on MacIntyre’s account of social practices and Taylor’s ‘affirmation of ordinary life’, I seek to explore the conceptual landscape of border-less education for young people grounded in the family and community’s concern to ‘bring up’ their

young people. Thus, I offer a redemptive pathway for schools and schooling back to their educative task.

## **2. Education and the Celebration of Uncertainty: Lessons from Informal Education.**

Given youth work is more often perceived in terms of sport, leisure and activities that aim at diverting young people from crime; informal education (in which youth work is, arguably, located) is under-examined by educationalists. At best, it achieves the status of compensatory education, an intervention targeted at those for whom schooling has 'failed'.

Closer observation reveals that many of the enduring themes in philosophy of education are defining of informal education. Foremost are the concepts of conversation and democracy. Indeed, it is noteworthy that the *practice* of informal education makes democratic education possible; it tends to exist free from a prescribed curriculum. Schooling, in contrast is the primary expression of *formal* education. In this context, consideration of democracy is often limited to education *for* democracy.

In sum, those interested in democracy *and* education have much to gain from philosophical inquiry into both the theory and practice of informal education. The critical significance of *uncertainty* is revealed. Uncertainty becomes an expression of dialogically-inspired conversation; it becomes an expression of a democratic space in which learning from the Other becomes possible.

But a series of implications arise; many likely of interest to philosophers of education. These include the valuing of doubt, mutuality, negotiation, risk-taking – and the role of courage within all. Beyond this, further scrutiny of systems and structures is required, not least the 'delivery' of pre-ordained curricula, the setting of targets, the pre-scription of outcomes, and 'performance management'.

Informal education, it seems, has much to contribute to a progressive education fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> century; an era in which the only thing we know for certain is that uncertainty will dominate. Educators (of whatever persuasion), it will be argued, must learn to celebrate this uncertainty if education is to be fit-for-purpose in equipping young people for the future.

## **3. Personalised learning and IEP's: Conflicting perspectives?**

With increasing numbers of students in mainstream schools becoming disaffected from education delivered in classrooms, many secondary schools have moved towards teaching strategies which focus on creating individualised learning opportunities. This approach's dominant philosophy promotes individuals as cognitive producers where academic learning is separable from one's sociality. Sole responsibility for self-determination is thus placed on the individual once the tools for achieving individuation have been delivered. The White Paper '*Your child, your schools, our future: building a 21<sup>st</sup> century schools system*' reflects this philosophy promoting increased use of IEP's, personalised learning, differentiated lesson plans and Home School Agreements.

This paper is part of a wider empirical doctoral study on the use of informal education approaches in formal settings. It presents a view of the self and identity which challenges this philosophy. The self and identity, it is argued, are an ongoing project within shared, reflexively engaged relationships. It is this reflexive engagement, which supports the collaboratively and holistically derived nature of self-identity.

The notion of personalised learning promoted within the White Paper represents a conceptualisation of the self in conflict with that of the students it wishes to engage. Its strategy seeks to separate the knower from the world around them, thus enforcing the notion of identity as cognitive producers. It conflicts with the student's perception of self-identity located within a holistic social narrative. For the students to engage with learning this paper argues schooling must seek a model of personalised learning that produces, and makes useful, knowledge whilst supporting holistic self production.