

Chapter 74

Deep Learning and Online Education as an Informal Learning Process: Is There a Relationship between Deep Learning and Online Education as an Informal Learning Process?

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ABSTRACT

Informal learning is a universal current phenomenon of learning via participation, experience, or learning via student-centered knowledge creation. It stands in stark contrast with the traditional view of didactic teacher-centered learning. Online education can be regarded as a positive and self-directed form of informal learning. Whether or not deep learning takes place for the online learner is a controversial topic for many educators. This chapter will discuss the benefits and challenges of the relationship between informal online learning leading to deeper learning. But, what isn't controversial is that in this century more education has been delivered in digital platforms than in any other time in history. For most providers of education to remain highly competitive, they must engage in electronic education of some form by moving beyond the brick and mortar of the traditional classroom. Informal learning has become the impetus resulting in the extensive and intensive application of electronic education.

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INTRODUCTION

John Dewey (1933, 1938), a proponent of informal learning realized its value in motivating students. But what he couldn't foresee was how the Internet and online learning would verify his hypothesis.

Today the global education community has become the buzz term in the realm of education and training. Learners in every location around the globe must acquire new skills, be literate, and understand constantly changing dynamics in globalization (Schrum, 2000, p. 91). College courses taught in the United States of America can be taken by students in Asia. Likewise, courses taught in Europe can be taken by learners in North America. More and more nontraditional learners are taking online courses either to supplement other courses or to complete a degree completely online. Today's average worker tends to be more mobile than in the past. Whether studying from abroad or studying in one's home country, online education offers the flexibility to attend classes from anywhere there is Internet access.

American educator from the 19th and early 20th century, John Dewey (1933, 1938) argued that informal education was the foundation for all formal education. A proponent of informal education he argued for the challenge of maintaining a balance between the two forms of learning—informal and formal (Dewey, 2010). Dewey seemed to be discussing about successfully combining these two forms of learning as if two sides of the same coin, one of the weightiest problems with which the philosophy of education has to cope is the method of keeping a proper balance between the informal and the formal, the incidental and the intentional, modes of education (Dewey 2010b).

Dewey's main proposition is that learning and education are social and interactive processes, and thus the school itself is a social institution through which social reform can and should take place. He was a strong proponent of democratic principles embedded in education (Dewey, 2010). That is Dewey did not agree with one-way transfer style of authoritarian schooling, because it did not fit the model found within democratic societies. In its place, learners needed educational experiences which enabled them to interact in a social educational context, as that is how they learn to become valued, equal, and responsible members of society. He believed that students thrive in an environment where they are allowed to experience and interact with the curriculum, and all students should have the opportunity to take part in their own learning (Dewey, 2010b).

Through the various online learning platforms Dewey's kind of interactive informal learning can take place naturally. As digital natives, today's students not only interact in a digital world, but they thrive on this form of knowledge discovery. Informal learning is often a spontaneous response to their digitally wired social environments, as learners navigate the personal, social and work journeys of their daily lives. Because technology is embedded in our daily lives informal learning is naturally a byproduct. The online instructor becomes the facilitator, partner in the learning process and a guide that allows students to impose their own ideas and therefore take ownership in their learning and discovery processes.

Coomb and Ahmed (1974) define informal learning as:

The lifelong process by which every individual acquires and accumulates knowledge, skills, attitudes and insights from daily experiences and exposure to the environment – at home, at work, at play: from the example and attitude of families and friends; from travel, reading newspapers and books; or by listening to the radio or viewing films or television. Generally informal education is unorganized, unsystematic and even unintentional at times, yet accounts for the great bulk of any person's total lifetime learn-

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