

Higher Education: Informal Learning for Unorganized Sector

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Abstract

Higher education could be interactive and subject centred, and yet, it is not only about reading books and learning by heart but much more about knowing oneself while entering into the knowledge world. However, being educated is a chance in life, and this opportunity should be extended to anyone and everyone in whatever form it suits to him/her. For a country like India, informal education is our strength, and we may train large section of grass-root level and under-privileged children to help them develop not only in their local pockets but to help globally with trained and skilled manpower in diverse fields the industries look forward to acquire skilled hands for different jobs. To the unorganized sectors where employability is over 90 %, the thrust has to be directed on how to produce trained and skilled manpower to cope with the variety of job requirements. Further, the introduction of technological developments focusing the relatively higher product quality benchmark, the challenges in the informal sector are on rise; and thus, this paper attempts to analyze the ever growing importance of strengthening of the informal teaching-learning processes highlighting the new expectations from the higher education.

Keywords: Higher education; informal sector, unorganized sector, skill development, trained manpower.

The informal education system connects the unorganized sectors where the employment prospect is more than 90 % against the organized sectors' employment prospect of about 8%. While the majority of the population who lives in rural areas and belong to the grass-root level depends on informal education and training which by no means is considered adequate in terms of skill development and job competency profiles [1] what the industry looks forward to. As such the industry finds it difficult to provide them with the job opportunities owing to the various skill gaps. Whereas the conventional education is quite expensive now and typically provided by formal educational institutions in well structured form leading to certification, non-formal education is a bit unorganized educational process taking into account skills based learning and job competencies development. The Individuals participate on a voluntary

basis and the skills trainers guide them in the learning process. Unlike formal education where learning happens with continuous assessments, examinations and certification, the individual is usually aware of the fact that he/she is aiming at hands-on-practice learning through non-formal education with skills development. Non-formal education gives young people the opportunities to develop their values, skills and competencies other than the ones developed in the vast framework of formal education. Those skills include a wide range of competencies such as on-job training, interpersonal, team, organizational and conflict management, intercultural awareness, leadership, planning, organizing, co-ordination and practical problem solving skills, teamwork, self-confidence, discipline and sharing responsibility etc.

Higher Education in Non-Formal Sector

What is special about non-formal education is that individuals, trainees, participants are the actors actively involved in the education/learning process. The methods that are being used aim at giving young people the tools to further develop their skills and attitudes. Learning is the ongoing process, one of its crucial features is learning by doing. “Non-formal” does not imply unstructured, the process of non-formal learning is shared and designed in such a way that it creates an environment in which the learner is the architect of the skills development. Non-formal learning on the other hand is a process that is different to formal education, and therefore can happen in different settings and environments with a lot of flexibility. Youth organizations offer non-formal learning through their programs at the same time non-formal learning experiences can be organized within the work place. It is important to acknowledge that individual skills acquired through involvement with the youth organizations are not only related to raising employment prospects, but they contribute to the development of human capabilities and motivations. Such skills contribute more directly to a general motivation for learning rather than to specific tasks and responsibilities related to personal development. There is a thin line between those learning experiences; nevertheless it is important to outline the specificities of learning provided thorough engagement is ensured in the youth organizations and their programs.

Informal education refers to the lifelong process, whereby every individual acquires attitudes, values, skills and knowledge from the educational influences and resources in his or her own environment and from daily experience (family, neighbors, marketplace, library, mass media, work, play, etc). Formal education refers to the structured education system that runs from primary school to university, and includes specialized programs for technical and professional training. Non-formal education refers to any planned program of personal and social education for young people designed to improve a range of skills and competencies, outside the formal educational curriculum.

“Learning is a process that is not only related to the function of school or other organized educational settings. This conception of learning is based upon the idea and observation that a considerable number of our meaningful learning experiences happen outside the formal education system: in workplaces, families, different organizations and libraries...”

Thus, formal and informal educations are complementary and mutually reinforcing elements of a lifelong learning process.

Skill Development and Core Competencies

What competencies one should develop is a major question now. Firstly, there should be agreement on the core competencies necessary for almost every human being, and secondly, the relevance for each

individual's personal goals should also be thought of. A number of organizations have tried to define the core competencies that are essential for every individual's personal and social development. The OECD's conceptual framework of key competencies classifies the required ASKs into three categories, with each category including a number of different attitudes, skills and knowledge.

- ◆ First, you need to master the use of tools interactively. This in short means being able to use language (communication), symbols (mathematics) and technology, as well as knowledge and information interactively.
- ◆ Secondly, you need to be able to interact well with the heterogeneous groups of people. To do that you have to be able to relate well to others, cooperate and work in teams, and to manage and resolve conflicts.
- ◆ Finally, and perhaps most importantly, you need to be able to act independently – something we call personal leadership. This means understanding and considering the big picture forming and conducting life plans and personal projects; and having the individual's ability to assert rights, interests, limits and needs. In addition to the key competencies, we of course, need many other ASKs. The pallet of necessary competencies depends on the personal goals and can be developed through personal development. Reflection skills and reflective attitude has an important role in the development process.

The need for lifelong and life-wide learning has revealed over the past few years that the necessary skills can be acquired through learning in both formal, and non-formal contexts. Non-formal learning is typically undervalued as not being “real” learning. What we learn in formal settings (schools, colleges, training centers etc) is only one part of acquiring skills. We learn in non-formal and informal settings too (e.g. in youth clubs, sports associations, within the family, in political life). Learning through civil society activities and in social environments is part of informal and non-formal learning, and takes place not just by chance, but also intentionally and in an organized way. Young people take part in a wide range of activities outside mainstream education systems, and this too counts as non-formal learning. The youth sector has over the years gained experience in providing non-formal learning. At European level the Youth in Action program is a good example of this work and the experience it can bring. In the consultations with young people, non-formal learning was often seen as the most positive, efficient and attractive counterpart to a largely inefficient and unattractive system of formal education. The advantage of non-formal learning lies mainly in its voluntary and often self organized nature, its flexibility, the possibilities of participation, the “right to make mistakes”, the closer link to young people's interests and aspirations. Integrating disadvantaged young people was also seen as an asset of non-formal learning. It is becoming more and more important to develop effective and flexible ways of recognizing skills acquired outside formal education and training systems. Finding the right balance in a set of tools which guarantee appropriate and satisfying solutions for certification and recognition, in accordance with the development of quality standards, (self) evaluation and assessment procedures for non-formal learning will be a sensitive task. Non-formal learning should not lose its open character and turn into a formal structure by imitating the formal education system. The consultation process highlighted a lack of understanding of the benefits of non-formal learning. It is thus necessary to strengthen the awareness of key persons and institutions in society, business and politics, of the main players (the social partners, NGOs, education experts etc.) and of young people themselves in order to promote non-formal education as an integral part of learning and education.

Personal development refers to the improvement of one's own competencies. It is by no means limited to the traditional subjects of self-help literature, namely happiness and relationships, but encompasses all learning on all the possible areas we as individuals can learn on. The outcomes of personal development are self-improvement and personal growth with the purpose of realizing one's higher potential, and admittedly, to thus become more successful and happier. Conscious personal development builds on the idea of being happy with what you are and, at the same time, realizing your high job potential what you may contribute to the society. It is about seeing your higher self-be that you being able to communicate better, being better in project management, knowing your professional skills – and working consistently towards that goal. Personal development is also a subtle way of improving the world by developing yourself and helping your friends to grow. In a nutshell, the process of conscious personal development consists of three iterative steps: self awareness, goal setting and action.

The first step, self awareness, is about becoming conscious of what you are. What do you know about yourself? And, what can you do to prove your worth? What are you good at? What are you not very good at? Whether you are happy and unhappy about yourself? What are your positive and negative behavioral patterns? What are your values?

The second phase, goal setting, means setting your development objectives. It is about knowing what you want to be and where you want to go. What competence do you need to develop? The goals of personal development can be from any fields of your life, be it work, health, friends, job, self-confidence or something else. Finally, the two previous steps are worth nothing if their conclusions are not acted on. Be it through formal or non-formal education or through self-help, growth and learning requires always energy, motivation and effort.

One can categorize into three categories of what we are, what we can do, and what we know about attitudes, skills and knowledge. Knowledge (K) is the mental part of competencies [2] and refers to the things you know. It is something that can be written on a piece of paper, such as theories, sequences and dependencies. You can, for example, know how sentences are structured in English, what a project description should contain, and that you need to identify tools for your work. The second category, Skills (S), is concerned with the practical competencies. Skills are something you can do if you want it – by yourself or by using something. It is the competence that is in your fingertips. You can have the skills of writing, speaking French, coaching, giving presentations and programming Java for example.

Whether knowledge or skills together can make you comfortable while discharging your job responsibility? At driving school you first learn traffic rules and what the different pedals do. Only after you have learned the theory, you are allowed to practice your driving skills. On the other hand, when you were learning to speak, you first practiced the skill and only much later anybody tried to enlighten you on the concept of knowledge. Attitudes, on the other hand, can be learned and developed only through practice. Given that attitudes are visible only through what we do, one must change his/her behavior (through practicing a skill) to develop your attitudes. It is impossible for you to become a good listener without doing anything; similarly, it does not really help you, if you just think about the rules of good listening. The only way for you to become a good listener is for you to practice your listening skills until you do them automatically. One of the major strengths of non-formal education is that it stimulates the learners to use more than one of the learning styles. By doing this, non-formal education provides two important benefits over the formal education. First, each participant gets to learn by using their preferred learning style. Just think of the agony of a person preferring hands-on learning, sitting in a theoretical

lecture (or the other way around). By addressing all of the learning styles, non-formal education can keep more people interested and motivated than by just using one of the styles. Secondly, the learning of every participant is enhanced by them using all of the learning styles. If you prefer learning by putting theories into practice, you will learn more if you every now and then stop, watch and observe what is going on. The competencies one should develop can be defined in two groups. Firstly the core competencies necessary for almost every human being, and secondly the one which is relevant for each individual's personal goals.

Planning for Unorganized Sector

A number of organizations have tried to define the core competencies that are essential for every individual's personal and social development. In addition to the key competencies [2,3], we of course need many other qualities. The pallet of necessary competencies depends on one's personal goals and can be developed through personal development. Reflection skills and reflective attitude have an important role in the development process. Through reflection one can apply, relate and adapt existing skills.

Non-formal education has numerous advantages in personal development in comparison to traditional formal education. Formal education tends to have a bias towards certain competencies and certain learning styles. It seems that formal education, especially higher education, focuses on the learning of knowledge. Practice of skills is done less than studying knowledge, and by the time when we have reached university, the amount of attitudinal learning is often almost nonexistent. Non-formal education, on the other hand, is often much more based on skills and also has attitude-based learning objectives. Tolerance is an example of an attitude that is often developed using non-formal education. Practitioners of non-formal education should not, however, forget the importance knowledge element just because formal education seems to prefer it.

We all have a preference regarding how to collect and process information about the world. We want to experiment by doing or reflect by watching; and at the same time, experience through feelings or theorize through thinking. Depending on our choices, we prefer one of the four learning styles: looking and reflecting (reflector), building theories (theorist), putting theories into practice (pragmatist) or doing hands on experiments (activist). Due to these natural tendencies, we learn best when using our preferred learning style and worst when using the opposite ones. At the same time, however, we learn far better if we use all of the four learning styles – by accomplishing a full learning cycle. It does not matter which part of the cycle we start from, as long as we move through all of the four steps in a logical procession.

Non formal education [3-5] makes it possible for young people to take initiative and involve others in making small steps towards a better world. It is based on values and ideals, which should be at the core of any change for better. It deals with personal, voluntary involvement, and so the people are driven by their motivation and beliefs - they are committed. With such a mixture anything might be possible. What makes the role of non-formal education even stronger is the support given to it by different institutions with social missions. Having policies, programs and funds based on (the use of) non formal education, these organizations recognize it as a relevant and important factor in bringing a social change. They believe it works. Why should bureaucrats from international organizations or youth activists involved at the grass root level trust that non formal education is a good way to combat the problems of today's societies? Maybe because it approaches people differently, gets deeper inside them, because it gives hope for success in situations where other methods fail. On the personal level, the uniqueness of the non formal approach comes from the fact that it touches upon emotions and attitudes, where formal education

does not usually reach. It is complementary to school and higher education in developing different competencies. The learning process of non-formal education goes to a deeper level of personality. This is where a youth leader needs to get in order to develop understanding for social problems and capacity building to deal with them.

More importantly, the non-formal approach is essential to carry through any change that has to do with peoples' behaviors and their interactions, especially when it is about the most important values, like freedom, human rights, democracy, peace, respect, diversity or gender equality. There are still too many examples of these values being ignored, threatened and violated, thus resulting in serious problems in the society. It is difficult to simply solve such issues; they are too deep, too sensitive and too complicated. Where politicians fail to find solutions, where formal approach gives poor results, the non-formal education can be applied for solving problems. In non-formal setting groups is a basic unit, and so it shows that we are not on our own, that we depend on others as other people depend on us. This way of thinking helps to create the feelings of ownership and responsibility for the environment and people around. Certainly there are methods and tools, other than education, which also help to deal with problems in the society. However the above mentioned issues of non-formal approach make it particularly suitable to face challenges in life and resolve real life issues. There are several fields where non formal methods have been proved to bring results and have been successfully applied, both by youth organizations and big institutions: social inclusion, conflict resolution, capacity building, active citizenship, sustainable development.

Conclusion

Students are a privileged group - they get diplomas, which are seen as guarantee of success in life. They are an 'elite', compared to social groups like minorities, poor children or homeless people. On the other hand educated young people are the future of the society. The knowledge and skills they gain should be used not only to achieve good social status, but also for the benefit of others. The youth, living rather smooth life, needs to develop a sense of responsibility for the world around them and sensitivity for its problems. Non-formal education gives students the opportunity to experience and learn to respect others, show initiative, understand and value differences between people. Students need non-formal education – next to formal one - to get a deeper notion of their role in the society and to activate their potential for its benefit. Developing proactive attitude among students is also in the best interest of higher education institutions. Education systems cannot progress and respond to the changing needs, if students - one of the sides concerned, are not being properly involved and are not expressing these needs. To activate them bottom-up initiatives should be fostered. This goes best through peer contacts, since friends have big influence on young people. Non-formal education, linked with the peer approach, builds up students' capacity and makes them stronger and more pro-active. Where does non-formal education reveal the potential lying within the students community? It happens in students' associations, at training courses or international events. One of the fields where non-formal methods make a big difference are the students exchanges, programs with higher goals of international cooperation and cultural understanding. This kind of experience – long stay in another culture, with another language, lifestyle, often different academic system and content – is a unique opportunity which students should use, but also an intense trial. Two main challenges are coming alongside. Firstly students are not always eager to go abroad, being biased or discouraged by various mental barriers. Secondly, those grabbing the chance are not prepared enough to accommodate the new situation and benefit from it. Next to the knowledge about the place

or language skills, a necessary element of successful exchanges is the student's open mindset. Dealing with stereotypes, cultural shock or integration problems, drawing conclusions and learning from living in another environment needs to be facilitated. Otherwise it can turn into a shallow or negative memory.

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