

‘Learning as Becoming’: Unpacking the Role of Self and Identity in Learning in Informal Contexts

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ABSTRACT

Learning in informal contexts differs from traditional school-based learning. Learners are seen as whole individuals, actively engaged in a range of learning experiences. Their motivations and the meanings they derive from learning are diverse, shaped by their prior knowledge and self-perceptions. While existing research has focused on various informal contexts, this study proposes a framework that bridges scattered theoretical and empirical findings, clarifying (1) How is learning in an informal context defined? (2) Why are self and identity important in learning in informal contexts? (3) How do self and identity influence, and in turn, are reshaped and reconstructed in the process of informal learning? Findings reveal that intrinsic identity-driven motivations, often unconscious, underpin learners’ autonomy and adaptability across diverse informal scenarios. Besides, discursive practices and self-regulation mechanisms reflect identity mediation. As dual catalysts, self and identity can also be constructed dynamically, self-reflectively and expressively, rather than just maintaining. Theoretically, this research repositions self and identity as core analytical categories in informal learning studies, presenting a unified conceptual model. Practically, it urges educators to recognise learners’ identity fluidity and the crucial role ‘significant individuals’ play in shaping learners’ identities. It also cautions that identity-linked learning may perpetuate societal biases (e.g., racism, gender inequity) and reinforce entrenched power hierarchies. By foregrounding the relationship between learning and identity, this study advances a ‘person-centred’ perspective for understanding education beyond institutional confines, with implications for lifelong learning, community engagement, and equity-oriented pedagogy.

Keywords: learning in informal contexts, self-concept, identity formation and transformation, educational psychology, equity