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Theory for Simulation

Informal Learning: Relevance and Application to Health Care Simulation

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Abstract: This article presents a learning framework which has been used in other disciplines but has relevance for health care simulation. Given the interest in simulation pedagogy, informal learning is presented for consideration within this contemporary learning field. In contrast to formal learning, the concept of informal learning aligns well with important aspects of contemporary health care simulation strategies. Formal learning typically incorporates a specified curriculum, is taught by a designated teacher(s), and involves assessment or certification. These are predominantly planned and prespecified activities which take place in colleges, universities, and schools. Informal learning on the other hand lacks at least one of the characteristics of formal learning and typically is indeterminate, is opportunistic, involves both internal and external goods, and is an ongoing process. There are strong connections between informal learning and health care simulations which feature students and clinicians engaging in highly contextual unfolding scenarios. Such simulations are multidimensional and their unfolding nature can be somewhat unpredictable, irrespective of predetermined learning objectives. Health care simulation can provide opportunities for whole-person embodied learning, including the affective dimensions of practice. Compared with traditional, formal learning approaches, simulations highlight the values and attributes which are central to practice, thereby offering valuable informal learning opportunities for participants to develop their tacit knowledge and to engage significantly in the process of becoming a health care professional. A case study example of a nursing student as she enters practice illustrates some additional and perhaps unintended outcomes of health care simulations.

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The concepts of formal learning (such as lectures, assessments) are familiar and constitute what are perceived

to be the mainstay of education systems and processes. However, the notion of informal learning and its contribution to wisdom, judgement, and community has regained prominence in the educational literature as a valuable component of holistic learning, particularly for practice (see, e.g., Beckett

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& Hager, 2002, Hager & Halliday, 2006). There are strong connections and applicability of the characteristics of informal learning for health care simulations, specifically in fostering values and professional behaviours, which is the focus of discussion within this article. To illustrate these connections, a case study from a recently completed doctoral thesis will be featured. Consideration of informal learning, in addition to the more formalised aspects of planning and delivering health care simulations, may inform and extend awareness of contemporary pedagogies for educators and clinicians.

Key Points

- There is strong applicability of informal learning for health care simulations.
- The design and implementation of simulations should arouse student enthusiasm, interest, and motivation.
- Much valuable informal learning is significantly tacit and whole-person embodied learning.

Overview of Informal Learning Theory

“Informal learning” is a concept that has had a relatively low profile. Hager and Halliday (2006, p. 29) suggest that this is so because, as the adjective “informal” implies, informal learning is usually defined by the particular characteristics that it lacks in relation to its more illustrious sibling “formal learning.” As Hager and Halliday (2006, p. 29) note, three essential features are usually required for an instance of learning to count as formal. They are that it:

- Involves a specified curriculum,
- Is taught by a designated teacher or group of teachers,
- Involves the learning attained by individual learners being suitably assessed and certified.

Thus, formal learning can be characterised as a planned activity that takes place in accredited educational institutions such as schools, colleges, universities, training centres, and the like. Typically, formal learning follows a prescribed sequence whether actual attendance of the learners at the institution is a requirement. Often quite specific outcomes are required to be achieved although sometimes the learning sequence reflects broader directions or aims. However, in all instances of formal learning, learners have a general idea of what they are supposed to be learning, and they accept that the prescribed learning has been decided by appropriate authorities (Hager & Halliday, 2006, pp. 1-2).

If we reserve the term formal learning for cases that meet each of these three criteria, it is clear that there will be some borderline cases of learning that exhibit some degree of formality, by matching only two or one of these criteria. Such borderline cases are sometimes called “nonformal” learning. Examples would be hobby or craft courses that

follow an introductory curriculum delivered by experienced enthusiasts but which involve no formal assessment of student learning. But, one of the most solid findings of educational research is that “assessment drives the learning” (e.g., Hayward 2012), that is, students take more seriously learning on which they expect to be assessed, while downplaying nonassessable learning. In the absence of formal assessment, these nonformal hobby and craft courses have to rely on participant motivation and enthusiasm to drive the learning.

Given these characterisations of formal and nonformal learning, it could be said that informal learning encompasses all other situations in which people learn. This would mean, of course, that a wide and very diverse range of instances of learning fall into the category of informal learning. Learning from life experiences of all kinds, whether at work or in leisure activities, is obviously a very large part of the overall realm of informal learning. Of course, participation in formal education activities is a major part of many peoples’ life experiences. Typically, a quantum of informal learning is gained in addition to the formal learning. Thus, the learning that teachers and lecturers plan for their students will often be accompanied by unplanned learning. Part of quality formal education arrangements is to foster an ethos that encourages informal learning of a kind that complements and augments the planned formal learning. A central claim of this article is that an important consideration when designing and implementing simulation learning activities is how to maximise the value of the informal learning that will, inevitably, occur alongside of the planned formal learning outcomes. Illich famously called this informal learning that occurs alongside of formal learning, the “hidden curriculum” (Illich, 2000).

But, so far informal learning has been considered in terms of what it lacks in relation to its higher profile siblings formal and nonformal learning. Can it be described more positively? Yes, it can.

Key Features of Informal Learning

As discussed at length in Hager and Halliday (2006), key features of informal learning are that it is *indeterminate and opportunistic*, involves *internal and external goods*, and is an *ongoing process* as described in the following.

Indeterminate Learning

In contrast to formal learning outcomes that often can be minutely prespecified, informal learning is much less determinate than this for many reasons. First, informal learning is significantly contextual, in that its content is significantly shaped by the particularities of the context in which it occurs (Hager & Halliday, Chapter 6). As well, learners themselves are part of the context, thereby adding

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