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What is Nonformal Education?

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Can you list specific differences between formal and nonformal education? Is informal education the same as nonformal education? Why do some agricultural educators spell nonformal with a hyphen (non-formal) while others do not? Are these questions really pertinent to the profession?

I believe that these are important questions. I believe that agricultural educators do a disservice to the profession when they use such basic terms in an unscholarly manner. I believe that important distinctions exist between formal and nonformal education and between nonformal and informal education. I believe that agricultural educators need to be aware of the distinctions in order to be effective educators, especially when moving from formal settings to nonformal settings. I believe that the differences of opinion between classroom teachers and extension educators will never be resolved until the distinctions are fully understood and appreciated.

The purpose of this philosophical article is to express a position and invite response. My position (summarized in the previous paragraph) is based on preparation as an agricultural educator (B.S. & M.S. in Agricultural Education) and on experience in teaching in the classroom as well as in nonformal educational settings with the Cooperative Extension Service. I have worked in two university departments that were trying to prepare both formal and nonformal educators. Invariably conflicts have arisen between those two efforts, usually over scarce resources. Without an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of both formal and nonformal education in agriculture, those conflicts can be damaging.

This article will explore some of the differences and similarities among formal, nonformal, and informal education. It will then state reasons why a balanced and informed understanding of the three is important to our profession. Ultimately the goal of this article is to lay the foundation for unity among agricultural educators whether they work in formal settings, nonformal settings, or both. Agricultural educators, to me, include secondary and post-secondary teachers of agriculture, teacher educators, professionals in state departments of education whose primary responsibility is for agricultural programs, extension agents, and individuals engaged in international agricultural education. My opinions are presented here in order to begin a conversation rather than to deliver the final work. Let us start with a key question.

What is Education?

Numerous definitions exist. Some of the older ones are some of the better ones. For me education means learning knowledge, skills, and attitudes. The most important of these is learning how to learn. Learning means deciding about your own lifestyle.

Teaching, by itself, does not constitute learning; neither does passive listening. Learner's must decide to incorporate any knowledge, skill or attitude into their own set of values and behaviors (lifestyle), or the learning is not meaningful. Learning happens outside the classroom as well as within. Some learning results from teachers and some does not. Some learning is intended and some is accidental.

Three Types of Education

Most of the general population assume that education and schooling are interchangeable terms. Many educators seem to feel that any education that happens outside of school is somehow inferior, usually dubious, and certainly uncontrolled. Other educators and many philosophers point out that learning takes place inside and outside of classrooms. I believe that learning occurs in formal, nonformal, and informal educational settings and that the learning experience can be equally powerful in each of those settings.

Formal education is properly associated with schools. A more precise definition is supplied by Coombs (1973), "the hierarchically structured, chronologically graded educational system running from primary school through the university and including, in addition to general academic studies, a variety of specialized programs and institutions for full-time technical and professional training" (p. 11).

Nonformal education (NFE) has been defined (Kleis, 1973, p. 6) as any intentional and systematic educational enterprise (usually outside of traditional schooling) in which content is adapted to the unique needs of the students (or unique situations) in order to maximize learning and minimize other elements which often occupy formal school teachers (i.e. taking roll, enforcing discipline, writing reports, supervising study hall, etc.).

Nonformal education is more learner centered than most formal education. It has to be. Learners can leave anytime they are not motivated. NFE tends to emphasize a cafeteria curriculum (options, choices) rather than the prescribed, sequential curriculum found in schools. In NFE human relationships are more informal (roles of teachers and students are less rigid and often switch) than in schools where student-teacher and teacher-administrator roles are hierarchical and seldom change in the short term. NFE focuses on practical skills and knowledge while schools often focus on information which may have delayed application. Overall NFE has a lower level of structure (and therefore more flexibility) than schools.

Even less structured is informal education which deals with everyday experiences which are not planned or organized (incidental learning). When these experiences are interpreted or explained by elders or peers they constitute informal education (Kleis, 1973, pp. 3-4).

Some examples will help clarify formal, nonformal, and informal education. Formal education occurs in a typical public high school classroom. Nonformal education occurs with such organizations as 4-H and Scouts which are less structured than schools, allowing youth more choices, providing less curricular sequencing, and enforcing it even less.

Learning is controlled by the learners who may drop out any time without penalties. As a result educators must emphasize those skills, knowledge, and attitudes which are desired by the learners. Content is more practical, therefore, and responsibility for discipline shifts from teacher to learner. An example of informal education is when infants and young children are learning to speak. They learn by listening and imitating. Their trial and error efforts are augmented by parents, siblings, and friends who encourage correct sounds and spontaneously correct errors.

Extension education is nonformal education with only a few exceptions. Although extension agents may take advantage of learning opportunities which arise serendipitously, to call extension work "informal education" is inaccurate.

A secondary vocational agriculture program is difficult to fit into one of the three categories because it has elements of all three. Work in class which is tested and graded is typical of formal education. Much of the FFA and supervised occupational experience activities are typical of nonformal education. When students' everyday experiences are interpreted and augmented by their peers or parents this is typical of informal education. All three types of education provide powerful learning opportunities. The most effective teacher is one who allows and helps learning to take place during situations which fit all three types of education. This may be done intentionally or instinctively.

While formal and nonformal education are different, they are not opposites. Both emphasize organized and intentional learning. Both involve structure, professional educators, and choices by learners. Responsibility for learning is shared among educators and learners. The differences are more a matter of degree in each of these types of education.

Educator Styles

An educator must be flexible in order to be effective in all three types of education. An educator needs to use different leadership styles for different situations. Directive leadership may work most of the time for formal settings but democratic and nondirective (Laissez faire) styles are needed to enhance learning in nonformal and informal settings. Some educators seem to be able to adapt to the situations. Too many, however, are effective classroom teachers but less effective as nonformal educators because they try to use classroom techniques and directive leadership in both settings. Likewise, certain educators who are effective in nonformal settings lose their effectiveness when teaching in the classroom because they do not adapt to the requirements of more structure and more responsibility for learning.

Both formal and nonformal educators must be well prepared, enthusiastic, clear, and business-like in their presentations, use a variety of teaching techniques and get students involved in learning. But, the demands on educators in nonformal settings differ from those of classroom teachers. The nonformal educator must be more flexible, ready to change to meet students' diverse and changing needs. Democratic and nondirective leadership styles will be required more in nonformal settings and directive leadership will be appropriate less frequently than in the classroom.

Why Distinguish Between Formal and Nonformal?

I have been arguing that agricultural educators should distinguish, accurately and sensitively, between formal and nonformal education. Let's look more closely at my reasons, in addition to educator effectiveness, for this argument. (1) Schools, having occupied large chunks of our lives, tend to dominate our perceptions of education, learning, and teaching. Formal educators tend to define the teaching role and relegate nonformal education to lower importance. Most of the public resources available for education are allocated to school-based programs. Formal educators, furthermore, are justifiably concerned about losing any of those resources. (2) Land grand universities' extension and resident instruction often seem to be in conflict philosophically and in competition for scarce funds. More agricultural education departments are becoming departments of agricultural and extension education making those historical conflicts more evident and potentially more damaging. (3) Formal and nonformal education can complement each other if properly understood. Both, along with informal education, provide powerful learning opportunities which can strengthen and support one another. (4) Due to our professional responsibilities, which in most cases emphasize one over the other, we tend to prefer formal or nonformal settings and develop biases against the other. Maintaining balance is very difficult. As educators, learners, and parents, however, we cannot allow our limited experience or biases to limit the learning opportunities of students.

And the Hyphen?

Finally, how should we spell nonformal education? Does it really make a difference if I leave the hyphen out of "Non-formal?" I believe that it does make a difference. According to my dictionary (Webster's, 1988) "non-" is a prefix which means "not: absence of; reverse of," in other words the "opposite of" something. But nonformal education is not the opposite of formal education. In many ways they are similar or overlap. Since nonformal education has a definition and unique philosophy, "nonformal education" is the more accurate spelling. Save "non-formal" for occasions when you wish to communicate absence of formality or the complete opposite of formal. If any doubts still remain, go to your local university library and find nonformal education in the computer (or card catalog). Although you will find both forms of spelling, the most common usage in current literature is "nonformal education."

Some Concluding Thoughts

To summarize, we (agricultural educators--whether local teachers, teacher educators, state department of education professionals, extension educators, or international agricultural educators) need to understand the differences among formal, nonformal, and informal education if we are to be effective educators in each of the different settings. We need to develop a greater appreciation of our colleagues who work predominately in the "other" setting. We have an opportunity to broaden and strengthen departments of agricultural and extension education by understanding and applying the different techniques emphasized in each of the three settings. Ultimately, we have an obligation to our clients, whether they are teachers, agents, students, or the general public, to take a broad view of education--to appreciate and use all learning opportunities for their benefit.

References

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