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LEARNING THE MATURE WAY - A CASE STUDY

*Anne-Marie Smith

... informal learning takes place
coincidentally to the striving to
achieve the product goal.

(Christie 1985:55)

INTRODUCTION

This paper centres on the theme of adult learning by reporting through specific illustration how a small group of mature students successfully got over the formal learning hurdle of education when faced with pre-tertiary syllabus components. The study also presents a concrete breakdown and examples of the students' approach to work or, to use Christie's phrase again, of the "product goals" they were aiming at.

I will try to illustrate that although I believe along with Christie and others that formal and purposeful learning is, by definition, confined to the classroom, there are ways in which an informal, partially classroom-based approach can be used to meet some formal goals, such as obtaining the qualifications that will help shape a generation of persons who can be looked upon as role models, or can in turn pass on knowledge through the performing of successful activities, once they have acquired mastery of those "product goals" themselves.

I must explain that since I happen to teach the communications, English language and literary component of the courses in the Kalgoorlie College Aboriginal Education Section, I have chosen to focus on the Advanced Certificate Unit we call "Senior English", which is a variant of "General English", Grade 12 (W.A. Secondary Education Authority) Syllabus.

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What I am emphasising next is a case study on how, as a student/teacher team, we went about covering a necessary slice of formal syllabus using an informal type approach. The table below outlines on the right-hand side how we had to meet curricular aims, how we transferred those into themes or topics which we debated, discussed, then researched. We then tried to bring those themes to life through action and participation, and in the end transferred them into formal presentations. The headings on the left-hand side are an attempt to classify and identify the zigzag pattern that led us from the formal to the informal and back again in our approach to learning.

MEETING A FORMAL SYLLABUS THROUGH AN INFORMAL APPROACH -
A CASE STUDY

I. FORMAL AIM	Course Aims; Rationale, e.g. Grade 12 Syllabus (SEA) & Tertiary Entry Level
II. INFORMAL SELECTION OF GOALS (general)	Suggestions of topics; Suggested THEMES e.g. HOME, LAND, ABORIGINES OF WA, YAGAN
III. INFORMAL CONSULTATION (specific)	Negotiation/Discussions Awareness/Research of availability of materials.
IV. INFORMAL DECISION-MAKING (consensus)	THEMATIC APPROACH: HOME reasons for selection: - students' own interest; availability of people, places to visit & study; community-based theme might generate further learning activities.
V. INFORMAL/FORMAL PLANNING (practical)	Books available locally; literature written locally; local Community involvement; personal contacts & knowledge.
VI. INFORMAL/FORMAL OUTCOME (realistic)	Visits : CAPS; Coolgardie Child Care Centre; Two nursing homes. Community Contacts: Attendance Committee meetings. Students' interests: Home visits; home organisation. Issues: Aboriginality; Race; Crosscultural marriage; parenthood; old age. Literature: Novels; biographies. Guest speakers: Electoral Roll; Genealogy Society
VII. FORMAL ASSIGNMENTS (product goals)	Reports/minutes/essays/literary appreciation/comparative studies/data collection/analysis.

DISCUSSION

If we examine the above outline we see, for example, that the initial aim, Stage I, is called formal because, although it departed from some more didactic approaches to teaching, it clearly focused on external constraints like syllabus aims and general considerations, which had been formally defined as part of an outside framework.

Stages II to IV show the gradual build up to planning through consultation and negotiation. The selection of input had to be experimental, as this was the first year that this course was being mounted.

The following were guiding criteria which the students generated themselves:

- an interest in both welfare issues and children's education,
- a knowledge of organisations which could be visited locally,
- a strong sense of belonging to the Goldfields area and of family ties and relationships,
- an identification of the communities that were linked with our theme of "home".

Under Stages V and VI, practical consideration restricted our choices and we had to revert to some formalism in terms, for example, of the drawing of plans of action and the designing of questionnaires. Making appointments were other examples of enforced formalism, although as often as possible direct, personal contacts were used.

Finally, Sections VI and VII outline the outcome or end products which, in the final stages, appeared as formally presented assignments as detailed above. As already mentioned, all tasks were related to the theme of "Home". Visits to schools and nursing homes led to the production of Reports and Essays. Community contacts and attendance of major committees resulted in the writing of minutes and consultative committee reports. Students personal interest and creativity fostered the study of short stories, poems, novels and biographies. This then was linked in with literature and literary appreciation. Analysis and essay writing were part of the outcome of this, while research and investigations were another consequence of the search for one's roots, which was an extra theme that emerged from the topic of "Home".

CONCLUSION

The course outline shows how, through real life tasks, one may meet the original curricula aim, and yet that performing the end product can also become a learning experience in itself, as new organisational skills can be picked up and integrated at the same time. It was interesting to note that, when performing a task, the students gave the end product a direction of their own making. Everytime this happened, it seemed to involve an element connected to the student's prior knowledge and personal input.

At all times, the teaching was geared to flexibility and often led to negotiating a framework prior to the write-up of a task. It was clear that students' perception often came from within, and this made any imposed outline of a task very much harder for them to follow. Often the students' starting point might differ greatly from that of the teacher or textbook, and adjustments had to be made. As Harris (1979:7) pointed out -

The weakness actually lies with us non-Aborigines
who are ignorant of how much and what they know.

I have observed that when faced with a functional, contextualised task, students will always be comfortable with their writing, and that structure may become a stimulus from which to go back and forth, as opposed to a rigid guide which would restrict free expression.

Familiarity with content and relevance to personal experience appear to be the key to stimulating performance. Students seem to be operating from a position of initial strength due to some sense of personal confidence, a sense that there is a task that they have observed already, or for which they have a firm idea of the end product that is expected. In some cases students were ready to produce the task much before the teacher expected them to.

Ideally, if the students could demonstrate their ideas to their fellow students or teacher first, orally for example, the performing process would be considerably shortened. In my teaching approach I am often reminded of the exchange that takes place between an "informant" and a researcher, and I feel the following quotation from Eades can be of help in the teaching-learning situation -

Consider information exchange as a part of your relationship with someone, and for specific issues, start with the known information and share it, then use triggering devices and wait until the knowledgeable person is prepared to give his information.

(Eades 1985:105)

I feel that the "knowledgeable person" in the classroom situation can equally be the student or the teacher.

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