

Practice paper

When reality surpasses concepts: informality in social pedagogy

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Abstract

More than half a century ago, UNESCO popularised the terms formal, non-formal and informal to define, organise and characterise the macrocosm of educational actions. In this article I question the current relevance of these categories, and the characteristics of education and learning that act and intervene within the framework of social pedagogy. I focus mainly on informal learning, not only because it is the least well-known type of educational action, but because it is one of the central pillars on which the socio-educational relationships developed by social educators are built. I follow an orientated, though not systematic, procedure of documentary analysis. The analysis is conceptually orientated because I analyse two types of documents: (a) the documents that refer to informal education or learning, regardless of the territorial context or academic environment in which they are produced; and (b) those that relate such education or learning to social pedagogy. I organise the results obtained from these analyses into four sections. In the first section, I relate what different studies have proposed on formal, non-formal and informal education/learning, the ways of

understanding them and the contents and procedures that respectively distinguish them. On the basis of this research, in the second section, I then propose a means of mapping to distinguish between the three types of education/learning. In the third section, I relate these forms of education/learning to social pedagogy. And finally, in the fourth section, by way of conclusion, I present some of the overlaps and hybridisations that demonstrate the current complexity of the universe entailing educational actions.

Keywords social pedagogy; informal education; informal learning; formal education; non-formal education; formal learning; non-formal learning

Introduction

Vocabularies are as deadly as men
(Rorty, 1996, p. 234)

More than half a century ago, UNESCO popularised the terms *formal*, *non-formal* and *informal* to define, organise and characterise the macrocosm of educational actions. These terms legitimised the political and, supposedly, epistemological hegemony of school education. The move put schools at the nerve centre of education and, at the same time, enthroned the (official) curriculum as the fundamental strategy for configuring and ensuring the normalised functioning of societies within the framework of national states.

Schools, as the centre of formal education, represented what was considered to be the defining standard of education. All other educational actions were defined in relation to it, by default or by undervaluation: they were either non-formal or informal, but always residual or marginal with respect to authentic education. Even if it is residual (Schugurensky, 2015), the non-formal educational sector has never represented a problem since it belongs to the same category as formal education. So-called *informal education* is deserving of a separate study, however. Being different, it has always had a diffuse and unclear status in its relations with both formal and non-formal education.

(Social) pedagogy and educational theory have as yet produced a few ideas and developments in relation to informal education/learning. This may perhaps be attributable to the strong formalisation of education systems and our scarce knowledge of processes that are unstructured or little structured in educational terms. In such a context, the informal sphere is perceived as either one of little significance with respect to people's education or as an unknown territory too complex to map. This all began to change at the end of the twentieth century, however, due to: (1) the continuous and accelerated changes taking place in societies (Rosa, 2010); and (2) the emergence of complexity as a new heuristic category for describing and understanding the world. One might say that the perspective of complexity permeabilises or suppresses many of the limits and boundaries that the analytical perspective, predominant over the past two centuries (Sloterdijk, 2016), had led us to perceive in phenomena and things. The complex gaze replaced the closure, separation, distance and isolation of phenomena with communication, interrelation, fluidity and continuity (Úcar, 2023a).

This may be one of the reasons why the fields of non-formal and informal education and learning have begun to be studied and researched in recent years, not only in the sphere of youth work (Allaste et al., 2022; Kauppinen et al., 2021) but also in relation to social pedagogy (Belton, 2014; Jeff and Smith, 2021; Jones and Brady, 2022). However, this remains a largely unexplored terrain that needs to be weeded and ploughed (Kirchhöfer, 2003 cited in Tuschling and Engemann, 2006, p. 455;¹ Straka, 2004; Úcar, 2023a), especially from a conceptual and operational point of view. In contrast, it is also true that the informality has been closer to social pedagogy than to school pedagogy or general pedagogy, the latter two historically focusing on the education system and abandoning, or at least marginalising, any other type of education or learning.

Since its origins in the mid-nineteenth century, social pedagogy has dealt with what was outside both schools and the official curricula. Rather, it focuses on the life situations of participants and the interpersonal relationships that underpin these, making it more suited than other pedagogies to dealing with informal situations.

In the English-speaking context, unlike the continental approach, pedagogy has always referred exclusively to teaching–learning relationships (Petrie, 2005). For this reason, Moss and Petrie (2019) have raised questions over the relationship between education and social pedagogy, given that the latter concept is difficult to understand in the UK (Coussée et al., 2010; Kornbeck, 2002; Petrie, 2005).

In the same vein, and following the educational rupture (Úcar, 2023a) that led to the tripartition of education into formal, non-formal and informal, I raise the following questions that I will address in this article: How relevant are these categories today? Do they still serve to characterise the macrocosm of educational actions in a clear way? How do they relate to social pedagogy? What are the characteristics of the types of education and learning that operate and intervene within the framework of social pedagogy? My focus is primarily on informal learning, not only because it is the least well-known type of educational action, but more importantly, because I believe it is one of the central pillars on which the socio-educational relationships developed by social educators are built.²

To answer these questions, I follow an orientated, though not systematic, procedure of documentary analysis. This analysis is non-systematic because it merely involves analysing research conducted on the topic according to specific time frames and following specific exclusion and inclusion criteria. Instead, it broadly gathers any type of document, academic or not, that addresses the topic. The analysis is also conceptually orientated because I analyse two types of documents: (a) those that refer to informal education or learning, regardless of the territorial context or academic environment in which they are produced; and (b) those that relate such education or learning to social pedagogy. The compilation of documents was carried out between 2020 and 2024 via weekly automatic alerts from the Google Scholar search engine and through complementary searches of other sources and databases that, for the most part, search for literature produced this millennium.

I have organised the results obtained from these analyses into four sections. In the first section, I relate what different studies have proposed on formal, non-formal and informal education/learning, the ways of understanding them and the contents and procedures that respectively distinguish them. On the basis of this research, in the second section, I then propose a means of mapping to distinguish between the three types of education/learning. In the third section, I relate these forms of education/learning to social pedagogy. And finally, in the fourth, by way of conclusion, I present some of the overlaps and hybridisations that demonstrate the current complexity of the macrocosm of educational actions.

Overlapping categories: the formal, non-formal and informal

In the 1970s UNESCO published Edgar Faure's well-known text *Learning to Be*. Since then, all educational actions have been placed in one of these three spheres: formal, non-formal and informal. However, despite the initial practical usefulness of this tripartition of the macrocosm of educational actions, it currently presents many problems when it comes to identifying and characterising actions and learning carried out by people (Úcar, 2023a). Perhaps this is because they are terms that overlap to some extent (Allaste et al., 2022) or because, as Tuschling and Engemann (2006) have pointed out, the terms have not been used homogeneously.

Straka (2004) analysed the evolution of these concepts, starting with the concept of non-formal education. He began with a UNESCO (1947) report on informal education in the underdeveloped world and organised the social, political and relational changes in formal, non-formal and informal education into four phases up to the beginning of the new millennium. Among the many changes that took place during these phases, he pointed to the influence of socio-cultural and situated learning theories, which propose a concept of non-formal and informal learning as distinct from non-formal education. The new concept of informal learning focuses on outcomes from the interaction between the individual and the socio-cultural environment in which they live.

In the academic literature analysed, I have found a significant predominance of works that use the term 'learning' rather than 'education'. In addition to the aforementioned influence of psychological theories, this is very likely related to what Biesta (2005) called the learning era, which derives from the focus of education on the needs of the learner.

The extension of the adjectives formal, non-formal and informal to learning makes it even more difficult to clearly conceptualise what we are talking about at any given time. Annen (2023) referred to a situation of 'conceptual uncertainty since there are numerous competing definitions of different terms and concepts, although the differences are sometimes marginal' (p. 5).

The vast majority of the authors reviewed agree that the main difference between these three types of education/learning lies in the fact that formal and non-formal education obey requirements of intentionality, structure, organisation and spatial and temporal location (Allaste et al., 2022; Caride, 2020; Corney et al., 2023; Meirosu, 2023; Rogoff et al., 2016; Sharma and Raghuvanshi, 2019; Zhelyazkova-Teya, 2023), while the exact requirements and characteristics of informal education are yet to be well understood (Gómez, 2022; Straka, 2004; Úcar, 2023a).

Be that as it may, current uses of the terms are organised in relation to the degrees of formalisation and institutionalisation of education and learning, and the extent to which this occurs incidentally or unintentionally (Tuschling and Engemann, 2006).

According to Straka (2004), reciprocal influence and exchanges between the three types of education/learning have made the boundaries between them increasingly permeable and difficult to demarcate. The same author pointed out that, with the turn of the millennium, a new phase of non-formal learning could be identified in relation to lifelong learning promoted at the European level. Within this framework, 'the objective is not only to support informal and non-formal learning, but also to audit the results of these learning efforts' (Straka, 2004, p. 5).

This brings into play another element that seeks to contribute to delimiting how these concepts are conceived in political-administrative terms, but that, in reality, highlights the difficulty and even impossibility of achieving complete conceptual clarification. I am referring to the need, expressed in various European Union documents, to seek ways of accrediting informal learning (for a summary and an analysis, see Barry, 2021; Caride, 2020; Corney et al., 2023; Straka, 2004; Tuschling and Engemann, 2006). That is, learning about which nothing is known when it comes to the mechanisms and procedures through which it is produced, beyond the fact that it is produced informally, that is in a way that is neither controlled nor regulated.

Despite numerous studies being produced on these concepts in recent years, the issues surrounding them persist today, especially in the field of youth work and, specifically, in the differentiation between non-formal and informal education/learning. By way of example, Corney et al. (2023) argued that the concept of non-formal education is predominant in Europe, while in the UK the practice of youth work 'has been influenced by pedagogical practices characterized as "informal"' (p. 12). In the same vein, Kauppinen et al. (2021) pointed out that some authors have conceptualised the learning that occurs in youth work as non-formal learning, while others have defined it as informal learning.

One constant across many studies is the questioning of the formal/informal dichotomy. It is argued, for example, that both types of learning occur at the same time and in the same space in school and at work, making them very difficult to discriminate between (Barry, 2021; Rogoff et al., 2016), even at the structural level (Dron and Anderson, 2022).

The aforementioned problems have led some authors to point out that non-formal and informal learning are nothing but metaphors (Straka, 2004), or that the latter is rooted in the former (Colley et al., 2003; Sawchuk, 2008). Even in European Union texts, these concepts are applied interchangeably to education and learning and used vaguely (Salto-Youth, 2016), or they implicitly recognise the difficulty of this distinction by avoiding delving into it. One example of this would be in the European Commission's (2018) *European Inventory on Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning*. Hence the regular call for more research in this area (Straka, 2004; Tuschling and Engemann, 2006; Úcar, 2015, 2023a).

Finally, some authors point out that formality is not a characteristic of individual learning, but of the socio-cultural conditions in which it takes place (Rodríguez Illera, 2018; Straka, 2004). This is probably where, beyond the sociopolitical uses of these terms, the differentiation should be located. One aspect is where and how one educates, teaches or intervenes, and another is how, why and for what purpose one learns. The two processes are not necessarily connected and, if they are, the ways in which they can be connected are so many, so diverse and so multifactorial that it will be difficult to fit them all into such rigid and simple categories as formal, non-formal and informal.

Informality in education and learning

It is a fact that in recent years there has been a marked increase in interest in informal learning (García-Peñalvo and Griffiths, 2015; Kodom-Wiredu et al., 2022). Many and varied spaces and topics are currently being researched in this area: schools (Sintapertiwi, 2022); libraries (Tawfik et al., 2022); higher education (Ramu et al., 2021); the family (Coolman et al., 2023); hospitals and health care (Yun et al., 2019); museums (Morrissey et al., 2022); music (Butler et al., 2021); the world of technology and

social networking (Long et al., 2021); and, in general, the world of work and organisations (Crans, 2023), an area in which this study is particularly prolific. Despite the above, Jeff and Smith (2021) noted that, ‘over the past fifty years, exploration of the processes and orientation of informal education has been erratic’ (p. 1).

Barry (2021) highlighted the difficulties that researchers have encountered in studying informal learning, as it seems to have different meanings in different contexts. In his view, there are two aspects to the problem. First, it is unclear what authors mean by the concept of informal or, in other words, what determining factor characterises the concept. Second, the multiple terms with which informal learning is equated. There are even authors who use the concepts of informal education and informal learning as synonyms, while others clearly differentiate between them. It is unsurprising, then, that Barry (2021) concludes ‘that these terms remain ambiguous and vaguely defined’ (p. 30). However, it seems that over the years no better and alternative term has emerged to unify the various forms of informal learning (Rogoff et al., 2016; Schugurensky, 2015).

Many ways of defining and characterising informal learning have been based on perhaps the most widely agreed idea that it occurs during people’s everyday lives through and as a result of their relationship with the physical and digital socio-cultural environment in which they live. It has been referred to as experiential; spontaneous; unstructured; non-formal; free choice; self-directed; self-regulated; incidental; tacit; situational; non-didactic; peer-to-peer; conversational; extracurricular; non-institutional; implicit; permanent; driven by individual intentions, choices and preferences; and more (Allaste et al., 2022; Barry, 2021; Dron and Anderson, 2022; García-Peñalvo and Griffiths, 2015; Jeff and Smith, 2021; Kauppinen et al., 2021; Kodom-Wiredu et al., 2022; Li et al., 2023; Meirosu, 2023; Rodriguez Illera, 2018; Rogoff et al., 2016; Schugurensky, 2000, 2015; Zhelyazkova-Teya, 2023).

Over the past few years, numerous models or perspectives have been developed in different fields based on these informal modes of education or learning. Without aiming to be exhaustive, and among many others, we can cite Dron and Anderson (2022) (the digital context); Jones and Brady (2022) (social pedagogy and youth work); Kauppinen et al. (2021) (youth work); Jeong et al. (2018) (the workplace); Lofty et al. (2022) (academic libraries); Motoyama Narita (2015) (music teaching); Sharma and Raghuvanshi (2019) (sustainable development in education); Vieira and Ostrouch-Kamińska (2015) (gender); and lastly, Decius et al. (2024) (higher education).

I will focus on one of the models that seems to me to be among the most cross-disciplinary and clearest when it comes to informal learning, because this model includes many of the elements and concepts that are usually discussed in the academic literature analysed. It is a model that was initially developed by Schugurensky (2000) and improved by Bennett (2012).

From the combination of two bipolar variables – (1) awareness/non-awareness of learning and (2) intentionality/non-intentionality of learning – Bennett (2012) defined four types of learning that make it possible to map the field of informality. Of the four types described, which are presented in Table 1, the clearest and most evident are self-directed learning, which is conscious and intentional, and tacit learning, which is non-intentional and non-conscious. The third type is incidental learning, which occurs when the person is aware of learning something, even though their intention in engaging in the activity was not to learn. The fourth type, which Bennett calls integrative learning, is a type of learning that is both intentional and non-conscious. It is learning generated from the perceptual characteristics of human beings. Psychology has shown that people’s perception is selective and that they process only a small part of the enormous amount of information – perceptual data – that we receive. In fact, people process perceived data automatically according to a whole set of specific personal traits related to factors such as, among many others, the needs of the moment, the interests that drive them, the specific socio-cultural situation they are living in and their previous learning history.

Table 1. Types of learning (Source: based on Bennett, 2012)

	Intentional	Unintentional
Conscious	Self-directed	Incidental
Non-conscious	Integrative	Tacit

The fact that these four types of learning, which are characterised in the model as typical of informal learning, can also occur in formal and non-formal education only highlights the fact that the informal sphere underlies any type of formality and mixes with it in ways that are generally non-transparent. Perhaps this is the criticism that could be made of the model, which completely ignores the role that education and the environment can play in the two bipolar variables on which it is based.

It should be noted that many of the characterisations developed do not consider so-called formal and non-formal education/learning to also take place in people’s everyday lives, and that they constitute specific forms of relating to the environment. As Dron and Anderson (2022) pointed out, much of that learning can occur in both formal and informal contexts. It would seem clear, then, that there is no single common understanding of the concept of informal learning (Li et al., 2023).

Attempting to distinguish: a trial mapping

Table 2 presents a conceptual mapping of formal, non-formal and informal education and learning based on the analysis carried out in the previous sections. The dashed lines between the columns represent the continuities and overlaps that informal education and learning have with their formal and non-formal counterparts.

If informal education has been put in brackets it is because, from my point of view, this concept is, strictly speaking, an oxymoron. For it not to be so, it would be necessary to understand that informality refers to the conditions of the place or the situation in which learning takes place or can take place, and not so much to an intentional educational action (non-existent on the part of the environment) which, for semantic coherence, can in no case be informal. In fact, learning in informal spaces of many different kinds is, as I will show below, one of the important current lines of research in the field of education.

Table 2. Categorisation of informal education and learning

	Education		
	Formal	Non-formal	(Informal)
Status	Official	Unofficial	Undetermined
Spaces (examples)	School and university	Different types of centre (youth centres, cultural associations, etc.) and organisation, social association and entity	The house, the street, the community, society, the environment
Professionals	Faculty	Faculty Expert professionals?
Methodologies and practices	Teaching: academically and socially recognised curriculum	Teaching and/or educational planning: socially or organisationally recognised curriculum	Self-education
Learning	Attributed or directly associated with educational action	Attributable or associable, directly or indirectly, to the educational action or to educational planning	Not attributable or associable to a specific external educational action. Externally observed or explicitly acknowledged by the learner

Formal education is considered to have official status in policy and administration terms. Non-formal education offers accreditation, but with a value generally limited to the organisation issuing it. And informal education has no status, although, as I already mentioned, the possibility of establishing some type of accreditation has been studied in recent years.

Regarding spaces and professionals, Table 2 does not clarify either how learning takes place or whether there is any professional specifically in charge of it in the informal sphere. Something similar can be said of methodologies and practices. Although self-directed learning can be situated in the informal sphere, little more can be added to that revealed by Bennet's model.

The last row of Table 2 is perhaps the most useful, since it allows us to, more or less, clearly differentiate the three types of learning and, in particular, informal learning. Indeed, two characteristics specifically define what I call informal learning:

- that it is not a result attributable or associable to a specific educational action; and
- that it can be observed or evidenced by an external agent or explicitly acknowledged by the learner.

I would like to point out that two ideas emerge from the analyses elaborated so far, beyond the prevailing conceptual confusion. The first is the importance of the contexts in which both education and learning take place. And the second is the importance of the role played by the learner in their learning outcomes. From my point of view, learning can be the result of both the actions or a lack of actions (pedagogical and educational) of the context, and the needs, desires and motivations of the learner. Therefore, I believe that at least three elements that make up the informal framework, whether this refers to education or learning, should be highlighted:

1. Everything that explicitly or implicitly educates or can educate people, whatever the context, method or procedure used.
2. The needs (explicit or implicit), interests, desires and motivations of the people who learn.
3. The resulting learning needs not to be immediate, transparent or necessarily observable, but this does not necessarily mean that it has not taken place.

An extraordinarily broad and complex panorama emerges from the interactions between these three elements, in which there is room for a huge scope of educational and learning situations that are difficult to analyse, compile, classify or map in an orderly, differentiated and, above all, complete manner.

Social pedagogy and the categories formal, non-formal and informal

Originally, Paul Natorp, the founder of social pedagogy, presented it as a general orientation for all types of education, including formal education. However, later developments emphasised the specific role of social pedagogy as an alternative to school education that dealt with all those individuals outside the education system. The history of social pedagogy generally endorses this idea, at least in the countries where it was developed early on. From this perspective, social pedagogy would refer only to the non-formal and informal spheres of education and learning and leave aside the formal.³

However, the changes that have taken place in recent years have come to amend that tradition, at least in Spain, where social pedagogy professionals, referred to as social educators, are beginning to work in schools, previously the exclusive domain of formal education.⁴ In fact, the idea of broadening and extending the approaches of social pedagogy to the school environment and the training of teachers seems to be a trend occurring in different countries (Anteliz and Silva, 2018; Čech, 2020; Dilnoza, 2022; Moss and Petrie, 2019; Stobbs et al., 2023; Vieira et al., 2024).

It seems that we are going back to Natorp's ideas related to social pedagogy. This is likely related to three factors. First, the spread of social pedagogy around the world since the beginning of the new millennium (Janer Hidalgo and Úcar, 2020) and its combining and amalgamation with other educational traditions and practices. Second, the general perception that this constitutes an appropriate strategy to deal with the complexity of present-day situations and problems. And third, the widespread dissemination of the continental perspective of social pedagogy, which considers it to be applicable throughout life (Kornbeck and Rosendal Jensen, 2011, 2012, 2012) and in all the environments in which individuals develop (Jones and Brady, 2022; Moss and Petrie, 2019; Slovenko and Thompson, 2015; Úcar, 2023b).

From the perspective of social pedagogy as an alternative to school education, the field of non-formal education seemed the ideal space for its development. In fact, some originally defined social pedagogy as the science of non-formal education (Fermoso, 2003). However, one thing that has always

been historically clear in the development of social pedagogy is that social pedagogues/educators are not teachers and have never been involved in teaching and delivering a particular curriculum. In respect of this, Caride (2020) has demonstrated the inadequacies of non-formal education with regard to covering the field of social pedagogy/education and, likewise, the use and abuse of this term by European institutions.

Numerous authors among the works reviewed have related social pedagogy to informal education and learning, and there are several reasons that may support this. First, the connections between informal education/learning and everyday life (Belton, 2014; Meirosu, 2023; Rodriguez Illera, 2018; Sharma and Raghuvanshi, 2019; Slovenko and Thompson, 2015). Social pedagogy has often been characterised as a pedagogy of everyday life because social pedagogy practitioners act and accompany people in the framework of their daily activities, without references or constraints due to spaces or institutions, or to predetermined curricula. As Schugurensky (2015) acutely pointed out in relation to informal education, 'the situation is the curriculum' (p. 31).

It seems to me that this last idea very accurately reflects what happens in the development of socio-educational relationships, which are considered the core of social pedagogy (Cameron et al., 2021; Eichsteller and Holthoff, 2012; Úcar, 2016a). The focus is on the relationship between the professional and the participant(s) and, specifically, how the latter manage their experiences and their own life situated within the specific socio-cultural framework in which they live. The social pedagogue thus accompanies individuals to help them search for, make possible, bring out or make visible the learning and resources that can help them improve their own life and that of their community in their own context, always within the framework of human rights and democratic values and economic, social, cultural and ecological justice.

All this matches perfectly with the description of informal learning as experiential learning (Belton, 2014; Jeff and Smith, 2021; Meirosu, 2023; Schugurensky, 2015). Corney et al. (2023) assert that informal education is orientated 'towards learning that arises from experience, reflection and conversation' (p. 13). Or, in other words, 'social pedagogy is a holistic approach to experiential learning that focuses on interaction, joint activities, and relationships' (Makwana and Elizabeth, 2023, p. 759). This is a second point of connection between social pedagogy and informal learning that needs to be highlighted. The content of social pedagogy, like that of informal learning, is life itself, which is why I have often characterised it as a pedagogy of and for life (Úcar, 2016b, 2023a, 2023b).

Clearly connected to the above is the reference to social learning shared by social pedagogy and informal education (Belton, 2014; Crans, 2023; Jones and Brady, 2022; Meirosu, 2023; Schugurensky, 2015). Social learning emerges from the interactions and relationships that we maintain with other people throughout our lives. As Crans (2023) has noted, this is why many academics highlight the importance of the social side of learning in relation to informal learning. These forms of social education and learning constitute the raw material on which both social pedagogy and informal learning are built and shaped. It is unsurprising that some claim social pedagogy overlaps considerably with informal education (Smith, 2019).

Among many other possible reasons for connecting social pedagogy with informal education, the last I would cite is the emphasis that social pedagogy and informal education place on the goals of their actions and the values that underpin them. Both focus on the prevention of problems, inclusion and the fight against social inequality, among other aspects (Jones and Brady, 2022; Slovenko and Thompson, 2015).

The area in which social pedagogy has been most clearly and explicitly linked to informal learning is that of youth work. Perhaps this is because it is the most open stage of life, the one least subject to institutional restrictions and the one, finally, in which decision-making is usually most in need of conscient and intentional experimentation, information and guidance. All these elements are fertile ground for the open, situated and inclusive approaches evident in both social pedagogy and informal learning.

In the context of youth work, these relationships between social pedagogy and informal learning have been approached in different ways. Slovenko and Thompson (2015) have pointed out that social pedagogy fits well with the theory and practice of informal education, while Corney et al. (2023) stated that 'informal learning is like a social pedagogy' (p. 13). In the Polish context, Kawula (2003) as cited by Slovenko and Thompson (2015, p. 10) argued that youth work is part of social pedagogy and that one of its aspects is informal education. Finally, Hatton (2005), as cited in Jones and Brady (2022, p. 5), highlighted the synergies between social pedagogy, informal education and youth work, noting that all three are largely based on Freire's critical and emancipatory pedagogy.

It is interesting to note the theories that different authors view as underpinning informal learning (Crans, 2023; Hsu et al., 2023; Jeff and Smith, 2021; Kodom-Wiredu et al., 2022; Vieira and Ostrouch-Kamińska, 2015). In addition to Freire’s theory, which I have already mentioned, the following are usually cited: experiential learning theory (Dewey, Kolb); socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky); the theory of situated learning and the communities of practice theory (Lave and Wenger); and social cognitive theory (Bandura). Most of these also form part of the theoretical and methodological foundations of and reflections on social pedagogy.

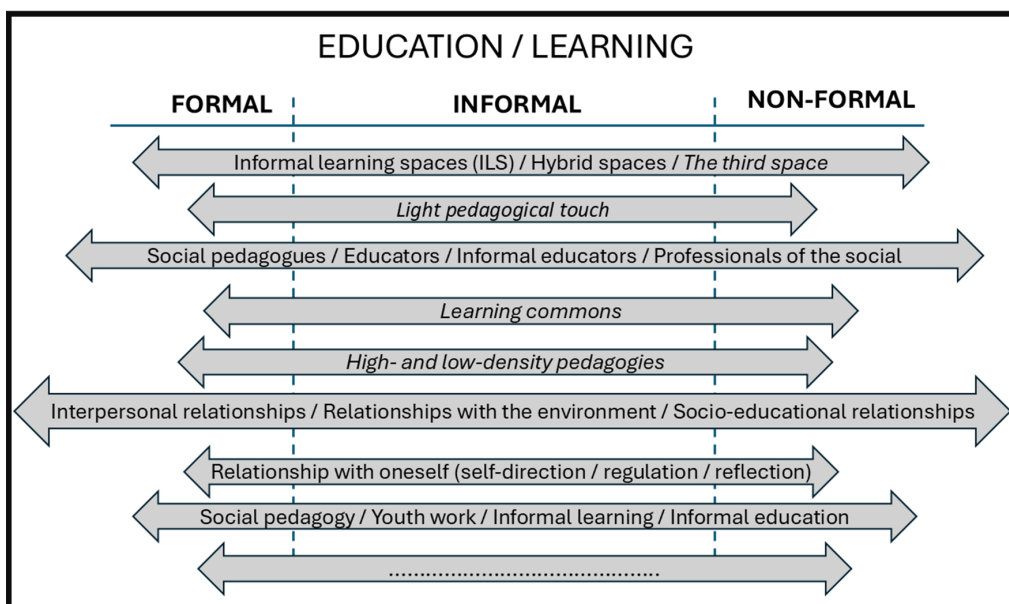
Finally, it is worth noting that social pedagogy and informal learning also share some methodological features. Hatton (2005) as cited in Jones and Brady (2022, p. 5), who reproduce the table showing these similarities, equated social pedagogy with informal education and youth work, establishing three levels – macro, meso and micro – for the similarities that occur between them in terms of perspectives, values, methodologies and specific intervention techniques.

From my point of view, dialogue, accompaniment, care for the person accompanied, the establishment of a socio-educational link, the creation of scenarios for learning, the participation of and participation in the community, the holistic perspective of both the social pedagogue and the participant(s), the transparency and honesty of the professionals and encouragement and promotion of the participant’s agency are, among many others, methodological strategies shared by both perspectives, social pedagogy and informal education/learning.

The complexity of informality: overlaps and hybridisations

In this section, I aim to construct a comprehensive, albeit approximate, view of the formal, non-formal and informal processes of education and learning. A view that, in an impressionistic way, focuses on the interstices, overlaps and hybridisations that exist between these categorisations. A view that also questions the use and significance of these terminologies, not so much to eliminate them as to use them in an open and contextualised way. Figure 1 shows some of the current elements or actions in the field of education and learning that go beyond and question the boundaries traditionally established between formal, non-formal and informal categorisations.

Figure 1. Activities and approaches that go beyond formal, non-formal and informal categorisations in education and learning



Educational spaces have already been noted as a current line of research. There is talk of informal learning spaces (Lofty et al., 2022), hybrid environments that take advantage of the principles of informal

learning (Rogoff et al., 2016, p. 381) and the third space (Oldenburg, 1998, as cited by Lofty et al., 2022). In all three cases, hybrid spaces of education and learning are referred to as going beyond the rigidity of formality, since they are difficult to place exclusively in one of the three categories. These spaces are being investigated in different areas, but perhaps it is in universities and, specifically, in libraries, where most of the work is being done (Marawar and Joshi, 2023; Sharma and Raghuvanshi, 2019; Tawfik et al., 2022).

Within the framework of these hybrid spaces, shared, often intergenerational, activities take place where learning is prioritised over teaching (Rogoff et al., 2016). In such activities, Gutiérrez and Calabrese Barton (2015) referred to the implementation of a 'light pedagogical touch ... that is, listening and learning from and with the children, giving just enough assistance in ways that opened up new forms of participation and reciprocal relations of exchange' (p. 580). It seems to me that this idea also connects with the actions of social pedagogy professionals, who permeate the rigidity of formality with their socio-educational actions. This has been exemplified by the case of social educators beginning to work in the Spanish education system.

In recent years, we have also begun to talk about informal educators (Allred and Howard, 2022; Gray et al., 2023), who usually work in museums or scientific centres and whose actions, as Evans (2022) has stated, are characterised more by 'presenting', 'facilitating' and 'participating' (p. 21), than by teaching or instructing. This is similar to what is mostly proposed in the fields of social pedagogy and youth work.

Finally, in relation to hybrid spaces in university libraries, some authors speak of learning commons (Lofty et al., 2022). Lippincot and Greenwell (2011), as cited by Lotfy et al. (2022), defined these as 'spaces for full-service learning, research, and project coordination for students' (p. 2). Once again, the line separating education from learning and the formal from the non-formal and informal becomes blurred.

Colom (1992) put forward an idea that, in my view, fits well with the complexity of socio-educational relationships and breaks with the categories that compartmentalise educational actions. It connects the formality/informality of a learning situation with the level of pedagogical normativity present in a given context.⁵ This author characterised learning situations regulated by a little or a lot of pedagogical normativity as low-density or high-density pedagogies. Extreme examples of this might be everyday life and school life. In the former, there are generally no pedagogical norms of any kind; at school, everything is designed for education and learning, so interactions are regulated by many pedagogical norms. From an educational point of view, it is these pedagogical norms that are supposed to enable the participants to learn, be it knowledge, principles, skills, attitudes or behaviours. It also seems that the following principles should be assumed: the more pedagogical norms that regulate the educational or socio-educational relationship, the more learning will occur. However, this is a causal link or correlation about which it is not currently possible to generalise. In fact, these assumptions are called into question by the intensity with which we experience certain everyday situations and the way in which they impact us and make us change our lives. In any case, our conclusion once again points to a lack of consistency in the aforementioned categorisations in terms of both education and learning.

Interpersonal relationships, those with the environment, whether physical or digital, and those characterised as socio-educational, also clearly escape educational and learning formalisations. These relationships can and do occur in any space and time and are subject only to the rules that emerge or are negotiated at the time between the people involved. Whatever education or learning there may be in these relationships transcends any type of formalisation and can only be accessed through an explicitness from the people involved in such relationships.

Merieu (1998) stated that to learn is to build in line with a personal project. Perhaps that is why informal learning has been related to self-education or to the direction and regulation of one's own learning. However, what Merieu did not say is that such a project does not necessarily have to be conscious or systematic. Elsewhere, I have pointed out that learning is a wild action that only obeys its own rules (Úcar, 2016c). These rules, conscious or not, can change over time and space according to specific contexts and situations and according to the development and evolution of the learners themselves.

What makes a fact, a principle or a procedure necessary or desirable and transforms it into an object of learning or content is something that is initially unknown to the external observer. Hence, on many occasions any type of formalisation, be it educational or learning, is nothing more than, as Sloterdijk (2013) metaphorically pointed out, an attempt at domestication. A domestication that does not always produce the results that originally motivated it and that, ultimately, calls into question any type of formalisation regarding education and learning.

Finally, it is true that, from their very beginnings, social pedagogy, youth work and informal education/learning escaped the closed conceptual compartments in which political-administrative and, supposedly, epistemological regulations attempted to confine them. Hence the need to rethink the existing categorisations and to reformulate these concepts so that they increasingly fit and better express the realities that we live with today.

Notes

- ¹ This author refers specifically to “provinces” of informal learning that need to be colonised’.
- ² In Spain, some Latin American countries and central Europe, social educators are the professionals of social pedagogy.
- ³ Elsewhere, I have argued that this is in fact a fallacy given that if there has been an education that can rightly be called social, it has been school education, given that it groups children together to socialise them and enable them to live in society. However, educational actions occurring outside the school framework were characterised as ‘social’ from very early on (Úcar, 2023a, p. 7).
- ⁴ The incorporation of social educators into schools began to be institutionalised in Spain in 2002 (Galán Carretero, 2019).
- ⁵ I understand regulations in pedagogy in a broad sense, including principles, criteria, projects, proposals, methods, techniques, materials and instruments, etc.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

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Consent for publication statement

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The author is a current editorial board member for this journal. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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