

***Learning in Places: The Informal Education Reader* Edited by
Zvi Bekerman, Nicholas C. Burbules and Diane Silberman-
Keller (Peter Lang Publishing, Inc, 2006) 315 pp.**

REVIEWED BY DAVID BRYFMAN

Drawing on a broad array of learning settings and experiences from across the globe including Israel, the United States, England and a Mayan hamlet in the highlands of Mexico, *Learning in Places: The Informal Education Reader*, edited by Zvi Bekerman, Nicholas Burbules and Diana Silberman-Keller, goes further than most current efforts to present the various facets of informal education and establish a more central place for informal education in the field of education research. This compilation of essays brings together the work of diverse scholars from across disciplines under the banner of informal learning/education. The book stands at the forefront of an attempt to unify a disparate field of practice.

In this series of studies, the editors set out to include a variety of original scholarship without trying “to impose a uniform theoretical perspective, style, or format...in order to preserve their character as a polyphonically voiced and internationally representative conversation.” (p.1) Definitions are not taken for granted; Sally Duensing goes so far as to call into question some of the core assumptions about informal education suggested throughout the book, including the role of interactivity and free choice, which she suggests might not be applicable in all cultural milieus. In many ways this book mirrors the budding field of informal education itself, a field that continually struggles to define itself theoretically, while simultaneously attempting to develop a body of literature around practices already in use. While the breadth and scope of the book provide valuable and diverse perspectives for the field, the one thing lacking is precisely the piece of information that the reader might most be searching for: a clear definition of ‘informal education.’

In presenting a variety of perspectives, *Learning in Places* gives voice to the emergent debate over definitions of the field. At times the book assumes that its readers share a preconceived notion of “formal” education, as that which takes place in “the form of age-graded and bureaucratic modern school systems or elders initiating youths into traditional bodies of knowledge” (p. 204). As a result, more authors spend time distinguishing between the often conflated concepts of “informal” and “nonformal” education. Burbules describes the difference between informal and nonformal education as

“having primarily to do with the degree of *structure* and the degree of *intentionality* in the teaching-learning process. Nonformal education is characterized by some kinds of structure (though different ones from formal educational institutions and processes), and includes some level of conscious intent to achieve learning, whether by overt teaching or other means. Informal education, as I understand it, is more continuous with the

activities of everyday life, in which some teaching and learning might occur, but largely in an unintentional and tacit way” (p. 282).

Labeling informal or nonformal education with their negative prefixes suggests that either could be construed as the antithesis of formal education. Indeed, Burbules defines the two concepts not on their own terms, but in terms of the extent to which they adhere to a particular understanding of formal education. Categorizing these phenomena as something which they are *not* is problematic, especially when we have no universally agreed upon definition of the object of comparison, formal education.

The editors of this book do not shy away from the blurriness of such definitions. A chapter by Daniel Schugurensky, for instance, acknowledges that informal learning, in addition to taking place in informal environments, can and usually does also take place in nonformal settings (e.g. training workshops, yoga classes or rehabilitation programs) as well as in formal settings (primarily in schools and universities). D.W. Livingstone offers a broad definition of informal education, ostensibly to be applied across different settings, stating, “informal learning is any activity involving the pursuit of understanding, knowledge, or skill that occurs without the presence of externally imposed curricula criteria.” (Livingstone, p. 206)

While this definition of informal education is useful, in practice it does not capture many of the learning environments reflected upon within this book, most of which have some externally imposed criteria, even if they are not specifically referred to as curricula. With chapters dedicated to a wide variety of structured settings - including museums, the internet and after-school care for children, all of which have specific educational goals and objectives – this book regularly blurs its own boundaries between informal and nonformal education, a fact that several authors acknowledge. While I recognize that this book is reflective of a field without a unified scholarship, I cannot help but feel somewhat disappointed that the editors of the groundbreaking *Informal Education Reader* deliberately chose to include multiple, disparate voices without taking advantage of the opportunity to adopt more definitive and rigid terminology.

This book also attempts to assign informal education a more prominent place in the field of education and educational research. As Silberman-Keller suggests, “the concept of nonformal pedagogy does not yet exist in the professional literature” (p. 251). Without a recognized literature it is hardly surprising that in many circles informal education lacks credibility. Schugurensky develops this theme further, stating:

“In educational discourse, informal learning is usually conceptualized as a residual category of a residual category. If formal education refers to the institutional ladder that goes from preschool to graduate studies, and nonformal education refers to an organized activity that takes place outside the formal educational system (e.g., short courses, workshops, professional development etc.), then informal learning often becomes a loose category that encompasses “anything else” that is not included in the previous two. Given this characterization, it is not surprising that informal

learning is at the margins of the margins of the educational conceptual and research radar.” (p.163)

“Informal education” is a term that Jewish educators have come to associate with summer camps, youth groups and travel programs. One thing to be learned from the various definitions presented in *Learning in Places* is that many of these settings familiar to Jewish educators fall more accurately into the category of *nonformal* education, not the commonly ascribed label of *informal* Jewish education. All of these settings are structured to varying degrees and when done well all contain highly conscious educational objectives. It is largely for these reasons that I, along with a growing number of academics and practitioners, prefer the term “*experiential* Jewish education” to more precisely define the phenomenon that we are interested in – as a practice of Jewish educational experiences which can transcend the boundaries of formal and informal settings.

As its title suggests, *Learning in Places* offers perspectives on a variety of educational experiences which take place in multiple settings across several cultures and societies. This book challenges a core concept of what is commonly thought of as constituting education and is an important read for anyone involved in the educational enterprise. For Jewish educators specifically the book offers an opportunity to look beyond the often myopic world of Jewish educational scholarship while still maintaining its roots in several familiar practices and settings. This book should also serve to stretch Jewish educators by offering radically different paradigms for the ways in which Jewish education has often traditionally been conceived.

Because of the familiarity of the setting, Bekerman’s chapter analyzing the *Hanchaia* experience (i.e. leading, guiding, moderating) of a group of Israeli educators involved in a values education training program may resonate with Jewish educators more than other chapters. This study reflects on several factors which constitute informal education including the prominence of dialogue, debate and discussion between facilitators and the students. Bekerman also categorizes the type of learning taking place as that which often involves discovery, creativity and challenge, emphasizing that a core aspect of informal learning is that the facilitator and students reach their final destination together.

One chapter which may provide unexpected perspective to Jewish educators is Ashley Maynard and Patricia Greenfield’s analysis of the Zinacantec Mayan hamlet in the highlands of Chiapas, Mexico, where women teach the art of weaving through apprenticeships. The practices described in this chapter are not incidental transmissions of culture between generations but instead reflect a highly organized and intentional structure of learning based on modeling significant cultural practices. Whether these women are fully cognizant of their highly sophisticated practices or whether they are merely replicating their own mother’s weaving techniques is difficult to ascertain. This unknown only makes the discussion about intentionality in informal education even more intriguing. On a practical level, one could only begin to imagine the limitless potential for Jewish experts to teach with a similar apprenticeship model any number of “rituals, routines, cultural practices, and socializing agents that support cultural learning” (p.141).

In distinct contrast to the practices within the Zinacantec village, the world of technology is expanding around us at an exponential rate. Burbules presents a study of learning through the internet, offering educators an insight into the world of online collaborative learning communities. Not only does Burbules challenge our concept of community, but he demands educators to consider the implications of a generation that is growing up with connections to people globally that would have been inconceivable even a few years ago. For Jewish educators struggling to articulate concepts of Jewish peoplehood and *Klal Yisrael*, Burbules offers a new way of framing the Jewish world and concepts of *kehillah* through channels that may be more familiar to the younger generation of Jews than it is to their educators. As Jewish educators continually grapple with the conflict between “authenticity and relevance,” to borrow Michael Rosenak’s phrase, these two chapters, and the book as a whole, offer a refreshing lens on the relationship between tradition and modernity in Jewish education.¹

With so little written about informal education in a language that Jewish educators can relate to, this book adds significantly to our theoretical understanding of practices which have existed within Jewish education for hundreds of years. The irony of course is the academics commenting on informal education are all based in formal educational institutions. Although two of the editors, Bekerman and Silberman-Keller, draw heavily on their experiences in Israel, this book is one which transcends the field of Jewish education and should spark discussions for all involved in the educational enterprise.

The greatest impact of this book may not be for those who are already engaged in informal education, but for those who are interested in incorporating more informal/nonformal learning within their more formal educational institutions. As Mark Smith suggests, “the values and practices of informal education do not fit easily into the current schooling paradigm – but its practitioners have a duty to work within institutions such as schools and colleges so that they may be more convivial for learning” (p. 26). Research on informal education not only serves to enhance the sub-field, but the entire enterprise of education.

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¹ Michael Rosenak, *Roads to the Palace*, (Providence: Berghahn Books, 1995).