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BOOK REVIEW
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Documenting and Assessing Learning in Informal and Media-rich Environments, by Jay Lemke, Robert Locusay, Michael Cole, & Vera Michalchik. Published by Massachusetts Institute of Technology in London, England, UK, 2015 (160 pages).

Cross (2006) said that, “informal learning is like riding a bike: the rider chooses the destination, the speed, and the route” (What is Informal Learning?, para.3). Informal learning is highlighted in this book. It is a recent book that presents learning in a different perspective as it contains key concepts pertinent to documentation and assessment design for informal learning activities. The authors argue that the valued outcomes of informal learning tend to be less predictable and much more diverse than those of formal education, and that the learning that matters is learning that is used. The book presents four domains of informal learning: (a) learning in after-school programs and community centers, (b) short-term, focused, out-of-school activities, (c) activities in informal learning institutions, and (d) computer-based and online activities. The book has only four chapters: the introduction, the review of the literature, the highlights of the expert meetings, then conclusions and recommendations.

Maybe the most important highlight of the book is on the evidence presented, which includes exemplary studies and projects, identification of particular approaches to assessment, methods of documentation, and techniques of analysis. Other books espousing the use of media and technology inside the classroom would mostly encourage teachers and students to explore more on the use of technology inside the classroom. This is because the use of technology would expose learners to informal learning which gives a better and lasting effect on the learners. Media and technology are said to be the major sources of students’ informal learning. For instance, discussions, which could not be carried out inside the classrooms, can be supplemented by the materials and readings available online. Pitler, Hubbell, and Khun (2012) explain that technology is no longer an add-on to the task of teachers; it has become a fundamental element as to how teachers teach and how students learn more. So, it has become the life that teachers, learners and every one live. A media-rich and highly technological classroom is a classroom where learning takes place fluidly and interestingly.

This book under review contains key concepts pertinent to documentation and assessment design for informal learning activities. Major arguments presented in the book are that the valued outcomes of informal learning tend to be less predictable and much more diverse than those of formal education and that the learning that matters is learning that is utilized. The book explains that completing informal learning is a challenging task because the myriads of outcomes are not the outcomes expected by educators and people may not notice these outcomes. The outcomes are diverse and often unexpected. In the usual school setting, once goals are set, expected outcomes could be seen through sets of exams prepared for the learners. Assessing informal learning means looking back afterwards to evaluate valued outcomes that were never expected in the original planning.

In this book, it is clear that informal learning plays a role in constructive activities like asking questions, solving problems, producing video documentary; thus making it more applicable to real needs of the learners. Everything that people learn becomes significant when it is applied. The different activities presented in this book are all supported by different verifiable studies. The four domains that are identified are all backed with research conducted in different and diverse settings. The strong scientific evidence makes this book unique compared to other books of this type that usually lack strong scientific foundation.

The authors used convincing concepts supported by related studies that make their claim scholarly. The use of different research studies connected to their claims contributes significantly to the trustworthiness of its contents. Indeed, the book is a good reference, although it could still be improved. A clear explanation of the major differences between formal and informal learning could be included in the introduction for clear grasp of the meaning. A better organization of the meaningful discussion could be done. The discussions are presented properly but the organization makes it somehow perplexing. Proper heading would perhaps help to clearly see how the four highlighted domains are being discussed.

The book may not be considered an excellent book because of the few imperfections but it is a good reference, worthy to be read by educators and reading enthusiasts in general. It would surely contribute to the never-ending learning and discovering process of educators and education students.

References

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