

# Learning beyond the Classroom: The Value of Informal Learning Environments

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*“Develop a passion for learning. If you do, you will never cease to grow.”*

*-Anthony J. D'Angelo*

**T**HE learning environment is a crucial factor in successful learning. Traditionally, only formal learning environments, such as schools and other educational institutions, have been accepted as educational settings, where educational activities are well-organized, following established curriculum programs and teaching objectives. Often disregarded is the fact that from the point of view of lifelong learning, most of our learning takes place in informal learning environments (Sefton-Green, 2004).

Informal learning environments, in their broad sense, span a wide range of settings, including physical educational venues, such as the library, museum, and science center, and virtual learning spaces like the social media platform and online forum (Yang & Ouyang, 2024). In recent years, the scope of informal learning environments has expanded to encompass more diverse settings, such as the street, hospital, shopping center, and marketplace, offering learners broader opportunities for acquiring knowledge and skills. Learning in informal environments is typically enacted without standardized procedures or pre-assigned instructors. It could be incidental learning behaviors or pre-designed activities with explicit learning objectives (Wang & Yang, 2018). Being open, interactive, practical, flexible, and autonomy-supportive (Yang & Ouyang, 2024), such learning is effective in piquing learners' interest and boosting active engagement, as well as fostering their lifelong learning competencies.

Recent decades have witnessed a growing body of literature focusing on the educational value of informal learning environments. Pattison et al. (2016) conducted a

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review of studies examining mathematics study in informal learning settings beyond the classroom. The research results reveal that math learning is ubiquitous, happening with a high frequency in day-to-day activities (e.g., shopping, gaming, home activities), and that the use of math knowledge in real-world life is of greater practical education value than in-class math learning. The study also emphasizes that well-designed math projects in informal education environments, such as museums and exhibitions, are particularly supportive of math learning by utilizing colorful interactive activities provided by these venues, and that a balance between the entertaining and educational roles of these informal learning scenarios is warranted to ensure the expected learning outcomes. Ramu and Aziz (2016) surveyed 40 studies on the effects of informal learning environments within the campus on student learning (published between 1979 and 2016). According to their research findings, campus-based informal learning environments, including the library, cafeteria, garden, corridor, and more, have significant impacts on student academic performance and school-life satisfaction. These spaces encourage inquiry, collaboration, and communication in the students, enabling them to better comprehend and apply knowledge acquired in the classrooms.

It is evident that informal learning environments are of equal significance to formal ones. They are mutually complementary and together, create wider ecology of education for the students (Li & Shi, 2016). Meanwhile, it is a misconception that learning in an informal environment must be casual. Rather, informal learning environments can well serve as the settings for structured educational activities. *The Effect of Informal Learning Environment on Learning Wastes and Recycling: The Case of Glass Bead Atelier* in this issue looks at the use of the informal learning environment in the teaching of curricular content. Through a case study of a glass bead atelier as an off-campus learning setting, the study investigates the effect of teaching in an informal learning environment on student achievement in the “Wastes and Recycling” study as well as the students’ views about learning in an informal education environment. The research findings suggest that informal learning environment-based activities that support formal learning positively affected learning outcomes and that students held positive attitudes toward them (Türkmen & Edis, 2025). It should be noted that the study is not without limitations. The short duration of the experiment makes it difficult to assess the long-term effect of the intervention; the subjects in the study are confined to a single age group from a certain region. Factors like these may compromise the generalizability of its findings. Despite its limitations, the study offers valuable insights to educators seeking to leverage informal learning environments to support official curricular instruction.

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