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Informal Learning in Malaysia

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Abstract: *This paper presents findings from the first attempt in Malaysia to investigate the participation of adults in informal learning outside workplace and formal educational setting. The study finds participation in informal learning is high. Informal learning through reading activity seems to concentrates around matters related to religion.*

Adult education as a field of study in Malaysia is a recent phenomena. In the sixties and seventies adult education is largely seen as providing adult with literacy programs. However, such notion soon becomes irrelevant since the country achieved a phenomenal success in increasing literacy rate among its populace. Nevertheless, adult education continues to be associated and burdened with its historical baggage and thus, failed to get noticed as an important field in the academia until recently. Adult educators in the country have been struggling to ensure that the field received the recognition it deserves. Following that, the first nation wide survey (in Peninsular Malaysia) on the nature of adult learning was conducted in 2002. This paper presents findings from one particular aspect of the survey, that is, participation of adults in informal learning. The survey was funded by the Malaysian Ministry of Science, Technology, and Environment.

Fortunately for Malaysian, despite the country not having a clear policy on adult education, the government has been implementing various educational programs for adults. However, as expected, practically all government run programs centered on formal learning. Informal learning receives little or no attention, and hence remains in obscurity. This phenomenon is not unique to Malaysia alone. A study in the United States by Rowden (2002) shows that many business organizations focus very little attention to informal learning. As the most pervasive forms of adult learning (Marsick & Watkins, 2001), such a treatment cannot be avoided, but can be changed for the better, if the field is better understood. This study is the first attempt in Malaysia to get a glimpse into informal learning outside of the workplace context. The study specifically developed to investigate the nature of informal learning outside workplace and educational institution context. Following a request by the funding agency, the study also dwell deeper into the utilization of reading in informal learning among adult Malaysians.

About Malaysia

Malaysia is strategically positioned in the heart of Southeast Asia. The country is divided into two regions; East and West Malaysia. East Malaysia is situated at the northern tip of Borneo, while West Malaysia, also known as Peninsular Malaysia, is sandwiched by Thailand in the North and Singapore and Indonesia in the South and West respectively.

Malaysia's multi-ethnic and multi-religious community is a source of pride to the nation. The predominant Malay constitute about 60% of the population, Chinese 30%, Indian 7 %, and the remaining are made up of other ethnic groups. In a modern Malaysia, each race continue to retain its cultural heritage and identity while living and working alongside each other in harmony.

Informal Learning

Marsick & Watkins (2001) position informal learning at the heart of adult education because of its learner centeredness and its connection to life experience. Current understanding indicates that informal learning can occur with or without any expressed goal. This type of learning is usually intentional but not highly structured. Among examples listed as informal learning include self-directed learning, networking, coaching, mentoring, and performance planning.

In the context of workplace, formal learning often stimulates informal learning, while informal learning often leads to participation in a more structured activity (Shipton, Dawson, West, & Patterson, 2002). Nonetheless, Rowden (2002) noted that informal learning occurs the most in workplace setting. Sadly, many organizations give little recognition to informal learning as such it receives the least attention and funding.

There have been considerable progresses made in deepening our understanding about what constitute informal leaning (Marsick & Watkins, 2001). However, investigating this type of learning in the field, as discovered by the researcher and writers of this paper, remains problematic. Furthermore, while majority of the studies investigate informal learning within workplace context, this study explore it from outside such context.

Methodology

The population of the study comprised of 21 years old and above in Peninsular Malaysia. A total of 3000 respondents were selected for the study. The sampling utilized a frame from the Malaysian Statistics Department. Four states were randomly selected, each representing the north, east, central, and south zones of Peninsular Malaysia. Trained enumerators collected the data by personally interviewing respondents at their houses using a set of questionnaire specifically designed for the study. Responses were obtained from 2262 respondents. The enumerators were trained to ask question that reflect how a person goes about getting information that he/she wants to learn or get further information. The data were analyzed for descriptive statistics using the SPSS program.

Findings and Discussion

The study shows that adults Malaysian participate in informal learning through five activities namely reading, watching ‘television’, listening to the radio, attending knowledge circle (*majlis ilmu*) and contacting others (see Table 1 below).

Table 1: Informal Learning Activities

Activity	Frequency	Percentage
Watching ‘television’	2127	94.0
Reading	1928	85.3
Contacting others	1719	76.0
Listening to the radio	1715	75.8
Attending knowledge circle (<i>majlis ilmu</i>)	1169	51.7

N = 2262

These activities allow them to seek certain information or to deepen their understanding about certain issues. ‘Television’ also include other audio visual items, such as Video, Video Compact Disk (VCD) and film. Contacting others as referred to in Table 1 include asking a person or calling someone to learn about something. Knowledge circle or ‘*majlis ilmu*’ indicates organized but unstructured learning activity attended by a group of people. The use of the term

'*majlis ilmu*' differentiate a purposeful gathering for learning against that of a gathering for passing off time at 'coffee-stall'; a favorite leisure time activity for many Malaysians. These various learning activities reported by the respondents support the notion that learning opportunities for adult "come in many sizes, shapes, and forms (p. 43)" and that they "often combine resources ...from educational materials to people who can assist them with their learning (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999, p. 34)." What is more important here is the fact that, for the first time in Malaysia, these forms are given due recognition as contributing to the overall learning process among adults.

A total of 2127 respondents (94.0%) indicate that their learning activities involve getting information through watching television, film, video or VCD. A surprisingly high percentage of the respondents, at 85.3% prefer reading, and almost equal percentages (about 76%) chose learning through listening to the radio and by contacting other people. About 52.7% indicate learning by means of attending 'knowledge circle' (*majlis ilmu*). Generally, this study finds that participation in informal learning among the adults in Malaysia is high. This finding seems to correlate with the discovery by Rowden (2002) regarding informal learning in workplace. Rowden investigation shows that workers in small businesses are involved in informal learning more often than formal learning.

Learning through the activities listed by the respondent help enriching their life experience (Knowles, 1980), a fact that must be acknowledged if one wants to encourage adults to see themselves as active and competent learners (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999.) It should be noted that when respondents were asked whether they participated in learning activities on their own, they often provide a negative response. However, when asked about how they go about solving certain issue they faced or wanting to know more about certain things, then they acknowledge that they do learn informally on their own. Such positive responses enable the researcher to collect valuable data on informal learning, which would otherwise be very difficult to decipher since most people relate learning only to formal learning.

The high participation of adults in informal learning through watching 'television' does not come as a surprise. Television has been known to have large viewing audience in developing countries (Elkamel, 1995). Elkamel study about the role of television in Egypt reveals that 90 % of Egyptians watches television. As for this study, what is more intriguing is the inclusion of VCD by the respondents. The emergence of VCD is a new phenomenon in Malaysia, since it only started to be made available cheaply in the country in the late 1990s. During the time of the data collection, a lot of VCD featuring political related contents were widely available. The VCDs became source of information to many adults who were politically inclined and longed for alternative views other than what were presented in local media. This finding support the notion brought by Marsick and Volpe (1999) that informal learning can take place wherever people have the need, motivation, and opportunity for learning.

Two activities are equally important to many adults for informal leaning purpose, namely; contacting others and listening to the radio. One characteristic drawn by Marsick and Volpe (1999) regarding informal learning in workplace is that it is linked to learning of others. The finding from this study suggest that learning of others is more explicit outside of workplace situation when adults literally make an effort to contact by asking or calling/phoning another person. As for the use of radio, although it is not as popular as television, it still plays significant role as a means for adults to indulge in informal learning.

The popularity of ‘knowledge circle’ or ‘*majlis ilmu*’ as an informal learning activity is surprisingly low. The concept of ‘*majlis ilmu*’ where a small group of people congregates regularly to learn something may be on a decline. Unlike radio and television, which now are integral parts of daily routines, ‘*majlis ilmu*’ requires a learner to be detached from such routine in order to be a participant. Integration of learning activity into daily routines has also been characterized as one feature of informal learning (Marsick & Volpe, 1999).

Of particular interest to the researchers is the nature of participation in one particular learning activity, namely reading (see Table 2 below). This is in response to a wide media coverage in Malaysia, regarding poor reading habits among Malaysian has reportedly continue to remain very low.

Table 2: Reading activity among adults

		Frequency	percentage
Gender	Male	971	50.4
	Female	957	49.6
Locality	Urban	1099	57.0
	Rural	829	43.0
Marital Status	Married	1389	72.0
	Single/divorced	456	23.7
Age (year)	21-30	666	34.5
	31-40	470	24.4
	41-50	384	19.9
	51-60	245	12.7
	>60	163	8.5

N=1928

A high percentage of the respondents (85.3%) reported reading as preferred activities for informal learning. The ratio for males and females is about the same (both about 50.0%.) Slightly more urbanites (57.0%) preferred reading, than their counterparts from rural areas (43.0%). Nearly 60% are below 40 years of age, with nearly 35% of them within the age bracket of 21-30 year-old.

The high percentage of younger adults participating in reading activity seem to contrast the previous finding from studies conducted in the early to mid nineties by Pandian (1997). Pandian discovered that nearly 80% of undergraduates and high school students fall into the category of ‘reluctant reader’. Pandian used this term to describe adults and adolescents who can read but choose not to read. By the time this study was conducted, those who participated in Pandian’s study would have become young adults. This result suggests that a sizeable percentage of the so-called reluctant readers may have acquired reading habits over time. Clearly, adulthood has enable one to become a self directed learner, and in this case to choose reading as part of ‘a range of alternative possibilities (Brookfield, 1986, p. 58-9)’ for learning and living.

Respondents were asked to indicate their preferred choice of learning materials from a given list of six types of material. The results show their choice is concentrated around two materials, namely religious scriptures and books. As expected the majority (22.1%) who read religious scriptures do so because they want to learn more about religion/religious instruction. A very small percentage uses the scriptures for learning about politics, general knowledge, and

education. They also use books to learn similar knowledge areas. Magazine, newspaper, comic book, and the Internet, are not popular choice of learning tools among the respondents.

The respondents were also asked about where they often indulge in reading. The findings reveal that most reading activities are done at the respondents' home. The relatively high percentage of respondents (about 80%) from the lower income group indicating reading as their preferred learning activity, may be referring to the reading of religious scriptures. Formal religious classes often emphasize the importance of reading religious scriptures and other religious books. This is parallel to the earlier discussion on the notion that formal learning often stimulates informal learning (Shipton et.al, 2002). Additionally, the findings also maintain a recent argument that all types of learning contain both attribute of formal and informal learning (Malcolm, Hodkinson, & Colley, 2003). The findings also support the view that independent pursuits of learning in natural setting to deal with issue arising from a certain situation are very common in adult life (Candy, 1991).

Conclusion

Informal learning among adults in Malaysia is very widespread. Modern learning and communication facilities such as television, radio, and telephone should be used to promote contents that could encourage adults to become more active learner. In addition, more reading materials and facilities should be made accessible to adults. Also, since more younger adults indicate high participation rate in informal learning, consideration should also be made to popularize another medium, the Internet. Furthermore, since a previous study by Kamis and Muhamad (2001) had shown a significant shift to using the Internet for information seeking among young educated Malaysians.

This study is the first step towards giving due recognition that adults in Malaysia, just like their counterpart in other parts of the world are active learners. The prevalence of informal learning among adults in the country must be taken into consideration especially in the development of policy on life long learning (LLL) for Malaysia. Thus far, those who advocate LLL in the country continue to ignore the role and importance of informal learning among adults and they continue to strictly link it to productivity and employability (ASEM, 2002). In doing so, they contradict the spirit of LLL which embodies the concept that learning extended throughout the life-span of an individual to attain the fullest possible development in personal, social and professional life. It includes learning that occurs in the home, school, community and workplace, and through mass media and other situations (Dave, 1973).

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