

Optimal Practices for Non-Formal Education Initiatives

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Abstract

The primary objective of this paper is to explore the potential of non-formal educational (NFE) practices in enhancing the learning experience of young people.

The paper aims to define the most effective mentoring and learning methods through extensive research on NFE practitioner and participant experience, and to identify recommended methodologies and best practices for conducting NFE programs. The focus is on providing insights and recommendations on how educational programs for young individuals can be improved by leveraging the benefits of NFE practices.

Keywords: Non-formal education; methodologies, experiential learning, participant engagement, facilitation, flexible curriculum.

Optimal Practices for Non-Formal Education Initiatives

Education manifests in various forms, each shaping the development and trajectory of individuals' lives. Among these forms are formal, informal, and non-formal education (NFE), the latter being the focal point of this research. While formal education occurs within structured institutions, and informal education unfolds organically through daily experiences, non-formal education operates outside traditional classroom settings, offering a dynamic platform for learning. Unlike its counterparts, NFE places a distinct emphasis on learner-centered approaches, intrinsic motivation, and alignment with societal values such as inclusivity, diversity, and civic engagement. Through this lens, NFE assumes form of an impetus for empowering youth, fostering holistic growth, and nurturing active citizenship. In this exploration, I probe into the manifold benefits and implications of NFE, discerning its pivotal role in shaping educational paradigms and fostering resilient, engaged individuals equipped to navigate the complexities of the modern world.

In my research, I seek to validate the positive impact of non-formal education through investigating methodologies that prove to be effective when educating the youth. The importance of formal education (FE) in young people's lives cannot in the least be denied. It is a fact known to all that formal education coupled with a degree in a specific field is the greatest weapon one could have against turning impoverished (United Nations, n.d.). It is the much-trusted path to employment, stability, and overall better life quality. That being said, we cannot dismiss the reality where people do not easily adapt and reconcile with the formal style of learning. This could be a result of diverse phenomena. A student might not respond well to having to accept authority, or they could be shy of speaking up in the rigid environment of classroom or they

could simply consider the subject at hand irrelevant to their long-term objectives and desired skills, leading to a partial or complete loss of interest in their academic endeavors. Whatever the reason might be, there remains a no less fruitful alternative for those who find attending school efficient. To assume these people are less capable than others would speak volumes of naivete and ignorance on our part but realizing that many people simply perform better in different learning settings could just bring a step closer to accommodating the needs of those whom formal education frequently overlooks (Reuell & Parsons, 2023).

Other than demonstrating consideration for students with a preference for non-formal education styles, the accessibility of NFE and its potential for building a better social capital for the youth this learning method's greatest assets. There is a lack of emphasis on these values within the formal educational landscape and the consequence thereof is the social passivity of young people. NFE provides a window of opportunity both for educating the youth on essential social matters like inclusion and diversity as well as offering a way to reduce the already existing extent of social exclusion. By not shedding enough light on these issues, schools fail to deliver an important message about today's social divisions. The insufficient discussion of social inclusion and student profile diversity creates obliviousness among young people about the societal status quo. Whereas NFE positions itself as a knowledge imparting method that makes a point to inform the youth of social issues that truly matter and encourages proactive behavior among its apprentices. Apart from discouraging social passivity and advocating for civic engagement, NFE's accessibility is its another advantage. While many youngsters who cannot afford to attend a formal education or simply choose not to attend an institution of that category, NFE offers them opportunities and allows them to engage in no less meaningful and valuable learning experiences.

To contextualize non-formal education (NFE) within the realm of educational practices, examining specific programs facilitated by youth organizations offers valuable insight. These organizations, such as the Armenian Progressive Youth, InMotion Armenia, and various community youth clubs, orchestrate initiatives that diverge from the structured framework of formal education. Through activities like leadership workshops, community service projects, and outdoor expeditions, these programs cultivate skills and values not typically emphasized in traditional classrooms. These programs differ from formal education as they emerge distinct by nature. These programs include activities that exercise key traits of NFE, such as active participant contribution, interactive input from both the project facilitator and the participant, self-reflection, and experiential learning (e.g., roleplays and simulations) (Council of Europe, n.d.). Youth projects based on NFE practices need to have a clear connection between what they offer to teach, their ultimate purpose for youngsters, and the topical problems that the former faces. Active learning and participant inclusion are of utmost importance; hence, facilitators are required to ensure maximal accessibility of their activities to the program partakers (for example, fewer advanced technology-dependent exercises) (Council of Europe, n.d.). NFE highly values and incorporates the exchange of participant experiences into these programs, which aim to ignite prospects of personal growth, social inclusion, and cultural and democratic competencies. Evaluations are another characteristic of NFE, which are always held at the end of each youth initiative to help assess various aspects thereof, such as participant involvement, activity efficacy, project organization, and structure, along with learning needs and outcomes (Council of Europe, n.d.).

In order to come closer to understanding what constitutes a feasible and productive educational approach in NFE, definitions of formal, informal, and non-formal education need to be clearly presented.

Literature Review

What is formal education?

Put in simplistic terms, formal education is known as the kind of learning that happens within the confines of classroom walls. Yet it possesses many unique characteristics that easily set it apart from other types of learning practices. In the book “Attacking Rural Poverty: How Non-formal Education Can Help” written by Philip H. Coombs and Manzoor Ahmed, the authors provide a quite precise definition of formal education, describing it as “the highly institutionalized, chronologically graded and hierarchically structured "education system," spanning lower primary school and the upper reaches of the university” (1974, p. 8). It is self-evident that this delineation by Coombs and Ahmed, has several connotations in place, the uncovering of which would lead us in the direction of clearly comprehending what formal education precisely is and what are its peculiar features. To begin with one of the implications drawn from the above definition, a staple facet of formal education is the presence of institutions. By the same token, these learning institutions automatically suggest an association with trained educators. The role of the educator inevitably leads us to the undertone of explicit hierarchy in formal education. The teacher leads the classroom, an existing subtext that perfectly encapsulates the agency of the former. In general, teachers have responsibility that they need to execute continually to successfully uphold their role in the classroom other than the official title they carry. These responsibilities, solely

specific to the educator, involve the maintenance of structure both in and outside the classroom. These duties would include presenting oneself in accord with certain teaching standards as well as engaging in traditional teaching practices such as creating and following class curriculum, establishing rules, setting up a vision for the learning period, explaining material, answering questions, opening discussions, giving feedback, correcting mistakes, and grading (Johnson & Majewska, 2022, p. 9). These institutionalized and typified properties of formal education make it clear that, usually, there is a unanimous (and in most cases written) agreement between the educational institutions and their attendees. After the education is successfully complete, the said agreement turns into a tangible document attesting to the student's participation and reception of skills and knowledge throughout their time spent at a given institution. This document, in the form of an accredited diploma or a certification, serves as an acknowledgment of the student's achievements and in many cases rewards its holder by opening doors to opportunities that otherwise would have been inaccessible (Johnson & Majewska, 2022, p. 9). This particular type of reward is often times the main stimulant for an individual to undergo formal education due to how much power it holds in granting access to a more prosperous future.

To capture formal education succinctly but accurately as a long-standing practice, the following list has been created.

Formal Education

- Has defined features and structures
- Takes place in formal educational institutions
- Is hierarchical and pre-planned by the educating body
- Complies with the institutionalized roles of the teacher and student and engages in continuous conservation of these roles

- Occurs out of both parties' accord usually through a ratified agreement
- Rewards the student upon the completion of their studies with a diploma or a certificate
- Is often pursued out of extrinsic motivation

All of these elements, listed above, constitute what we normally refer to as formal education (Johnson & Majewska, 2022, p. 9).

What is informal learning?

Moving on to informal education, or rather informal learning since the word “word” is more descriptive of the nature of this category. There is a lack of research as well as all-encompassing definition for this method perhaps due to how arbitrary and broad informal learning is as a concept. It would be safe to say that this form of learning is the least intelligible in terms of concrete and accurate scholarly descriptions. Nonetheless, the one provided by Coombs and Ahmed (1974, p.8) might come closest to clearly articulating what informal learning is.

Their formulation of this concept follows as:

The lifelong process by which every person acquires and accumulates knowledge, skills, attitudes and insights from daily experiences and exposure to the environment-at home, at work, at play; from the example and attitudes of family and friends; from travel, reading newspapers and books; or by listening to the radio or viewing films or television. Generally, informal education is unorganized and often unsystematic; yet it accounts for the great bulk of any person's total lifetime learning-including that of even a highly "schooled" person. (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974, p. 8)

It makes one speculate that the reason why this type of learning is so loosely defined might ironically be reflective of its erratic nature. But a more factual view suggests that this blur and inability to clearly define informal learning is on account of many mistaking it for non-formal learning. Indeed, there is a degree of similarity between the two, which will be more plainly communicated later in the paper but a big portion of this perceived confusion around both types of learning is a by-product of being uninformed about these areas.

According to Johnson and Majewska (2022, p. 17), informal learning happens throughout one's entire lifespan. It is the kind of learning that happens everyday yet does not contain strict definitions like formal education does. Informal learning and its outcomes are not predictable nor planned, this process is omnipresent in everybody's life and is as unique as the person experiencing it is. For that reason, informal learning is not one-size-fits-all kind of approach which can often be seen in formal education; it is rather the day-to-day activities that make up a human life and teach them about a plethora of things in less defined and rigid ways. Most often this learning takes place unconsciously; the learner is often unaware of it, leading them to take it for granted or actually grow aware of the moment, which then becomes a process called "incidental learning" (Johnson and Majewska, 2022, p. 17). Unlike formal education, informal learning stems from one's own will, even though mostly subconsciously, and does not involve any agents other than oneself and individuals who happen to influence or be part of the process. It is exactly due to its arbitrariness that this learning has no structure and organization whatsoever, making it impossible to formally certify the learner in any way (Johnson and Majewska, 2022, p. 18).

The following constituents characterize the sporadicity of informal learning:

- Informal Learning
- Is not as widely researched and clearly defined as formal or non-formal learning
- Is often used interchangeably with non-formal learning
- Is a life-long process of skill and knowledge accumulation
- Goes unnoticed by the learner
- Is done voluntarily
- Does not comprise the institutionalized roles of teacher and student
- Is not recognized through diplomas or certificates

What is non-formal education?

If there was a learning spectrum on which we could place both formal and informal learning, each would fall on the opposite side and non-formal education would belong somewhere in the middle. It seems accurate to envision NFE with such placement on the imaginary spectrum because it has a bit of both formal and informal practices, along with its own peculiarities.

Coombs and Ahmed provide a quite comprehensive definition for NFE, saying that it is:

any organized, systematic, educational activity carried on outside the framework of the formal system to provide selected types of learning to particular subgroups in the population, adults as well as children. Thus defined, non-formal education includes, for example, agricultural extension and farmer training programs, adult literacy programs, occupational skill training given outside the formal system, youth clubs with substantial educational purposes, and various community programs of instruction in health, nutrition, family planning, cooperatives, and the like (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974, p. 8).

This explanation implies that NFE is and does several things at once. It has the systematicity and intentionality of formal education but is not restricted to classroom and is mandatory for the learner. Theoretically it “takes place outside of compulsory educational provision but can take place anywhere” (Johnson and Majewska, 2022, p. 13), ranging from school buildings to parks or cafes. According to Arlen Etling (1993) NFE content is adapted to the unique needs of the students (or unique situations) in order to maximize learning and minimize other elements often executed by formal education teachers such as taking attendance and enforcing classroom discipline.

One of the above-mentioned peculiarities of NFE is its values. Per Johnson and Majaweska (2022, p. 13), NFE has two objectives “one is to educate those not currently served by formal education (compensating for the limitations of the formal system), and another is to encourage social inclusion through targeting specifically marginalized learners.”

There is less focus on the educator but more on the learner in NFE. Students are free to quit whenever they lack motivation. Rather than the predetermined, linear curriculum provided in schools, NFE tends to stress a more casual program (options, choices) (Etling, 1993). In NFE hierarchy is absent similarly to the formal teacher-student relationship. What, however, is cultivated is mentorship. Roles are significantly less strict; the educator is more akin to a mentor making the entire NFE ambiance more a scene of knowledge exchange rather than unilateral learning process. While schools frequently concentrate on material that may have a delayed applicability, NFE places a greater emphasis on knowledge and practical abilities, and this is translated into the learner’s experience when their stimulus becomes intrinsic as opposed to formal education students. There is no institutionalized control held over NFE and its apprentices, which often initiates a shift from the extrinsic reward system to intrinsically

motivated consumption of knowledge and garnering of skills (Johnson and Majewska, 2022, p. 13). Another feature of NFE that reinforces such a shift is that it does not lay stress on certifications and is overall less credential-based than formal education, thus bringing about a reconsideration of learning priorities (Johnson and Majewska, 2022, p. 13).

Below is a list of properties that together make up the adaptive nature of NFE:

Non-formal Education:

- Is systematic and planned
- Does not require a structure but sometimes has one
- Aims to fill the gaps overlooked by formal education
- Encourages social inclusion
- Is more learner-centered
- Happens intentionally
- Can take place both in and outside of classroom or anywhere else for that matter
- Has a casual educator-learner relationship
- Allows the learner to have a degree of autonomy
- Educates on topical competencies while taking into account the learner's needs
- Is less qualifications-focused
- Learners' motivation is intrinsic

Role and Relevance of Non-Formal Education

Non-formal education holds immense significance in national development globally. The reason why NFE's relevance should not be doubted is on account of its substantial contribution to addressing key global issues across cultural, social, economic, and political dimensions. The flexibility of NFE is vital in tackling miscellaneous challenges and in getting support from governmental and non-governmental organizations worldwide (Kedrayate, 2012). The reasons for embracing NFE will grow more evident as we delve into its conceptualization and assess its contributions to the needs of not only young people but communities at large.

As an alternative to formal education, NFE is far more versatile by nature and is capable of fulfilling educational purposes that FE may often times overlook. In response to challenges such as school leavers and unemployment, NFE training programs have expanded in many developing countries. NFE's devotion to enhancing functional literacy, particularly amid technological advancements, cannot be denied either. Beyond skill development, NFE is characterized as meeting broader societal needs, offering opportunities for self-learning and gaining competencies. As a process, NFE plays a great importance on active learning and participation, whereas as a setting it recognizes the importance of an informal climate, stressing flexibility, and lack of formality in learning methods (Kedrayate, 2012).

Youth Organizations and Employability

Youth organizations hold a fundamental standing within the realm of NFE and frequently act as leading units for implementing educational programs of this category. The term 'youth

organization' implies a broad spectrum of social entities—ranging from associations and clubs to movements—catering to young people. These organizations, often driven by leaders of the same age as its target groups, offer non-formal education through recreational, political, or social activities across various topics and settings. This wide coverage and execution of activities suggest and incorporate organizations operating at local, national, or international levels, such as students' organizations, scouts, and youth clubs (Souto-Otero, 2016).

Young people's involvement in youth organizations directly affects their employability by contributing to the forming of their social, psychological, and human capital (Souto-Otero, 2016). Staying connected to the labor market is a crucial factor to be upheld since the lack or absence thereof would be grounds for negative implications in regard to relational dynamics in the lives of young people such as social integration and participation (Souto-Otero, 2016). A set of vital skills, including soft skills which are most often formed and later cultivated through NFE in youth organizations are key contributors to the building of human capital of the youth. For that reason, it is extremely beneficial for the juvenile to be involved in youth initiatives to be able to present themselves as more competent individuals in the competitive job market. Moreover, it is a known fact that the significance of engaging with youth organizations is often neglected, making the discussion of such social commitments even more topical (Souto-Otero, 2016).

Inclusion, Diversity, and Equality in Non-Formal Education

In NFE, the principles of inclusion, diversity, and equality (IDE) hold the most importance. However, these values often find themselves entangled in the political field, shaping the narrative through selective media reporting. Research in the field of inclusive approaches in youth work reveals a nuanced understanding among practitioners and youth around the said

value system. Inclusion is perceived as a natural part of everyday work for youth workers, with an emphasis on connecting people with varied profiles (Brestovanský et al. 2018). The principle of diversity is seen positively but difficulties arise when it becomes an ideological tool. However, the youth's perception of these principles alleviates the situation since their understanding aligns with that of practitioners and they both recognize the importance of adapting programs so as to accommodate everyone interested. Equality, viewed more as a process than a result, is explored in terms of leveling the chances for youth from different socio-economic backgrounds. The perspective of young people seems to reflect a focus on equal opportunities and availability of activities. Having said that, challenges emerge every now and then, with obstacles ranging from economic disparities to cultural and religious barriers. As a result, the youth workers find themselves wrestling with the dynamics of inclusion quite often (Brestovanský et al. 2018). This grappling with the occasional challenges becomes more serious when the youth workers are not properly trained to effectively put IDE into practice. This is a common scenario in the case of youth workers who perform their duties as part of their volunteering. There is naturally less pressure on volunteers to advance professionally and remain up to the mark in their field of work (Brestovanský et al. 2018). Thus, the need to address the lack of qualified experts as well as conduct special training to provide the existing youth workers with the necessary competences carries immense significance in respect to equipping the youth with IDE literacy.

Civic Engagement through Non-Formal Education

The subject of civic engagement programs began prominently within Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries' developmental endeavors in post-Soviet regions since 2004. Despite the geopolitical situation witnessing changes in CEE governments' democratic inclinations, non-

governmental organizations (NGOs), which fall under the aforementioned umbrella term of “youth organizations”, from these nations persevere in prioritizing democratic development, serving an example for other countries who might be in a similar situation. This commitment materializes through civic education programs extending to the youth in post-communist areas (Pospieszna et al., 2022). The term "civic education" pertains to educational undertakings aiming to impart fundamental values, knowledge, and skills necessary for active and engaged citizenship. Notably, the inadequacy of civic education in formal education curricula is the primary stimulus for the device of the above-mentioned programs (Pospieszna et al., 2022).

These civic education initiatives address deficiencies in preparing young minds for active civic or political participation. As insights gathered from diverse studies suggest, the impact of civic education indicates increased interest in the affairs of one’s own community (Pospieszna et al., 2022).

Practical Flaws of Non-Formal Education

NFE has had its share of skepticism and unjust judgments cast at it. Some widespread conceptions around NFE have been present among people who believe that any learning happening outside of classroom must lack in efficiency, organization, and positive outcomes, is less controllable and more unreliable, leading to NFE being viewed as inferior to formal education. That said, other educators have indicated that the learning experience can happen regardless of its implementation form, creating a more level-headed awareness around NFE (Etling, 1993).

A number of negative properties have been identified over the course of the history of NFE practice. There exists the perception that non-formal education can have inadequate outcomes

due to its lack of rigid curriculum. It is also alleged that NFE is harder to assess through a concrete set of measures. Alongside the difficulty of evaluating NFE programs, monitoring quality is another challenging matter. An inevitable side-effect of these procedural complications is the presence of the perceived lower value of NFE (Johnson & Majewska, 2022, p. 9).

Non-formal education, with infinite potential in its possession, is a powerful means to provide both quality and effective learning experience to the youth. From addressing educational gaps to fostering active citizenship, NFE's significance spans employability, civic engagement, and IDE. Challenges surely remain, requiring attention and action towards their resolution, however, NFE's ultimate objective to shape well-grounded young leaders and agents of change are rooted in solid reality.

Research Questions

Taking into account the literature review laid out above, the main research question of the capstone project is the following: Given the potential of non-formal education, what is the most efficient way to implement an initiative of such nature? In order to adequately answer this primary research question, a number of other secondary questions need to be addressed in a comprehensive and satisfactory manner. The mentioned questions follow as: What activities would prove successful with young learners and vice versa? How can facilitators positively affect the quality of the program and maximize participant engagement?

Methodology

The literature review and research questions stated above make it evident that in order to accurately study this subject and engage in productive research with the purpose of having an all-encompassing and fruitful outcome, the most suitable research method must be utilized. There will be thorough data collection and an in-depth analysis thereof. For that reason, this study calls for qualitative research methodology to be employed as it best fits the nature of this research like none other. The qualitative method will further be broken down into several stages to flawlessly accommodate the progression of the research.

Interviews with Non-formal Education Practitioners and Participants

Interviews were conducted with educators and learners to glean insights into their perspectives on non-formal education (NFE). One-on-one, semi-structured interview sessions were employed as a pivotal aspect of the research methodology, aimed at capturing the nuanced experiences of individuals engaged in the educational process. The selection of interviewees was strategic, comprising educators with extensive experience in NFE settings and learners actively participating in NFE programs. Through these interviews, the research attempted to pore over areas that may have been challenging to access during initial data collection phases. Moreover, the face-to-face nature of the interviews provided a unique opportunity to solicit interviewees' expectations and reflections on NFE, as well as the personal significance of their involvement in such experiences. Flexibility was maintained in the interview process, allowing for deviation from pre-determined question sets to explore emergent themes and foster more in-depth dialogues.

Survey

The survey component of this capstone project played a crucial role in augmenting my understanding of non-formal education (NFE) practices. I meticulously crafted a questionnaire designed to delve into the quantitative aspects of NFE, complementing the qualitative insights garnered from interviews. To facilitate data collection, I opted for an online survey format, leveraging digital platforms to reach a wider audience while ensuring the confidentiality and security of participant responses. The survey was shared on multiple appropriate platforms with the intention of circulating to the right audience, essentially allowing multiplicity among survey-takers' NFE experiences. This diversity maximally ensured a comprehensive coverage of the various stakeholders involved in NFE initiatives. Clear and concise instructions were provided to guide respondents through the survey, minimizing potential confusion and maximizing response accuracy. Once the data was collected, I subjected it to rigorous analysis, employing a range of statistical techniques to identify trends, patterns, and correlations. Through meticulous examination, I was able to derive meaningful insights into the factors influencing participants' perceptions of NFE effectiveness and impact.

Focus Groups

Focus groups, following after the interviews and the survey, were carried out by gathering together one group made up of 5 NFE learners. The group was allocated time to discuss a number of questions and was asked to share highlights of their discussions. A set of similar questions from the interviews was utilized for comparison/contrast purposes. The objective was to identify similarities and differences between responses when a question is asked in one-on-one

and group settings. This particular choice of my research approach was on account of understanding more clearly the possible fluctuation and alteration in the beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes of learners when interviewed in a private versus public environment.

Thematic Analysis

A final but equally substantial method of qualitative research was thematic analysis. This method was deployed to analyze the entirety of the collected qualitative data. It was applied to all the information previously obtained through the interviews, focus groups, and observations. Then the data was thoroughly inspected to detect common themes – topics, ideas, and patterns of meaning that were recurring in nature. I used a special process of thematic analysis that involved identifying themes, reviewing themes, defining, as well as naming them correspondingly.

Research Findings and Analysis

As we delve into the findings and analysis section, I would like to provide a comprehensive overview of the three subheadings I have created to accurately compartmentalize and present the information gathered from the interviews, survey, and focus groups.

The first subheading is centered around effective methodologies and aims to provide deep insights into non-formal education (NFE) methodologies that have proven to be effective with young people. It includes a detailed discussion of various techniques, approaches, and tools used in NFE programs that have been successful in engaging young people and promoting active

learning. Additionally, it highlights the benefits and challenges of different methodologies and provides real-world examples of their implementation.

The next subheading is dedicated to the subject of participant engagement. It presents a comprehensive analysis of all the data collected throughout the research to discuss how NFE programs could promote active participation and what varying forms of engagement could be perceived as mindful involvement and input. The subheading incorporates detailed discussions on the importance of participant engagement in NFE programs and how it further shapes their overall partaking in the educational program. It also highlights different strategies that NFE programs could use to promote participant engagement and provides examples of successful programs that have implemented these strategies.

The last subheading contains information on the usage of NFE practical tools and a descriptive analysis of some of the activities that have shown to bring about positive learning outcomes among participants. It also draws attention to important considerations that NFE programs should keep in mind when designing and implementing practical tools and activities.

Effective Methodologies

Upon analyzing data gathered from interviews, surveys, and focus groups, it became evident that certain educational methodologies exhibit greater efficacy within non-formal education (NFE) programs. One such methodology, widely acknowledged for its effectiveness, is project-based learning (Image 1, Survey Responses). This approach involves students collaboratively working on projects that require them to investigate and solve real-world problems, thereby fostering critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration skills. In NFE youth programs, project-based learning has been implemented through

initiatives such as community development projects, environmental conservation efforts, and entrepreneurial ventures. For example, youth organizations may task participants with designing and executing a sustainability project in their local community, providing them with hands-on experience in project management, leadership, and civic engagement. One of the interviewees, who is a seasoned educator in community-based programs, stated that "When learners are engaged in hands-on projects that relate to real-world scenarios, their motivation and retention increase significantly." This approach fosters collaboration and problem-solving skills, as participants work together to achieve a common goal.

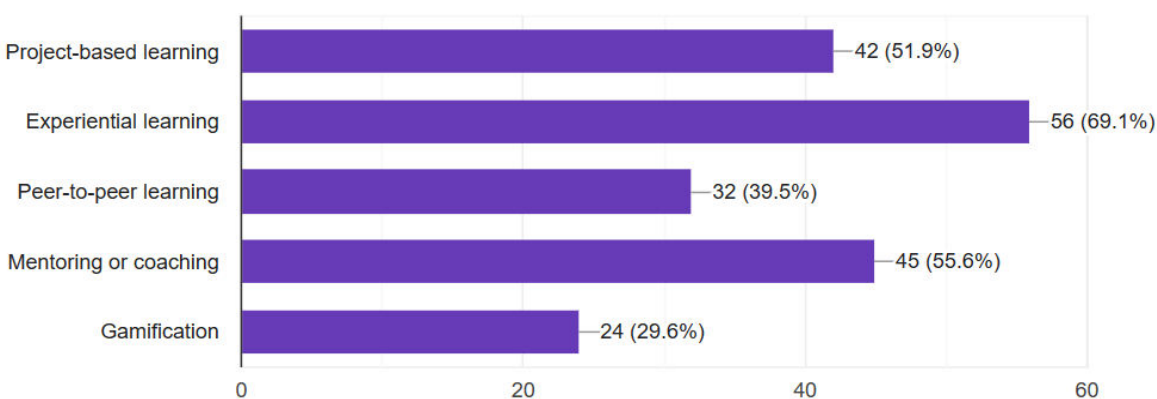


Image 1

Another effective methodology is experiential learning, as indicated by survey responses (image 1). Experiential learning, while sharing similarities with project-based learning, involves a broader spectrum of hands-on experiences that directly engage learners in real-world activities to deepen understanding and develop skills. Unlike project-based learning, which often centers around completing a specific project, experiential learning encompasses a wider range of immersive experiences, including internships, simulations, and field trips, aimed at enriching practical knowledge and skill acquisition through direct engagement with the subject matter. For instance, in an experiential learning context, students may participate in an environmental

conservation project, where they engage in activities such as planting trees or running water quality tests and consequently gaining firsthand experience and insights into environmental issues. Participants appreciate opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge in practical settings, such as skill-building or interactive workshops. One NFE project participant pointed out that through experiential learning, she was able to gain confidence and develop a deeper understanding of the subject matter which was closely related to her speciality. That in turn helped her get a full-time position offer from a company she had been trying to get into.

Apart from experiential learning, technology integration is another valuable component in intensifying learning outcomes. The use of digital tools, such as interactive online platforms and multimedia resources, is deemed instrumental in maintaining engagement and facilitating personalized learning experiences. Alongside the use of technological tools, learner-centered approaches, such as differentiated instruction and personalized learning paths were frequently mentioned by several interviewees as crucial properties of NFE programs. Some talked about times when educators adapted different teaching methods to accommodate diverse learning tendencies and individual needs and how helpful that turned out to be for the group. Along the lines of learner-centered training styles, one program coordinator mentioned, "By tailoring the learning experience to each participant's strengths and challenges, we can optimize their engagement and success." This approach is thought to promote not only inclusivity but also a more supportive and encouraging learning environment. Incorporating reflective practices was another key finding from the data I gathered. Focus group participants noted that opportunities for self-assessment and reflection helped them internalize lessons and track their own progress. One interviewee described that "Journaling and group discussions allow us to process our experiences and make meaningful connections to our own lives."

Upon careful analysis, it is evident that project-based, experiential, and technology-assisted learning methods are quite effective in non-formal education programs. These methods, when combined with learner-centered strategies and reflective practices, create an inclusive and dynamic learning environment that promotes learner growth and success. Participants benefit from a personalized learning experience that not only enhances their knowledge and skills but also empowers them to apply these insights in real-life situations. By integrating these methodologies, non-formal education programs can continue to develop and deliver meaningful and impactful learning experiences to their learners.

Participant Engagement

Through a thorough process of interviews, surveys, and focus groups, I have identified several key factors encourage and promote participant engagement in non-formal educational programs. First and foremost, the program's flexibility and adaptability, as well as the incorporation of structured and unstructured activities, were mentioned as significant contributors both in the survey and by several interviewees (See Image 2).

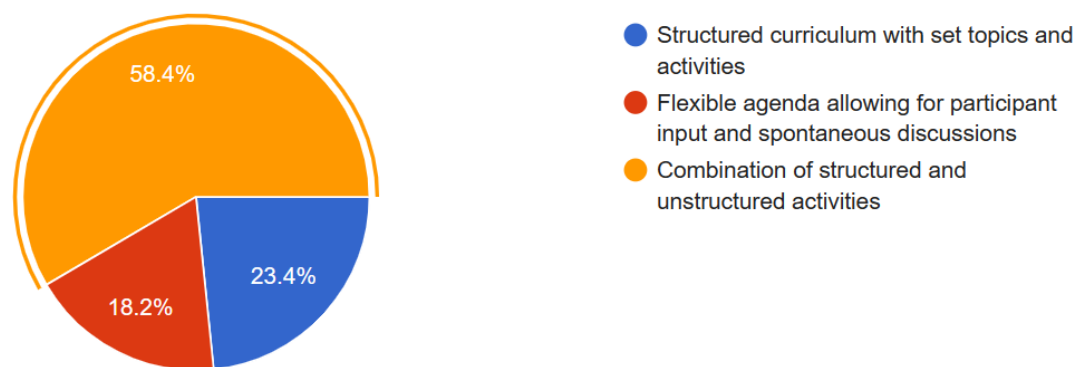


Image 2

It appears that participants appreciate most the kinds of programs that accommodate their schedules and individual learning paces. One interviewee, a seasoned NFE project partaker, noted, "The ability to access resources and attend sessions at my own pace made a big difference in my overall experience and engagement."

Another factor that promotes engagement is the relevance of the content to participants' personal and professional goals. This aspect was widely present in conversations with almost all of the interviewees. Tailoring the curriculum to align with learners' interests and career aspirations fosters a sense of purpose and motivation. One of the survey respondents expressed, "When I see how the program aligns with my career path, I feel more invested in the learning process." Interactive and collaborative learning environments were also highlighted as effective in boosting engagement. Participants value opportunities to work with peers, share experiences, and solve problems together. For instance, one focus group participant shared, "The group projects and discussions allowed me to learn from others and build a network of like-minded individuals." Similarly, supportive and approachable instructors play a crucial role in sustaining participant engagement. Educators who provide guidance, feedback, and encouragement help learners stay motivated and engaged. As one interviewee emphasized, "My instructor's enthusiasm and availability for questions made me feel valued and supported throughout the program."

It becomes evident that flexible program structures, relevant content, collaborative learning opportunities, and supportive instructors are all key factors that affect the participants' experience and expressed interest in a given NFE program.

Activity Catalogue

Non-formal education projects can also be made even more engaging, productive, and memorable, by incorporating interesting activities that cater to the learners' interests and goals.

Engaging in community-based projects provides a practical avenue for individuals to apply their skills in real-world settings, fostering not only personal development but also social cohesion and civic participation. For instance, during an interview, one participant shared about her involvement in a local sustainability initiative within the framework of a larger project. In this endeavor, she actively contributed to tasks such as conducting environmental assessments, implementing eco-friendly practices, and collaborating with local stakeholders. Through these hands-on activities, she honed her practical skills while acquiring a deeper understanding of sustainability principles in action. She said that that opportunity helped her understand the subject at hand better and connect with others in the community.

Much like community-based projects, themed workshops or skill-building events are another widely preferred activity that can help participants dive deep into specific topics and practices such as arts, music, writing business proposals or something as abstract as learning how to embroider on a piece of fabric. Interactive sessions like art classes, cooking workshops, or coding challenges enable the participants to try out different skills and find new passions. They enjoy hands-on activities that challenge them to think creatively and apply what they have learned in practical ways. Falling in the same category, interactive simulations and role-playing games, are valuable learning tools that create a safe and supportive environment for the learners to practice decision-making and experience diverse perspectives.

During one of my interviews, I learned about an effective role-playing exercise that entailed learners acting as a business owner facing a crisis. This simulation was helpful in revealing the ins and outs of running a business and developing problem-solving skills. Apart from that, reflective practices like journaling or group discussions were frequently referred to as remarkably useful when it came to helping the participants process and internalize their knowledge while fostering a sense of community and connection. For that reason, discussions with peers and reflections on personal experiences are greatly encouraged as they often lead to a deeper understanding of the learning content.

As a result, integrating community-based projects, themed workshops, interactive simulations, and reflective practices in non-formal education projects can make the experience more fulfilling and engaging for learners. These activities provide opportunities to develop new skills, meet new people, and get more insight into the subject matter, inspiring the students' personal and professional development.

Trainer Interaction Styles

Trainers play a fundamental role in the success of non-formal education (NFE) programs, shaping the learning experiences of participants through their interaction styles and teaching methods. Effective trainers prioritize creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment where participants feel valued and empowered to actively engage in the learning process.

Encouraging open communication and fostering a sense of trust and respect among participants are essential components of this interaction style. Furthermore, trainers should employ interactive teaching methods that promote collaboration and critical thinking. Group discussions, problem-solving activities, and hands-on exercises not only enhance participant engagement but also facilitate deeper learning and skill development. Additionally, trainers should be adept at adapting their teaching strategies to accommodate diverse learning styles and individual needs. This flexibility ensures that all participants can fully participate and benefit from the educational experience. When selecting trainers for NFE programs, organizations should first consider individuals who possess a combination of subject matter expertise, effective communication skills, and a genuine passion for youth work. Trainers who demonstrate empathy, patience, and enthusiasm for guiding participants through their learning journey are particularly well-suited for NFE settings. By creating positive and supportive interactions with participants, trainers can create a conducive learning environment that nurtures personal growth, skill development, and meaningful connections.

"Don'ts" in NFE Program Implementation

While NFE programs hold immense potential for empowering individuals and advancing community development, they are not immune to challenges and pitfalls. Through an analysis of data collected from the learners and trainers, several common "Don'ts" become apparent, highlighting areas where program implementation may falter and hinder desired outcomes.

One common pitfall is inadequate planning and resource allocation. Insufficient attention to program design, curriculum development, and logistical arrangements can impede the smooth execution of NFE initiatives, leading to disorganized or ineffective educational experiences. Additionally, a lack of participant engagement poses a significant challenge to the overall program success. Programs that fail to capture participants' interest or provide meaningful opportunities for involvement might be at risk to have low attendance rates and limited impact on learning outcomes.

More than that, ineffective communication between facilitators and participants can present an obstacle for the success of NFE programs. Poor communication practices, such as unclear instructions, inconsistent feedback, or a lack of active listening and responsiveness to participant needs, can lead to frustration and disengagement among participants. Addressing these communication challenges requires proactive efforts to standardize open dialogue, establish clear expectations, and solicit feedback from participants throughout the program. By identifying and addressing these "Don'ts," organizations can mitigate risks and enhance the effectiveness of their NFE initiatives.

Recommendations

After conducting interviews, surveys and focus groups, several recommendations have emerged to help improve the effectiveness and engagement levels of non-formal education programs. These recommendations are designed to maximize learner outcomes by leveraging successful methodologies and activities. One suggestion is to emphasize project-based and experiential

learning. Such approaches foster collaboration, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills, while increasing learner engagement and retention. Therefore, NFE programs should combine more opportunities for hands-on, real-world projects.

Another recommendation is to leverage technology integration. By utilizing digital tools, online platforms, and multimedia resources, educators can create engaging, interactive learning experiences that support personalized education and provide opportunities for participants to access materials at their convenience. It is essential to stay current with new digital advancements to maintain engagement and cater to varied learning styles. Personalizing and differentiating instruction is also crucial. By modifying the curriculum based on individual needs and interests through differentiated instruction and personalized learning paths, educators can optimize each learner's experience and success in the program.

Incorporating reflective practices is also important. Encouraging participants to immerse themselves in self-assessment, journaling, and group discussions as part of the curriculum can help them internalize lessons, process their experiences, and establish meaningful connections between the learning content and their own lives.

Fostering community engagement and collaboration and providing themed workshops along with skill-building events are also essential. These activities enable students to delve deeply into specialized subjects, discover new passions and build valuable skills. Community-based projects and activities also promote social connections and civic engagement, helping participants see the relevance of their learning while building a sense of belonging. Introducing interactive simulations and role-playing games that provide safe environments for learners to practice decision-making and experience diverse perspectives can also deepen their insight and boost problem-solving abilities.

Equally important is prioritizing the hiring and training of instructors who are enthusiastic, accessible, and supportive is crucial. Facilitators who actively engage with students and provide constructive feedback help maintain motivation and foster a positive learning environment. It is also essential to continuously monitor and evaluate program effectiveness. Implementing feedback mechanisms to collect participant input regularly will allow for timely adjustments and improvements based on learners' experiences and needs. By integrating these recommendations into non-formal education programs, educators and program coordinators can create more engaging, productive, and memorable learning experiences that accommodate participants' interests and career aspirations. This approach not only benefits the learners but also ensures the sustained success and evolution of the NFE programs.

After having discussed improvement pathways for NFE projects, it is time to address certain practices that should be avoided to maximally ensure an effective and engaging learning experience for participants. To begin with the information overload – a common practice that needs to be done away with. Overloading participants with excessive content or activities in a short period can lead to burnout, confusion, and reduced retention. Instead, it's best to put first impactful lessons and experiences to provide quality over quantity. Another serious oversight that happens during NFE programs is participant feedback neglection. Neglecting to gather and act upon feedback from participants can hinder program development and affect learners' experiences. Regularly seeking input from participants and using their feedback to make informed improvements should always be of utmost importance. Additionally, non-formal education programs should be flexible and adaptable to accommodate different learning styles, paces, and interests. Being open to adjusting the program based on participants' needs will lead to a more successful outcome. Solely relying on traditional teaching methods, such as lectures

and rote learning, can limit engagement and stifle creativity. Instead, active learning techniques like hands-on projects and interactive discussions should be habituated by the facilitators.

Furthermore, it's important to address the diverse needs of participants to ensure that the program is inclusive and accessible to all learners, including those with disabilities or unique learning preferences. Skipping reflective practices such as journaling or group discussions can impede participants' ability to internalize lessons and connect them to their own experiences. Making space for reflection is a great way to alleviate the learning process and encourage personal growth. Additionally, clear, consistent, and open communication is key to maintaining an effective program, and it's important to offer content that is directly related to participants' interests and career goals. Isolating participants from one another can potentially damage the development of valuable peer relationships and limit the exchange of diverse perspectives as incorporating group activities and discussions promotes collaboration and teamwork. Finally, while technology can enhance learning experiences, excessive dependence on it may limit the development of interpersonal skills and critical thinking. Balancing digital resources with face-to-face interactions and other forms of active learning is crucial.

By avoiding these practices, non-formal education programs can create a more engaging, inclusive, and successful environment for learners.

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