
INFORMAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS RESEARCH NEWSLETTER

**A SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP OF THE
AMERICAN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH ASSOCIATION**

Volume 2, Number 1, July 1998

IN THIS ISSUE

I am pleased to report that the first business meeting of our SIG at the 1998 AERA Annual Meeting was a success. About thirty members attended to discuss business, enjoy wine and cheese, and engage with our invited speakers, Leonie Rennie and Terence McClafferty (Curtin University of Technology, Perth, Australia) who presented on "Young children's learning from interactive science exhibits." Scott Paris was elected to the new position of Program Chair Elect — congratulations. Issues discussed at the meeting included collaborating with similar organizations, co-sponsoring AERA sessions with other SIGs or divisions, and establishing a committee to write our SIG bylaws. If you belong to a similar organization and could help us establish a collaboration, please contact one of our officers.

SIG members also reported on a wide variety of AERA sessions that were relevant to informal learning environments research. Relevant sessions ranged from children as art museum tour guides, sibling tutoring, and hybrid language use in after school clubs to learning through problem solving, promoting reflection in computer-mediated environments, and frameworks for investigating students' after-school activities. Selected papers from the AERA Meeting are available on the Web at <http://aera.net/meeting/>. Two reviews of relevant sessions from the AERA Meeting are on page 5 of this issue. Please contact the editor if you would like to write a brief summary of an AERA session you attended for a later newsletter. We are also interested in reviews of other conferences that may be of interest to SIG members.

Finally, this newsletter features an article by John Falk and Lynn Dierking (Institute for Learning Innovation) that continues our discussion on defining our field. (See page 2.) Falk and Dierking propose the term free-choice learning as an alternative to informal learning, describing the history of the term and pointing out that the issue in question is not the environment but instead the motivation of the learner. We invite your responses and comments on this issue for future newsletters.

-Kirsten

ILER STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

To further educational research in informal learning environments such as science centers, museums, zoos, aquariums, and nature centers, and to promote a community of practice interested in establishing and maintaining informal learning environments conducive to better understanding of teaching and learning.

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ILER WEBSITE

<http://darwin.sesp.nwu.edu/informal/>

ILER LISTSERV

ILER_SIG is a forum for discussing topics of relevance to our members. To subscribe, send e-mail to lists@mail.sesp.nwu.edu with the following contents: subscribe sig-iler [your first name and last name here]

***FREE-CHOICE LEARNING:
AN ALTERNATIVE TERM TO
INFORMAL LEARNING?***

***John H. Falk & Lynn D. Dierking
Institute for Learning Innovation***

Learning occurs in a variety of settings outside school classrooms and continues long after a person completes his or her formal education. During school and family visits to museums, zoos and parks, while participating in informal education activities sponsored by community-based organizations such as libraries, community centers, and Girl Scouts and when at home reading newspapers and magazines and watching TV, both children and adults are exposed to many concepts and ideas. The learning that results from such experiences is often referred to as informal learning.

The distinctions between formal, informal, and nonformal were first developed in the 1950s by individuals working in the area of international development. The terms were borrowed in the 1970s by museum professionals and environmental educators in search of a way to define and distinguish their activities from the activities of school-based formal educators. Since the 70s the term informal education and informal learning has increasingly achieved recognition within the educational community (this SIG is a good sign of this acceptance), as have the institutions and processes the term purports to represent. However, we would argue (and have argued for a number of years!) that the term informal learning is problematic.

Interestingly in the 80s a few researchers (Dierking, 1987; Koran, Longino, & Shafer, 1983), suggested that describing informal education settings as free choice education settings might be more appropriate, but for a variety of reasons this notion never really took hold at the time. As we have thought about it further, though, the real issue is not what one calls the setting but what one calls the learning that occurs in the setting. Clearly there is an important distinction between formal educational settings and informal educational settings, and a variety of individuals, including us, have enumerated their differences. The problem arises when the terms formal and informal are used as modifiers of the word learning. Do we really believe that the fundamental processes of learning differ solely as a function of the physical setting? As we have argued, learning is influenced by many factors, one factor being the physical context, but the physical setting alone is unlikely to influence the type of learning that occurs there. As much as we admire and appreciate museums and other such settings, to suggest that sitting

children in rows and lecturing to them within the four walls of a museum makes it somehow different than doing the same thing in a school is clearly absurd. Similarly at the other extreme, why should we assume that creating open-ended, optional, inquiry-based experiences in a school is somehow fundamentally different than open-ended, optional, inquiry-based experiences in a museum? What makes learning different is partially the setting, but equally, if not more importantly, the underlying motivation of the learner. Hence our preference for the term free-choice learning.

Free-choice learning is a term that recognizes the unique characteristics of such learning: free-choice, non-sequential, self-paced and voluntary. It also recognizes the socially-constructed nature of learning, the dialogue that goes on between the individual and his or her socio-cultural and physical environment. The vast majority of the learning that occurs within informal education settings involves free-choice learning — learning that is primarily driven by the unique intrinsic needs and interests of the learner. By contrast, much of the learning that occurs within formal education settings involves compulsory learning — learning that is primarily determined by the dictates and needs of an externally imposed authority

Informal educational settings are notable for their efforts to facilitate and promote free-choice learning. Perhaps more than any other characteristic, museums, zoos, aquaria, botanical gardens, national parks, historical homes, science centers and other such similar settings afford opportunities for the public to set their own learning agendas while freely navigating through contextually rich environments. People do learn a tremendous amount in these settings, when motivated and interested to do so. Thus, we would strongly advocate using the generic term informal when referring to the setting and the generic term free-choice when referring to the type of learning that typically occurs within these settings. In the long run, we believe this distinction will better serve practitioners, policy makers and researchers in both the informal and formal education sectors.

References

Dierking, L.D. (1987). Parent-child interactions in a free-choice learning settings: An examination of attention-directing behaviors. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 49(04), 778A.

Koran, J.J. Jr., Longino, S.J., & Shafer, L.D. (1983). A framework for conceptualizing research in natural history museums and science centers. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 20(4), 325-339.

AERA 1999 ANNUAL MEETING Call For Proposals

Montreal, April 19-23, 1999

“On the Threshold of the 21st Century: Challenges and Opportunities”

DEADLINE FOR RECEIPT OF PROPOSALS: AUGUST 3, 1998

AERA 1999 Annual Meeting

The annual meeting in Montreal is AERA's last before the next millennium. To mark the transition into the new century, the meeting program will bring to center stage reflections on critical challenges and opportunities that AERA and education globally face in the coming years. We plan to invite and highlight sessions that promote discussion on the following clusters of issues, each of which stretches across division and SIG boundaries: Foundations; Pluralism; Levers for Change; Reform; and, Developing the Professions of Education.

In focusing on these key issues, we hope to produce an engaging and substantive program. We believe that reflections on these enduring concerns will help our community better address the important challenges and opportunities that we will face in the immediate future and in the years to come.

General Information

The 1999 AERA Annual Meeting will be held Monday, April 19, through Friday, April 23, in Montreal. The program will consist primarily of presentations selected, through a peer review process, by divisional program chairpersons and heads of special interest groups (SIGs). To be considered, proposals must be received by August 3, 1998. In addition, there will be invited speakers and symposia, panel discussions, graduate student programs, and informal conversation hours.

Proposal Information

Any AERA member may submit a proposal for consideration to any AERA division or SIG — whether or not he or she belongs to the particular division or SIG.

Any nonmember may submit a proposal if (a) an AERA member is a coauthor of the paper, (b) an AERA member is a participant in the session being organized, or (c) the proposer is sponsored by an active AERA member. An invitation from a member of the Program Committee to submit a proposal constitutes adequate sponsorship.

For the Complete Call for Proposals

See the AERA Website <http://aera.net>
Or *Educational Researcher*, Volume 27, Number 4, May, 1998.
Or contact the AERA Meeting Coordinator, 1230 17th St., NW, Washington, DC 20036-3078.

Submit Your Proposal to the ILER SIG

Mail your proposal to Christine Klein, St. Louis Science Center, 5050 Oakland Avenue, St. Louis, MO 63110; 314-533-8283; fax: 314-289-4420; email: kklein@slsc.org. This SIG is accepting electronic submissions. (See <http://zhao.educ.msu.edu/aera> for instructions.) Make submissions by mail or through the web page listed above — phone, fax and email information are given for questions only.

NOT A MEMBER OF AERA? JOIN US

American Education Research Association members receive the *Educational Researcher*, the *Review of Education Research* and other publications. Through publications, the annual meeting, and Special Interest Groups like our own ILER SIG, members share ideas and results of research.

Each SIG is given a number of sessions at the annual meeting based on the number of members of AERA that belong to the SIG. **To have more sessions related to informal learning environments, we need more members of AERA to join our SIG and more SIG members to join AERA.** If every SIG member had one colleague join AERA we could double our sessions at the next annual meeting. Membership is \$45, student memberships are available for \$20. For more information about AERA see <http://aera.net> or call (202) 223 - 9485.

ANNOUNCEMENTS & UPCOMING EVENTS

1998 Visitor Studies Conference

August 4-8, 1998, Washington, DC, USA
Early registration deadline: July 15, 1998

The conference includes preconference workshops, evaluation studies, visitor learning, attracting new audiences and much more. Keynote speeches will be given by Stephen Weil, Center for Museum Studies, and Robert Sullivan from the Smithsonian Institution. The 8th Annual Museum Education Research Colloquium, "Education and Collaboration" will be held in conjunction with the VSA Conference this year. (For more information on MER see <http://www.erols.com/merorg/> or email: merorg@erols.com.)

Contact: Visitor Studies Association
Department of Psychology Colorado State University
Fort Collins, CO 80523-1876, USA.
Phone/Fax: (970) 491-4352
Email: vsa@lamar.colostate.edu
Website: <http://museum.cl.msu.edu/VSA>

1998 American Zoo and Aquarium Association Annual Conference

"Keeping the Wonder Alive"
September 13 - 17, 1998, Tulsa, Oklahoma, USA
Early registration deadline: August 21, 1998

Each year the AZA Annual Conference offers professionals the opportunity to meet with their peers and discuss important issues affecting the field.

Contact: AZA, 7970-D Old Georgetown Rd.
Bethesda MD 20814, USA
Phone: 301-907-7777 Fax: 301-907-2980
Website: <http://www.aza.org/>

Call for Papers • International Society for the Advancement of Interpretive Communications 1st Annual Conference

March 6 - 10, 1999, Albuquerque, New Mexico USA
Deadline for proposal abstracts: September 1, 1998

Contact: ISAIC 1999 Conference
PO Box 189, Laingsburg, MI 48848 USA.
Phone: (517) 651-5441 FAX: (517) 651-2057
Email: jvainterp@aol.com
Website: <http://www.isaic.org>

MCN '98 • Annual Conference of the Museum Computer Network

"Knowledge Creation — Knowledge Sharing — Knowledge Preservation"
September 23 - 26, 1998, Santa Monica, California
Early registration deadline: July 31, 1998

Anyone concerned with information technology and museums will find MCN '98 a key professional event. Technology, administration, legal issues, design concerns, research and commercial implications will all be discussed from the perspective of museum applications and the diverse audiences for which they are created.

Contact: MCN Program Office
c/o The MIT Museum, 265 Massachusetts Avenue
Cambridge, MA 02139, USA
Phone: (617) 253-9613 Fax: (617) 253-8994
Email: mcn@mcn.edu
Website: <http://www.mcn.edu/MCN98/>

Association of Science-Technology Centers 1998 Annual Conference

"Broadening Horizons"
October 16-18, 1998, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada
Early registration deadline: July 31, 1998

Pre- and post-conference workshops and trips, as well as guest speakers including Jane Goodall, promise to make this a memorable conference.

Contact: ASTC, 1025 Vermont Avenue NW
Suite 500, Washington, DC 20005, USA
Phone: 202/783-7200 Fax: 202/783-7207
Email: astc98@astc.org
Website: <http://www.astc.org/info/profdev/1998.htm>

National Association for Research in Science Teaching Annual Meeting

March 28-31, 1999, Boston, MA, USA
Proposal deadline: August 15, 1998

Contact: Art White, Executive Secretary of NARST
The Ohio State University
1929 Kenny Road, Room 200E
Columbus, OH 43210
Phone: 614-292-3339 Fax: 614-292-1595
Email: awhite@POP.SERVICE.OHIO-STATE.EDU
<http://science.coe.uwf.edu/NARST/NARST.html>

Reviews of Sessions at the 1998 AERA Annual Meeting

Attend any notable sessions at AERA? We'd like to share the proceedings with fellow SIG members that did not attend. Also, please keep us in mind when you attend other conferences that may be of interest to SIG members. Contact the editor for more information.

Rosebery, A. & Warren, B. (1998, April). Re-Examining Change in Teacher Professional Development. In Researching change in teachers' professional communities: Methodological and theoretical dilemmas (Session 39.63). Paper presented at the AERA, 1998 Annual Meeting, San Diego.

Building on their continuing work with teachers and their classrooms, this presentation focused on 'interanimation' among discourses as an approach to studying learning in teacher research communities. Interanimation refers to contact among different discourses — places where there are opportunities for evaluation, change, refinement, and elaboration. Warren and Rosebery's *Ch'êche Konnen Sense-Making Communities* are long term, small, and diverse. The work of the community is divided between inquiry in science and inquiry in teaching and learning.

Rosebery and Warren presented a short video tape as the focal point in order to discuss teacher learning during a conversation about the nature of experimentation. They illustrated how teachers and scientists brought different points of view — i.e. multiple discourses about their worlds — to the table. The tape showed a small group of regular participant teachers in the process of negotiating meaning. An expert helped elaborate the scientific point of view. As the dialog proceeded it became apparent that over time the scientist and teachers moved closer to each other in coming to a common agreement about the meaning of the terms null hypothesis, controls, and the role of evidence.

In their analysis, Rosebery and Warren look for the places where there is tension and where conversations break down. They let those conversations 'roll' and they then try to facilitate them. They argue that utterances are situated in individual's history, that groups co-construct meaning in the ways in which utterances are shared — in short there is a mobility of meaning. They refer to the existence of canonical (iconic) stories from the classroom, in that old stories are hauled out they are part of the past and they inform our thinking.

Reviewed by Doris Ash, Exploratorium

Scholes, R. (1998). Some facets of survey research design we often overlook. (Session 39.70) Session at the AERA, 1998 Annual Meeting, San Diego.

McCall, M.H. Words and their value to the survey researcher.

This presentation discussed a study on the varying interpretations people have for quantifying phrases (for example, 'a lot,' 'many,' 'substantially more,' 'a few'). The author made an excellent case for taking extreme caution in using such phrases in the design and description of survey research.

Anderson, L.W. The quantity and quality of data obtained from open and closed questionnaires.

This second presentation compared responses to open and closed versions of a questionnaire; there were similar return rates for both and a few instances of lower completion rate for the open questionnaire.

Hutchinson, S.R., Green, K.E., & Bennett, E.B. Response rates of surveys received and returned via postal versus electronic mail and returned via facsimile.

In the third presentation, the authors had tested response rates to a long (six printed pages) survey using three media — email, FAX, and postal (SASE provided). Preferences of respondents were for email or postal over FAX, and postal over email. The latter may be due to lack of comfort with email technology in some populations as well as the length of the survey. The email surveys were returned with more detailed responses, however. Internal reliability, proportions of missing data, and mean responses were similar for both email and postal surveys.

Wang, L. & Fan, X. Six criteria for survey sample design evaluation.

The fourth presentation recommended six criteria for assessing the quality of the sample design in survey research: "a clearly specified population, an explicitly stated unit of analysis, a specification of determining a desired sample size, an informative description of the selection procedures, a description of response rate and nonresponse treatment, and demonstration of appropriate estimation procedures." It is important for readers to keep these things in mind when evaluating the strength of a survey-based study.

Reviewed by Susan Lynds, Oregon State University

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A Special Interest Group of the American Educational Research Association

TIME TO RENEW YOUR SIG MEMBERSHIP

New and renewing membership is due! Send your name, address, institution's name, phone number, fax number, and email address with a check for \$5 (payable to AERA SIG) to the membership chair at the address below. Please indicate whether or not you are an AERA member. You need not be a member of AERA to join this SIG or receive this newsletter. (Why join AERA? See page 3.) For additional information see our SIG Website at <http://darwin.sesp.nwu.edu/informal/>

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