“This book adds to our understanding of the role of informal learning as a critical contributor to the future of schooling in a wired global context. The authors show how informal learning deepens and broadens what is learned formally and also contributes to student growth and development while helping solve local and global challenges.”

–Karen E. Watkins, Professor and Associate Department Head, Department of Lifelong Education, Administration, and Policy (Adult Education, Learning and Organization), The University of Georgia, USA
This book has two purposes: To open up the debate on the role of informal education in schooling systems and to suggest the kind of school organizational environment that can best facilitate the recognition of informal learning. Successive chapters explore what is often seen as a duality between informal and formal learning. This duality is particularly so because education systems expend so much time and effort in certifying formal knowledge often expressed in school subjects reflecting academic disciplines. Recognizing the contribution informal learning can make to young people’s understanding and development does not negate the importance of valued social knowledge: That complements it. Students come to school with knowledge learnt from their families, peers, the community and both traditional and social media. They should not have to “unlearn” this in order to enter the world of formal learning. Rather, students’ different learning “worlds” should be integrated so that each informs the other. In a knowledge-based society, all learning needs to be valued.

Some contributors to this book reflect on how new educational systems could be created in a move away from top-down authoritarian and bureaucratic management. Such open systems are seen to be more welcoming in acknowledging the importance of informal learning. Others provide practical examples of how informal learning is currently recognized. Some attention is also paid to the evaluation of informal learning. A key objective of the work presented here is to stimulate debate about the role of informal learning in knowledge-based societies and to stimulate thinking about the kind of reforms needed to create more open and more democratic school learning environments.

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This Routledge book series provides a forum for dialogue on key educational issues and challenges faced by Asian and European societies. Its distinctiveness is its broad focus on Education in Asia and Europe. In essence, it will address major issues in education reform, student learning, leadership, curriculum, higher education, multicultural education and other major educational issues affecting Asia and Europe.

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Schools and Informal Learning in a Knowledge-Based World

Edited by Javier Calvo de Mora and Kerry J. Kennedy
Javier would like to dedicate this book to his sons, Willian and Eduard, and his grandson, Hiryu; and Kerry would like to dedicate it to his grandchildren, Zoe, Jamie, Oliver, Henry, Annabele, Rose, Fletcher and Sam
Contents

List of figures xi
List of tables xii
Series editor’s note xiii
List of contributors xv

1 Towards a new educational contract 1
JAVIER CALVO DE MORA

PART I
Schools and informal learning: Shaping the future 13

2 What we really learn in school? 15
ROGER C. SCHANK

3 Exploring the foundations of informal learning 25
JUDITH LLOYD YERO

4 Inventing a public education system for the 21st century 46
JOHN H. FALK

5 The relationship between formal and informal learning 62
DANIEL A. TILLMAN, SONG A. AN, AND WILLIAM H. ROBERTSON

PART II
Case studies of informal learning’s potential 81

6 Asian students’ informal civic learning: Can it enhance civic knowledge and values? 83
KERRY J. KENNEDY AND XIAOXUE KUANG
Contents

7 The Shanghai model for global geography education
   OSVALDO MUÑIZ SOLARI AND LIANFEI JIANG

8 Academic family and educational Compadrazgo:
   Implementing cultural values to create educational relationships for informal learning and persistence for Latinx undergraduates
   ALBERTA M. GLORIA, JEANETT CASTELLANOS, MARY DUEÑAS, AND VERONICA FRANCO

   CECILIA WALLERSTEDT

PART III
Informal learning as lifelong learning and its evaluation

10 Governance of informal learning as a pathway for the development of young adults’ agency for sustainability
   VALĒRIJS MAKEREVIČS AND DZINTRA ILIŠKO

11 Integrating formal and informal learning to develop self-management skills: Challenges and opportunities for higher education in the university-to-work transition
   AMELIA MANUTI

12 Informal learning assessment
   JAVIER CALVO DE MORA

13 Is an “avant-garde” assessment? The certification of competencies in the Italian higher education system
   SERAFINA PASTORE

14 Conclusion: Open schools and shared responsibilities: Integrating informal and formal learning in 21st-century schools
   JAVIER CALVO DE MORA AND KERRY J. KENNEDY

Index
Figures

1.1 Structure of meaning and pattern of communication. 4
3.1 The jagged profile of one individual. 39
6.1 Proposed model for assessing influences on students’ civic knowledge: Demographics, informal learning and social engagement. 89
7.1 Cybernetwork and the expansion of IL. 102
7.2 Reaching global university networking. 104
7.3 Integral geography education with GST in a geo-enabling world. 107
7.4 The Shanghai model for learning and collaboration. 109
7.5 Formal setting towards IL environment. 111
7.6 The Shanghai Model (a two-stage strategy for online IL). 113
10.1 The significance of informal learning. 160
10.2 Rationality and availability of choice for informal education. 161
10.3 Motivation and opportunities for informal learning. 161
10.4 Responses of respondents towards the offered forms of informal learning. 162
10.5 Expectation of participant of informal education. 162
12.1 Organizational culture and assessment tools. 185
12.2 Pyramid of school levels of knowledge. 187
### Tables

| 6.1 | Reliability coefficients and CFA fit indices for each scale | 90 |
| 6.2 | Results of structural equation model (SEM) for measurement model shown in Figure 6.1 | 91 |
| 6.3 | Mediation effects in the measurement model shown in Figure 6.1 | 93 |
| 7.1 | Structure of formal setting (a 3-day workshop) | 110 |
| 8.1 | How academic family promotes informal learning for Latinx students | 128 |
| 13.1 | Validity aspects | 195 |
| 13.2 | Practices of validation and certification of competencies in Italy | 197 |
Asia and Europe together represent the largest landmass, the largest population and the largest concentration of economic resources as well as a diversity of cultural traditions. The 21st century is characterized as “the Asian century” and therefore its interactions with Europe are fundamental. In this new century, the Asia-Europe connection is of utmost importance. This is indicated by the existence of the Asia-Europe Foundation (supported by the European Union (EU) and housed in Singapore), the Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM), that is the regular platform for dialogue between EU member states and the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) plus other Asian societies, by the flow of students from Asia to Europe and vice versa, and by the growing academic literature that highlights the benefits of two way cross cultural communication. Education is a fundamental policy tool in both regions as each seeks to move to take advantage of the knowledge economy. The EU has recognized this with its policies in support of Asia-Europe mobility programmes and different countries in Asia constantly look to Europe not so much for support, as in the past, but as a source of investment. The success of Asian students in international large scale assessments is a constant reminder to European countries that there is much to learn from Asia.

This Series provides a forum for dialogue on key educational issues and challenges faced by Asian and European societies. Education is a key social practice on both continents and the means by which innovation, creativity and critical thinking can be encouraged and developed. Major issues such school education reform, student learning, leadership, curriculum, higher education, multicultural and intercultural education and other major educational issues are addressed. Most often a comparative perspective is provided to provide insights into these issues but there are also opportunities for focusing on distinctive issues in one or other of the regions.

In the current volume, the focus is on informal learning and its role in an increasingly globalized world where learning holds the key to success both for nations as well as individuals. The argument throughout is that informal
learning can no longer be disregarded. It must be recognized along with formal learning and non-formal learning as a source of knowledge production that can assist in understanding and influencing an increasingly complex and unpredictable world.

Kerry J. Kennedy
Series Editor
Asia Europe Education Dialogue Series
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This book discusses the case for integrating informal learning in the daily life and work of schools. The recognition of informal learning is a step towards understanding that learning takes place in multiple ways, even before birth and throughout the life cycle. It can take place anywhere, anytime and anyhow. It is an essential feature of the human fabric. This creates a new educational challenge: Integrating formal and informal learning in schools in order to build social relationships and knowledge platforms that can meet the challenges of the 21st century.

The aim of this introductory chapter is to offer conceptual tools that help to define informal learning from different perspectives. The purpose is to enhance the school as a social institution that recognizes multiple sources of learning in the creation of knowledge. The following spaces of reflection will be discussed:

- The nature of informal learning.
- Features contributing to the development of informal learning in schools.
- Impediments and limitations of informal learning.
- Benefits of informal learning.
- Institutional challenges.
- Contents of the book.

The nature of informal learning

Learning is best seen as a natural human ability. The formation of society and the building of human capacity have been possible due to the continuous acquisition of knowledge. Yet knowledge in official school curricula focuses not on this natural learning process but on specified subjects and disciplines that are sanctioned by authorities. Natural learning, or everyday learning, that is not part of “official learning” tends to be seen as “informal”: Creativity, entrepreneurship, problem solving and empathy, among other metacognitive abilities, have until recently not been recognized by the school system.

The precise specification of informal learning is difficult because it is embedded in daily social processes such as belonging to a community, social movements, gender identification, families, community regeneration, justice, health,
leisure, etc. The ethical qualities of this kind of informal learning are clear and are part of the intellectual profile of each human being and their lived experiences. At the same time, antisocial, xenophobic and violent behaviours are also often acquired informally and the elimination of such learning is an important role for schools.

The processes of acquiring informal learning involve basically personal experience and social influence: Observations focused on self-interest, reflections on misconceptions and successes, imitation and adaptation into a diversity of social groups, dialogue and languages between adults and children, social speech such as aesthetics or fashion, social networks, peer communication, collaboration between peer groups, etc. These processes of “natural learning” are often conceptualized in school contexts as active learning methods, and this concept starts to recognize the importance of informal learning.

The conceptual foundation of active learning methods is simple: Neither students nor teachers are symbolic institutions seeking rewards based on hierarchical position or institutional prestige (Weber, 1905). Rather, the basic assumption of this book is that both students and teachers are considered actors (“understood as human beings with their beliefs, feelings and emotions in their rationality”) (Alpuche de la Cruz, 2015) capable of autonomous individual action. The justification of this basic assumption, focused on the freedom of individuals, represents a critique of social determinism favoured by functionalist approaches, where the origin and social context of each individual determines the itineraries and school destinations of students.

The concept of social relationship is implicit in informal learning. That is, learning (both formal and informal) is acquired through social relationships in which different human beings exchange meanings, complement knowledge, create new categories of or build necessary symbols to undertake communication processes. They may also engage in other actions which provide opportunities for mutual influence among different organizational actors in an institutional framework, such as schools.

The effects of autonomy of thought and social relationships among organizational actors are consistent with the idea of pragmatic complexity in schools (Ansell & Geyer, 2016; Cilliers & Greyvenstein, 2012). The central idea is that the interactions of organizations (and their members) with different local and global environments constitute self-organized learning spaces that consist of unique practical spaces of information as well as knowledge. Such spaces have their own “boundaries” that define the scope where each subject acquires his or her formal and informal learning. The organizational complexity lies in the fact that as far as schools are concerned, formal school subjects or specific groups of subjects have their own learning spaces compatible with the common space of the school as an institution. Such norms and rules characterize schools and will govern exchanges between formal and informal learning to reflect a particular organizational culture.

An organizational culture that encourages informal learning values the autonomy of different school actors who can express the diversity of their experiences learned, inside and outside the school space. All forms of knowledge should be
the object of merit and appreciation within the social and cultural framework of each school space. This includes the formal curricula and the informal learning acquired by each student, with both being assessed. This double reality of value and merit constitutes the basis of social justice in the processes of schooling. This requires a balance between recognizing the objective value of acquiring available knowledge for each subject as well as giving credit for the acquisition of informal learning that takes place in the particular social and cultural contexts of the school and its community (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Schools as cultural organizations are characterized by the complexity of social relationships among their members, always subject to an exchange of meanings via the basic technology of institutional functioning: Teaching and learning. Additionally, reflective actions taken by the users themselves will always add value to formal learning (Adams & Gupta, 2017; Scheerens, 2011). Schooling is not a one-way process. Both students and teachers will reflect on the purposes of the organizations of which they are a part and the goals the organization has for them, and they may (or may not) modify them in terms of their individual objectives and purposes (Blaschke & Stewart, 2016).

**What is informal learning?**

The most common definition has been proposed by Livingstone (1999):

> any activity involving the pursuit of understanding, knowledge or skill which occurs outside the curricula of educational institutions, or the courses or workshops offered by educational or social agencies. (p. 51)

This definition has some shortcomings: It defines informal learning outside the institutional context, and it excludes the exchange between formal and informal learning. Other approaches locate the definitions of informal learning in more qualitative terms. For example, Michael Eraut (2004) proposed several definitions of informal learning. He focused on the education of adults, his raison d’être being that different cognitive actions shape the awareness of different organizational actors in different social environments: Memory of events, selection of information, building of expectations, reflection, focus of interest, recognition of important events, discussion, personal involvement in actions and strategic planning of actions. In this conceptual framework, informal learning includes the experiences that are acquired and learnt by subjects throughout the development of their own lives. This appeal to individual freedom is key in order to define informal learning: It is the unique and personal learning which is acquired by adults. Other approaches classify informal learning from the focus of the subjectivity of each organizational actor based on two variables: Intentionality and consciousness (Van Noy, Jacobs, Korey, Bailey, & Hughes, 2008; Van Noy, James, & Bedley, 2016). In other words, it is the learning of and from life that is distributed in the different actions undertaken by individuals in the social and cultural contexts in which they live (Foley, 1999).
Factors contributing to the development of informal learning in schools

According to neo-institutional theories, meaning structures and communication patterns are the framework for basic analyses of organizations. The structures of meaning (norms and rules) refer to the grammar or organizational language that prevails in each school. These involve the universe of concepts used by school members, the symbols used to establish feelings of belonging to a common reality, the rituals used to control organizational habits and the beliefs established to regulate the social order that allows the continuity of the school year with its regulatory characteristics. Communication patterns refer to the social climate that allows or prevents social relationships in schools; for instance, mutual trust, citizenship rights in schools, feeling of responsibility and belonging.

A neo-institutional organizational perspective

From a neo-institutional perspective, “structure of meaning” and “pattern of communication” provide the basic framework for explaining the organization of schooling. This framework regulates the organizational grammar of schooling. “Structure of meaning” refers to the interpretive processes of teachers and students in all aspects of school education. “Pattern of communication” refers to the social relations in which different school actors exchange knowledge and information related to formal and informal curriculum. A “direct pattern of communication” is characterized by the recognition of some level of hierarchy between information senders (usually teachers) and beneficiaries (usually students). This is how much traditional teaching and learning takes place. An “autonomous pattern of communication” acknowledges that from time to time actors in the education process will switch their roles from information senders to beneficiaries, regardless of their identity as a teacher or a student (Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1 Structure of meaning and pattern of communication.
Traditionally, synchronizing the patterns of communication between different education actors has been regarded as a matter of efficiency. The maintenance of hierarchy in education relationships has also been regarded as a disciplining technique that creates a social distance between teachers and students. A contrary education organizational concept is being highlighted in this chapter. It is based on an education environment where all actors adopt autonomous patterns of communication. Transactions and responsibilities are assumed by all school actors, who consequently acquire cultural agency in schools. This concept will improve social relations among all actors who constitute a school. All members have the ability to create knowledge and produce content that is important for themselves as well as for other individuals or social groups.

The key for effectively developing this model is the creation of a “learning framework.” This is an institutional process by which norms and rules of learning are fixed in each school site. It identifies the cognitive processes that are going to be recognized, validated and certified by a school community. Schools that are focused on their own “learning framework” develop a sense of ownership over it and value communication patterns based on dialogue and cooperation. Such schools are characterized by the creation of social capital creating stable learning environments characterized by educational qualities that are focused on reflective action, trust, social solidarity, feeling of belonging or collective action. This learning environment symbolizes the school reality where students and teachers together develop their learning activities. Beyond the physical space of each school there are new school “boundaries” that include informal learning as an important reality of schooling in this new educational system.

Impediments and limitation of informal learning

The consideration of students as having organizational agency is an ideal model that creates new social relationships needed to produce new knowledge which is broader than the academic knowledge prescribed in mainstream educational systems (Jeffs & Smith, 1990). One step forward for this institutionalized curriculum is the diversification of learning sources and the legitimation of learning acquired in the classroom and extracurricular activities. Yet this still maintains student dependency with regard to curricular prescriptions of the educational system. This raises the issues of what can be regarded as “authentic learning.” There are different views. Two conceptual tendencies can be identified in authentic learning. One is pragmatic (transfer of knowledge) and the other is practical (participation of students and teachers in real-life issues, as referents of knowledge). From the point of view of the transfer of learning to other different situations based on classroom experiences, school systems are currently in charge of this transfer task. On the other hand, there are those who defend the symbolism of real-life experience as the main source of learning, the result of daily practice, symbolized in the liberal myth of the self-made person (Renner, Prilla, Ulrike, & Joachim, 2016). In other words, authentic learning from this perspective is based on a need to learn something to cover a personal or collective
demand. This is the case of the self-employed worker who learns languages in his adult age to serve clients who demand his/her services, or the student who learns a sport in order to be part of a group and feel like a member of such group.

In fact, these two approaches of authentic learning are complementary. The reason behind such complementarity is the following. On the one hand, teachers learn their profession through real life, that is, in the process of their daily work. On the other hand, students learn through simulation, that is, through problem solving and practical examples that could be applied to their professional futures.

“Authentic learning,” in this view, is reflected in the complementarities between formal and informal learning (Annen, 2013) whose boundaries can be regarded as liquid. That is, the different learning processes are interchangeable as part of active learning and critical thinking (Karr, 2009; Natale & Ricci, 2006). Formal and extracurricular school knowledge can work together to build understanding of any effective action and reasoning that might be needed. For instance, individual ideas and thoughts designed to question reality can help to understand reality and the actions required to improve it (Zimmerman & McClain, 2016).

Teacher dependence on external constraints, such as educational policy and curricular prescriptions, is another important barrier and limitation when considering informal learning in schools. This area of dependence and external control of school learning represents a closed approach to schools and the processes of schooling, which involve considering teachers as technicians applying prescribed knowledge. On the contrary, if we consider school as a knowledge laboratory, a variety of information is available susceptible to collective learning, involving the spatial and temporal expansion of schools to the life of each student and teacher. Practical experiences can be transformed into knowledge through cognitive processes. This is a process of critical thinking that can be acquired and learned in the daily practice of school actors.

The most important focus of attention (from both practical and pragmatic points of view) is the lifeworld of each school actor. This concept, which stems from the sociology of knowledge, constitutes the cultural background of each individual reflected in his/her beliefs, behaviours, languages and practices of communication. This creates an important equality principle among different student populations (Bevan et al., 2010) when considering that each school subject is considered as an educational agent: A subject who has the ability to be a source of knowledge and learns from other subjects who are part of their educational space.

To conclude this section, informal learning depends on the social and cultural capital of individual lives (Cole & Vanderplank, 2016; Rehm & Notten, 2016). The former is located in the social, familiar, educational and economical networking of each individual’s lifeworld. The latter refers to the communicative and discursive abilities of individuals which enable them to understand the intentions and messages of other individuals, as well as the capacity to express their ideas, intuitions, experiences or any other type of cognitive construction that must be transmitted to other individuals. This highlights the importance of formal and informal learning in the processes of individuals’ social mobility,
personal emancipation, exploration of new goals and life strategies. The accumu-
lative learning acquired (intangible capital) builds the social culture of each
individual and, obviously, of the communities of which they are a part. In other
words, the commitment of schools can be to create learning environments
(social cultures) (Sanders, 2007), that is, the cognitive, social and emotional
space where students and teachers learn together.

**Benefits of informal learning**

School management is a key issue in understanding the benefits of recognizing
informal learning at schools. Management action based on personal reflection
and critical thinking is needed to support school improvement and build learn-
ing climates or environments characterized by five areas (Grosemans, Boon,
Verclairen, Dochy, & Kyndt, 2015; Harrop & Turpin, 2013).

First, it needs to be recognized that students and teachers have their own
educational beliefs and values. These are related to areas such as school learning,
teaching, leadership, social relationships and the evaluation and classification of
students.

Second, the interdependence between informal and formal learning con-
tributes to the training of students and teachers. This collaboration can be
understood from two different perspectives. First, there is the institutional col-
laboration between schools and cultural organizations—schools are not isolated
from the societies in which they are embedded. Second, teachers and students
will have different interpretations regarding the standardized teaching and
learning patterns that are part of each system. Too much reliance on standard-
ized testing can create less positive attitudes towards informal learning.

Third, school actors experience a diversity of social relationships with their
closest reference groups (families, professional communities, teacher unions,
social networks, etc.). These relationships contribute to the construction of
individual and collective beliefs regarding the basic technology of school work:
Teaching practices and evaluation of required knowledge by each student.

Four, innovative learning methods such as action research, problem solving,
written productions or construction and design of learning provide different
information sources from those of official school curricula. Additionally, such
methodologies mean explicitly developing each school participant’s capacity
for expression. The tacit and unintentional learning implied in these types
of learning helps to build knowledge profiles for each student as well as their
teachers.

Finally, improving organizational contexts means expanding communication
patterns between formal and informal educational agents and actors. In this con-
text, the social and cultural collective of each school can contribute to the con-
struction of knowledge. Strengthening the processes of self-organization and
the design of new organizational structures can create new social relationships.
This can facilitate the sharing of information and significant or relevant knowl-
edge to strengthen the sense of belonging to the school.
Institutional challenges for informal learning

The methodologies of school work are the structural foundations for the permanent relationships between formal and informal learning. These permanent relationships contribute to the creation of a new institution for the schooling system, new working habits, learning environments and interactions among the different members of a school, and other learning technologies that are established for a better understanding of curriculum content. All in all, these relationships contribute to a new view of the organizational actor who is less institutionalized and more focused on the continuous improvement of the behaviour norms and rules of each school organization.

From a more practical point of view, the main institutional challenge for informal learning is its recognition. Such recognition of the value and merit of informal learning means adopting a flexible view of knowledge and getting close to an approach that is focused on the autonomous learning of each student oriented, guided and monitored by each teacher. As students learn in this way, they come to understand different epistemologies and they engage in deep learning (Singh, 2015, p. 4). Additionally, as students acquire new skills such as global education competencies (Ley et al., 2014), develop initiative for performing tasks, develop creativity for reflective actions, etc., these can also contribute to informal education. Such skills indicate the interaction that can take place between formal and informal learning.

Conclusion

The main effect of the institutional recognition of informal learning is an acceptance of the importance of school content that is informally generated by students and teachers. This can result in a greater sense of belonging to the organization on account of its recognition of each organizational actor’s content and knowledge. This focus on individual contributions means that schools cease to be islands and the educational system ceases to be an archipelago. That is, there is horizontal continuity among different types of knowledge acquired by students and vertical continuity among different layers and levels of the educational system. These continuities can counter social exclusion on account of socio-economic factors in different communities (Ramani & Siegler, 2015; Ramani, Rowe, Eason, & Leech, 2015), including migrant populations (Alenius, 2016) and at-risk adolescents (Keating & Janmaat, 2015).

Schools, perhaps implicitly, take decisions with regards to their learning priorities. In this framework of priorities, there are two sides. One visible side is the value given to learning as expressed in report cards. A less visible and more informal side is related to the subjective conditions in which students learn. The informal side can influence the decisions related to the reports given to a particular school population. This suggests a relationship between the formal and the informal and a recognition of the importance of informal learning in schools.
Finally, the stability of the interactions between different types of learning in schools is subject to the administration of each school. Political action changes in schools when the informal learning of their constituents is considered. School policy is typically understood as the power of taking decisions to improve both learning and education in the school population, and this is often about correction. Yet when political structures change to be more inclusive, the management and policy focus is on a community of professional learners and their multiple modes of learning and ways to enhance this learning, whether it is formal or informal. This change to school governance and management highlights the role of the school as an institution and the political decisions that need to be made to ensure that informal learning is recognized as an important part of the curriculum experiences of all students and teachers.

School governance focused on shared responsibility is a feature of schooling recognized by the European Union (Rogers, 2014). It not only assists in the recognition of informal learning but can also help to meet a broader agenda that could result in the design of a certification system that acknowledges the full range of learning in schools and systems. This would be both a practical and pragmatic outcome as mentioned earlier in this chapter and an important way to embed informal learning in recognized structures. The rationale for doing so has been given throughout this chapter, and it remains an important goal to which the remainder of this book will hopefully contribute.

References


References


Tu, C. (2004). *Twenty-one designs to building an online collaborative learning community*. Westport, CT; Greenwood.


Notes

1. I have designed a model that, for better or worse, builds on the reality that most of the day-to-day needs of most of the people within the world currently depend upon some variant of a government-regulated, free-market system where the availability and cost of goods and services are largely, but not exclusively driven by the rules of supply and demand.

2. A variation on this idea was first proposed by Ivan Illich (1971).

3. MOOC stands for massive, open, online course.

4. I will need to leave to another, longer chapter the details on how best to create, manage and enforce such a system.

1. Compadrazgo (co-parenting or fictive kinship) is a cultural practice involving the expansion of family systems that encompasses the responsibility of caring and support implemented within different Latinx families and communities. The term Latinx is used in this chapter to include individuals of all gender(s) who are of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican and South and Central American heritage. This chapter uses gender-neutral language in reference to individuals (i.e. Latinx, “they”) unless the original authors explicitly indicate gender pronouns.