

Bernie Grummell (2010) ‘Filtering informal learning in everyday life: invoking

ordinariness and moving to civic engagement’

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Abstract: This article explores the role of informal learning from television as it is anchored within the ordinariness of daily life. It examines the consequences for pedagogy and civic engagement, questioning how informal learning from television can enhance civic engagement. For many, this learning was localized through personalized and interpersonal relations of everyday life. Learning was not viewed as a distant institutional force, but as an embedded part of an ordinary life. The invoking of ordinariness rendered the relationship between learning and civic engagement unproblematic. Learning was localized in subjective terms for self-identity and interpersonal relations rather than critically reflecting on the power structures of everyday life.

Ordinary living: contextualising informal learning in daily television viewing

Concern about how television impacts on levels of civic engagement has long existed as writers bemoan the fate of democracy and civil society in the face of a commercial onslaught (Postman 1985, Gerbner *et al.* 1986). Robert Putnam (1995) captures this notion in his argument that television viewing – as an indicator of passive and privatised leisure – results in declining levels of social capital and civic engagement. His thesis gained widespread public and political interest in the absence of rigorous research on this issue (Maras 2006). Putnam (2000) contends that television viewing takes up time and effort that was formerly spent on other more civic-minded activities. This dissipation of social capital into ‘shallower and wider’ patterns of engagement (Putnam 1995:75) raises important questions about the relationship between ‘leisurely’ activities such as television viewing and the active engagement perceived as necessary for civic life.

The negative findings of social capital theories are countered by the acknowledged contribution of television (and other media) in the development of public pedagogy (Giroux 2004) and media literacy (Potter 2001, Livingstone 2003). Giroux and Freire (1989) highlight how critical pedagogy enables us to rethink the relationship between popular culture, education and power. Maras (2006: 106) points to the cross-fertilisation between social theories and media studies that can deepen our understanding of the relationship between learning and civic engagement. Wright (2007: 69) highlights the pedagogical space to ‘foster critical awareness, identity development, and social change using the informal learning taking place in the spaces between our students and our media culture.’

Of particular interest in this article is the role that informal learning can play as an activity mediating between cultural and civic spheres, between private and public life, between leisure and formal learning. The article draws on interviews with Irish television viewers to explore the complex and fluid relationship between informal learning, television viewing and civic engagement. It looks at how informal learning from television can contribute to identity development (through self identity and esteem), and how it can develop greater levels of critical awareness and social transformation by contextualising these activities within the relationships and spheres of everyday life. This level of informal learning activity often remains obscure in social and media theories.

Social capital theories neglect the informal learning of everyday life in its dismissal of ‘shallower’ forms of engagement (Putnam, 1995). Much of the work occurring within media literacy and public pedagogy is framed by formal educational processes. Consequently, this decontextualise media(ted) learning from its more typical viewing location in everyday life. Despite public pedagogy’s intention of becoming ‘part of a critical practice designed to understand the social context of everyday life as lived relations of power’ (Giroux 2000: 355), it often disregards the contextual and relational aspects of informal learning in everyday life. This article explores how informal learning is embedded in the contexts and relationships of daily life through the example of television viewing. This example is used to address the wider issue of how informal learning is linked – or not – to civic engagement.

Interviews with research participants reveal how informal learning from television is typically embedded in the structures of a taken-for-granted ‘ordinary’ life. This has a powerful impact on how participants engage in informal learning. A

sense of ‘ordinariness’ becomes a reflexive and normalising strategy where ‘people claim to be just themselves’ (Savage et al. 2001: 889). It enables people to anchor the complexity of their thoughts and actions in the normalcy of everyday life. This article explores how the invoking of ordinariness enables people to locate and explain their activities in ways that have important consequences for informal learning. For some, informal learning from television is contextualised on a personal level in terms of self-identity and esteem or positioned in relational terms of engagement with family and friends. Informal learning holds transformative possibilities, facilitating engagement with the wider social world by developing respondents’ sense of public awareness and capacity for civic action. These different responses are explored throughout this article, followed by a concluding discussion on the consequences for our understanding of informal learning and civic engagement.

Informal learning and civic engagement – theoretical insights

This article originated from an interest in how everyday activities like television viewing can play a variety of roles in people’s lives, from enjoyment of its relaxing and entertaining qualities, concerns about its couch potato tendency to its information gathering and active learning potential. Academic research and theories add to this multiplicity of understandings with its array of theoretical explanations. Some key areas that offer useful ideas emerge from the intersection of the disciplines of education (especially informal learning and adult education theories), cultural studies (public pedagogy and media literacy) and sociology (social capital and civil society theories). Theoretical insights from these approaches are used to explore the significance of findings emerging from this research.

Informal learning is understood to be voluntary, open-ended and active learning that is self-motivated, self-regulated and embedded in social contexts (Boekaerts and Minnaert 1999). Coombs and Ahmed acknowledge how informal learning is often ‘unorganized, unsystematic and even unintentional at times, yet accounts for the great bulk of any person’s total lifetime learning.’ (1974: 8). Informal learning experiences tend to be learner-centred, qualitative experiences that utilize objects, materials and settings in their real context. The strong contextual basis of informal learning means that it has to be socially situated and relevant in people’s everyday life to make the greatest impact on action (McGivney 1999).

Paulo Freire’s conscientization model is used to analyse the transformative relationship that occurs between informal learning and civic engagement (1972, 1974). He describes a pedagogical process where learners begin by focusing on immediate realms and generative issues of concern in their lives as they exist ‘in and with the world.’ (1985: 68). It enables learners to focus on the familiar known spaces in daily lives that they can critically deconstruct and known anew. Höijer (1992: 591) describes how we tend to focus on ‘psychologically close themes deal(ing) with content relating to everyday realities and concrete experiences, with human and social aspects of everyday life’. It is part of the wider process of constructing a taken-for-granted social reality and ontological security that we share (Garfinkel 1967).

The routine nature of everyday life leads to what Taylor (2002: 482) describes as ‘the sense that we are all, insofar as we connect to the backdrop of everyday life, ordinary; we are all somehow anchored to routine, to a place called home and to the mundanity of daily habit.’ Freire’s model acknowledges the immediacy of learning that occurs as we critique the familiar. The normalising of everyday life within a frame of ordinariness gives ontological security as we create a sense of trust and

safety in the world through our daily routines (Giddens 1984). The activities of informal learning in everyday life occur within a similar known space in which participants can critically reflect and understand their own world.

Learners can move to a wider engagement with the social and civic world – the stage of dialogic pedagogy in Freire's model where we reflect upon and problematize the wider socio-political and historical context of our world (Shor 1993: 104). Again this is localized in the immediate context of our locality where we engage – the private sphere of intimate relations (personal and family life) and the societal communication and voluntary associations that constitute civil society (Cohen and Arato 1992: 411). Dahlgren (1995: 12) argues that civil society 'composes the space for much of the public sphere beyond the media'. Civil society creates associations between people in the 'complex, molecular networks of everyday power relations'. (Keane 1991: 146). While still localised in the interpersonal relationships and contexts of daily life, learning at this level begins to look outward to engage with the wider socio-cultural and political world, to move from the immediate concerns of everyday power relations to a deeper understanding of how they intersect with power relations and structures of society.

This article explores the implications for informal learning from television as it is anchored within the unquestioned ordinariness of everyday life. It illustrates how the invoking of ordinariness often leaves the relationship between learning and civic action unproblematised. Learning can be localised in subjective terms (for self-identity and interpersonal relations) rather than reflecting on the power structures of everyday life that Freire encourages. Keane (1998: 170–80) describes this as the micro-level of the public sphere – the small-scale locales in which citizens forge their identities and negotiate everyday life. Learning at this level focuses on the immediacy of situated pedagogy, identifying and analysing problem-themes from personal experience rather than dialogic pedagogy and critical transitivity necessary for civil society (Shor and Freire 1987). Critical transitivity empowers the learner 'to think and to act on the conditions around her or him, and relates these conditions to the larger contexts of power in society' (Shor 1993: 32).

Analysis of interviews with Irish television viewers explore their engagement with learning at these different levels as a means of studying the interaction between informal learning and civic engagement. Media studies and public pedagogy remind us of the complexity and embeddedness of mass media such as television in our daily lives. Our engagement with media is a key site of continuous informal learning that permeates our lives. Cultural theorists highlight how the everyday experience of culture is a constitutive element of meaning-making in society and a potential means of personal and social transformation (Williams 1993, Giroux 2000). 'Culture is the primary sphere in which individuals, groups, and institutions engage in the art of translating the diverse and multiple relations that mediate between private life and public concerns' (Giroux 2004:62). As such, it is a key site of negotiation between private and public life, personal and civic spheres where learning can play a transformative role.

Researching unknown audiences: accessing stories of informal learning

Existing media research gives us an overview of the behaviour, beliefs and attitudes of television viewers (Barwise and Ehrenberg, 1988; Comstock and Scharrer, 1999, Morley 1986, Ang 1991, Alasutari 1999). Such research offers particularised

insights into the everyday activities of television viewers, reminding us that a single entity as the television audience does not exist. It is an ‘invisible fiction’ created by researchers, broadcasters and other institutions (Hartley 1987). Consequently, Ang’s (1991:165) understanding of the audience is adopted

the virtual standpoint of actual audiences watching television is the ill-defined shorthand term for the multiplicity of situated practices and experiences in which television audiencehood is embedded.

From this perspective of ‘actual audiences’, the experiences of viewers in this research become one example of ‘television audiencehood’, no more or less representative than the practices of other television viewers. This research is based on qualitative interviews with Irish television viewers, exploring their understanding of the role of informal learning from television in their lives. The informal learning of television viewers had not been studied in Irish media or educational research, so an open research call was broadcast on national television to recruit a wide variety of previously unknown participants.¹ A total of 65 questionnaires were returned by viewers, with 31 respondents agreeing to participate in a hour-long telephone interview and one Dublin-based focus group about the role of television for learning in their lives. This research was part of PhD research exploring the role of education in broadcasting, with a specific focus on the role of television for informal learning and civic engagement in everyday life (Grummell 2004). This research also examined the broader context of education in European broadcast policy-making and production (Grummell 2004, 2009).

Seventeen females (55%) and 14 males (45%) were interviewed across Ireland. These respondents were primarily in the older age groupings, with 23 out of 31 respondents between 40 and 75 years of age, while the remainder were between 30–9 years. 16 respondents were employed on a full or part-time basis. Eight people were retired (reflecting the older age profile of this group), while the rest were working in the home or unemployed. The socio-economic background of these respondents was quite distinctive, with most citing professional or intermediate non-manual backgrounds. The high level of educational participation by these respondents was another striking feature of this profile. The majority had attained some form of certification at post-primary or higher education level (25 people) and most had participated in a wide variety of adult education courses. This profile does raise questions about the representativeness of the sample, but it has to be counterbalanced by the exploratory nature of this research as existing academic or television research does not collect data on the informal learning activities of television viewers.

A grounded theory approach to this interview data revealed the ways that respondents speak about the role of informal learning from television in their daily lives (Corbin and Strauss 2008). This approach facilitated an inductive method of theory-building with interpretations emerging from the perspective of those interviewed. This social constructivist position looks at how people use language to construct ‘versions of the social world’ (Potter and Wetherall 1987: 33). Findings were then assessed in terms of their contribution to our understanding of informal learning from television, especially its basis in the context and relationships of everyday life.

Developing a Learning Identity: informal learning, identity and self-esteem

The findings presented below explore the contexts and relationships that respondents associated with their informal learning from television; firstly its impact on people's identity and self-esteem, before examining how it was embedded in the relationships of interpersonal life and finally engagement with civil society. Many respondents located their discussion of informal learning from television in relation to their sense of identity; their image of the type of person they are. They cited concrete examples of informal learning from television, critically assessing its influence on their sense of personal identity. They perceived themselves as someone who is useful, a 'knowledgeable person' who can draw on a wide array of informal learning sources (McMillan *et al.* 2008). Television contributed to this reservoir of information that they could use for themselves and others.

I tend to be a person who people ring up and I'll know the answers. So I have a little bit of everything in my head ... like when people ring up with a blocked sink to know who they will get to fix it, I'll know. (Aoife, female, 40–9 years)

Television was positioned as a learning resource that motivated and guided them along a personal development path, it 'motivated you to go out and do something about a little knowledge you might have...it gave you a sense of direction.' (Maeve, female, 50–4 years). Respondents actively sought opportunities for informal learning from television to develop their cognitive abilities and knowledge. They outlined several instances of self-directed learning from television (languages, computer skills, science, history) that lead them along a path of personal development to attain their aim of becoming an 'educated person'.

For some, this self-directed learning was associated with formal education and career progression as they actively sought learning opportunities from television that would enhance their career prospects. 'It [television series on child psychology] was purely for work related reasons, so I can apply for jobs as they come up within the area of child psychology' (Conor, male, 40–9 years). Such viewers described strategic monitoring of television programmes for educational purposes, 'you're watching to pick out information that you are going to use for your exams or for assignments and projects' (Liam, male, 30–9 years). The impact of learning from television for these respondents was tightly structured by the formal educational system, unlike the open approach to informal learning from television described by others. It points to a wide diversity of learning approaches from television that viewers expressed from this strategic career-orientated perspective to a more diffuse focus on learning for learning's sake; to become an 'educated' person.

Learning Identities as Forms of Self-esteem and Distinction

The complex nature of the relationship between informal learning from television and identity is evident when we look more closely at these expressions of an 'educated' identity. This is linked to a notion of self-esteem that many respondents drew upon in their discussion of informal learning from television, locating its contribution in terms of recognition, honour and respect. They positioned their informal learning activities as a form of symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1973, 1986), emphasising the enrichment potential of what they defined as 'intelligent' or 'serious' programming (primarily news, current affairs and documentaries). Respondents were actively acquiring and

developing their cultural, and more specifically educational, capital to improve their life chances.

The counterside of this ‘educated’ identity was a sense of closure as viewers dismissed some genres of television, primarily entertainment programmes, as trivial, passive engagement that can endanger cognitive development – a ‘couch potato’ fear of the corrupting influence of sitcoms and soap operas. Informal learning from television was used as a socially constructed form of distinction (Bourdieu 1984), as evidenced by the references to ‘others’ raised by respondents fearful of the corrupting influence of entertainment television on other people – mainly the young and vulnerable members of society. ‘I think that programmes like Neighbours and I think it’s Friends, I have a young daughter and I think that they are deplorable entertainment...I really detest them’. (Sean, male, over 55 years). This critical approach to entertainment television enabled respondents to use television and informal learning as capital leverage to distinguish themselves from others, with an implicit critical approach towards those who watched television purely for entertainment. This judgmental disposition towards television fits into the ‘moral hierarchy’ of media viewership that Alasuutari (1992, 1999) describes. These respondents were critical of relaxed enjoyment that television encouraged and its sedentary capacity ‘to pass time and filling spaces in their lives’ (Tomas, male, over 55 years).

However, these criticisms were usually targeted at other people and were continually countered by numerous examples of active learning engagement throughout their lives. The apparent contradictory attitudes about passive and active learning from television emerged as the contextual and relational aspects of viewing change. As respondents moved from one context of viewing to another and engaged in different relational aspects, their responsiveness and involvement in informal learning from television shifted (as later sections also illustrate). At this level of identity and self-esteem, television was described in positive terms (for personal development and active learning) and negatively (distinction and passivity).

Similar tensions are described by Hagen (1994) and Jensen (1995) as TV viewers identify a preference for ‘appealing performance’ or ‘pizzazz’ in news presentation formats (Jensen, 1995:87–8). This can be a double-edged sword, attracting viewers to television but also have a contradictory effect of turning programming into a diverting spectacle: ‘sometimes you sit in front of the television and it’s just flicker, flicker, flickering and you lose concentration.’ (Ita, female, 40–9 years). This tension between the relaxing effects of television and the active learning and critical thinking necessary for civil engagement (Dahlgren 1995, Keane 1998) lies at heart of the relationship between informal learning, media and civil society for many respondents in this study. It points to a far greater complexity than Putnam’s claim about the negative impact of television on civic engagement would imply.

Relational Aspects of Informal Learning from Television

The complexity of respondents’ use of television for informal learning is apparent when we examine how they filtered informal learning activities through the prism of the relationships of daily lives. For many, television was embedded in the routines of daily life for emotional and imaginative moments – a time out from the

more profane aspects of everyday life (Jensen 1995). This leisurely, pleasure-based attitude towards television was similar to the more typical image of the media audience described by media researchers (Lull 1980, Morley 1992). It is different to the passive approach towards television outlined in the previous section, as respondents expressed an active appreciation of how the relaxed enjoyment of television contributed on a relational level. Television viewing was located within the web of interpersonal relations with family and friends. Respondents listed several informal learning activities in which they engaged as a family unit, including watching television programmes with their children (or encouraged children to watch specific programmes), reading books and engaging in sports and other outdoor pursuits as a way of actively developing their children's learning.

I've always found that the children are always interested in [nature and wildlife programme], and it does, I find, make them ask questions about other things too, you know, and if there is a drought or famine or things like that ... they'd pick up a bit more (Maire, female, 40–9 years).

This encouragement was not just limited to children's learning, as family members supported each other. Respondents spoke about how other family members or friends told them about television programmes in which they might be interested. The interests or needs of those close to them also prompted respondents to engage with programmes – for example, using television to learn more about a disability suffered by a family member or learning a language from television because a family member re-located to another country.

My daughter had, she's 21, she lost her memory there a few years ago, serious memory loss, and eh, there was a couple of programmes on that, that did cover short and long term memory loss (Aoife, female, 40–9 years)

I became interested in German many years ago when one of my daughters was going to the RTC (Regional Technical College), I encouraged her to get involved in bilingual administration and it paid off because she has a good job in Munich. (Tomas, male, over 55 years)

This use of informal learning from television for relational purposes was also evident outside of their family. Television was contextualised in everyday life and valued for interpersonal reasons, for giving 'an insight into other person's life, how they live, the life they understand and their point of view.' (Niamh, female, 50–4 years). It provided respondents with activities and a means of socializing with others, facilitating conversations and general knowledge that can be shared between people – 'It is a common base that people have. You can say to people, for example, in a social way "did you see such and such last night"' (Eoin, male, 30–9 years). One respondent described how she set up a literature discussion group in her locality, prompted by the example of a literature group on television (Siobhan, female, over 55 years). She talked about how she enjoyed the interaction and socialization that occurred within the group, identifying the sense of 'sharing' as central for her. Other respondents watching language and cultural programmes identified a similar sense of sharing as the most important aspect of informal learning in their viewing and discussion of programmes with family members and friends. Informal learning was contextualised in a social setting and bound by these relationships, whether familial or friendship-

based. The implications of this filtering of informal learning through the lens of shared relationships and interests will be addressed later in terms of how it can potentially localise the impact of informal learning and civic engagement.

Informal learning, social awareness and civic engagement

For some respondents, informal learning from television contributed to their knowledge of and links with the outside world beyond their direct experiences. It was of particular importance to those who felt removed from public life in some way – some due to ill-health, others adapting to retirement, while countryside isolation or family responsibilities restricted others.

I lived away for an awfully long time and that's why I would be so interested in brushing up on history and learning, continuing to learn [from television programmes], I don't want to stagnate just because I'm in the countryside (Cait, female, over 55 years).

Respondents located the value of informal learning from television on this broad canvas – to develop their understanding of cultural or historical events, to enhance scientific and technological knowledge, or gain a greater insight into economic, political or environmental issues.

[Television programmes] would tell you things that you wouldn't know from your everyday life, conservation and the environment and rainforests and all that, you tend then to look at your, even the litter issues and things like that, you look at what you're using and see is it recyclable (Maire, female, 40–9 years)

While some respondents spoke about informal learning from television solely in terms of its contribution to their personal identity or in relational terms, several made a strong link between informal learning and a burgeoning critical reflection and civic engagement. This can be linked to the general debate on public and social responsibility in media studies (Dahlgren 1995, Keane 1998) and critical conscientization (Freire 1974). Respondents used their informal learning from television to be reflexive and to critically engage with the world around them.

These respondents recounted how they became involved in local community activities as a means of civic engagement outside of their work or family responsibilities. For example, one respondent described how he volunteered to teach organic horticulture in his local secondary school. He used this opportunity not only as a way of transmitting skills and values that he felt were lost to modern youth but also as a way of teaching them the critical and questioning approach to learning that he learnt through adult education (Eoin, male, 30–9 years). Another respondent talked about how he used his language skills to teach classes in his local community (Ciaran, male, 30–9 years). Again, this activity was framed in terms of contributing to his local community and spreading the knowledge and skills that he has learnt. They described how the informal learning of television was a valuable teaching resource to engage learners during these classes.

Discussion: informal learning and civic engagement

The types of activities outlined in the previous section demonstrated that many respondents were expressing a sense of reflexivity about their own lives and the social world around them. What remains to be explored however, is the consequences of this sense of social awareness and engagement – does it enable participants to develop critical thinking and civic action that is viewed in critical theory as a necessary part of being a democratic citizen? As the findings presented in the previous sections illustrate, different types of action were evident in the various contexts and relationships of everyday life. In some cases, informal learning from television was localised to respondents' personal development and the relationships of daily life. For others, such learning provided an important source of social awareness and a resource for civic engagement within their local communities.

These informal learning encounters did not necessarily adhere to linear progression as respondents moved from personal development and relational contexts, to greater levels of social awareness, and onwards to civic engagement and action. Respondents differed in their discussions of informal learning at these levels (personal development, interpersonal relations, social awareness and civic action). For some, informal learning from television played a role in all of these areas; for others, it was limited to specific levels. They varied in their informal learning activities and the way that they shifted these actions across the contexts and relations of everyday life.

This complex relationship between informal learning and television was clearly demonstrated in one respondent's description of television news viewing. He spoke about the social awareness that global news sources had given him, but highlighted the mixed emotions and responses that this evoked.

it's great, well it's not great to see it happening, but it's almost like being there and you know you're totally safe, none of the bullets, none of the violence is going to touch you ...it's nice to be aware of that (political, geographical and economic aspects of the civic unrest). I know there is not a whole lot that you can do about it, but it's better than not knowing, that's the way I look at it.
(Niall, male, 40–9 years)

News gave him an insight into the lives of others, but in a safe way; it was not something he personally had experienced. This raised the spectre of what Tester (1994) called the 'anaesthetic' effect of powerlessness and passive spectatorship that media provokes. It gave this respondent a sense of political awareness; but it also had the effect of restraining action, of limiting the move from social awareness to 'doing' or civic action. A notable absence from these interviews was the clear sense of action driven by critical consciousness that other studies demonstrate (Wright 2007, Kelly 1996). Wright's (2007) study of the *Avengers* illustrated the defiant alternative to traditional gender roles that the female lead character created for British women.

Kelly's (1996) analysis of the participative adult education *Right To Learn* series with adult education and unemployment groups in Ireland also revealed a strong sense of dialogic pedagogy and critical consciousness. The adult education groups using the series demonstrated an existing sense of critical pedagogy amongst learners which facilitated dialogic pedagogy and critical transivity. These groups acknowledged that such programmes are important for raising awareness and giving voice to their experiences of unemployment, but were critical of the limited nature of this awareness-raising. They felt that such television series lacked structural analysis of the power relations in society. Programmes needed to target the employers, politicians and those in influential positions, as 'it is not the unemployed who were

responsible for unemployment but “the people in power that created the system.”” (Kelly 1996: 64). Respondents in this current study of informal learning do not exhibit the same type of critical consciousness about their situation. Their uses of television for informal learning purposes tend to be more localised and situated as explored below.

Local contexts and situated pedagogy in an ordinary life

Respondents in this study rationalized their activities on the basis of ‘ordinariness’, and spoke about it in a personalized and relational framework of everyday life (Savage et al. 2001: 889). Their discussions of informal learning from television reflected a strong sense of ontological security as they expressed a ‘confidence or trust that the natural or social worlds are as they appear to be’ (Giddens 1984: 375). This normalised acceptance of ‘ordinary’ life gave a safety and structure for people. However, these personalized and interpersonal discourses also limited respondents’ focus to the immediate realms of their everyday life – the ‘psychologically close themes … relating to everyday realities and concrete experiences’ that Höijer (1992: 591) described. Consequently, they were positioned as ‘citizen-consumers’ who can ‘on a small, local scale, learn to make changes, make a difference, improve the personal for the national good’. (Brunsdon *et al.* 2001: 34, cited in Taylor 2002: 491).

The invoking of ordinariness left the link between informal learning and civic engagement unquestioned. Informal learning from television was assessed in local and relational terms.

These types of programmes (on drug addiction) I would watch with an interest that my own children wouldn’t be all perfect and there might come a day when that bit of information might be needed in my own home. (Aoife, female, 40–9 years)

Action was focused on interpersonal relations and the potential need for this knowledge for her family in the future. This article has demonstrated how many respondents tended to localise their informal learning from television in terms of its contribution to their personal identity, self-esteem and its role in the relationships of everyday life. Consequently, they became embedded within the unquestioned ordinariness of daily life and the relationship between learning and civic action remained unproblematised. Respondents described their informal learning from television in subjective and localized terms (for self-identity and interpersonal relations) rather than reflecting on the power structures of everyday life. This limited the impact of informal learning what Keane described this as the micro-level of the public sphere – the small-scale locales in which citizens forge their identities and negotiate everyday life (1998: 170–80).

This highlights one of the key issue that adult educators and civil society theorists emphasise – how we can move from the level of what Shor and Freire (1987: 104) call ‘situated pedagogy’ (where people identify the ‘subjective problem-themes’ of central concern to them) to a level of ‘critical transivity’. As they point out, it is easier to focus on the subjective problem-themes in our lives because they carry an intrinsic and immediate motivation for reflection in the personal and intimate sphere. The key for participation in civil society is dialogic engagement in critical transivity, where the ‘critically transitive thinker feels

empowered to think and to act on the conditions around her or him, and relates those conditions to the larger contexts of power in society' (Shor, 1993:32).

Dialogic pedagogy: problematizing and active participation in civil society

Some respondents began to demonstrate this transition in their use of informal learning from television as a resource for engagement in civil society. The focal point of informal learning from television for these respondents centred on their involvement with other people, especially in their local community – the spheres of societal communications and voluntary associations that Cohen and Arato (1992: 411) identified as a core part of civil society. For many respondents, their participation in community activities was framed through formal organisations – what can be described as structured associations. They cited a wide range of educational and civic activities, spanning formal and informal associations of civil society in which they had participated.

my interests would go under the title of environment. I run a small organic holding ... the other thing would be rural development. I'm involved with a number of rural development groups. I'm secretary of a housing association locally for families on low incomes and I'm also involved in an organic group and I sit on a consultative committee. (Eoin, male, 30–9 years)

This idea of having a responsibility to participate in civil society was very important to many of these respondents. They have gained from the knowledge and skills of others in the past and feel that they have a responsibility to continue this tradition. It was this sense of civic responsibility that enabled their move from the personalized and interpersonal levels to engage in dialogic pedagogy and civic action. Even on this level, there was a difference in rationale. For some respondents, this responsibility seemed essentially social and perceived as benign and charitable in its rationale (to give back to the system that helped you). It was a resource that facilitated engagement rather than a direct force for transformative education in its own right.

For others, civic engagement and activity was tied up with a growing sense of critical awareness and an emancipatory interest that stemmed from their involvement in socio-political activities. For example, one respondent spoke about how he initially became interested in informal learning when he was involved in trade union activities many years prior, marking a move to the stage of dialogic pedagogy where we reflect upon and problematize the wider socio-political and historical context of our world (Shor 1993: 104). This interest in informal learning stayed with him throughout his life, and now in his retirement, it plays another role as 'it occupies your mind and keeps you active, and you can associate with many other people from many walks of life...you have a new social life, you have a new outlook on life completely. (Padraig, male, over 55 years).

Learning has played a variety of roles within his life, from the emancipatory role during his work life to its current socializing role during his retirement. Other respondents reiterated similar points about the changing nature of informal learning from television during their life span. This may not necessarily occur in a deliberate or organised fashion leading from the personal and interpersonal to civic engagement, or from situated to dialogic pedagogy and

critical transivity. Instead engagement in informal learning from television was shaped by the context and relations in which people participated.

Conclusion: Informal learning in localised contexts and civil society

Findings presented throughout this article articulate the diverse and intricate role of informal learning in people' lives. For many respondents, their informal learning from television was filtered through a personalized or interpersonal frame in everyday life. They localized the role of learning in their lives in the various ways that this article has outlined – as part of their sense of identity or self-esteem, a form of distinction or within the interpersonal relations of everyday life. Learning was not viewed as a distant institutional structure and force, but as an embedded part of an ordinary life.

While many respondents talked in this personalized and localised way, others located the role of informal learning in terms of awareness-raising and engagement with a wider social world. These respondents were active participants in civil society. However, the accounts offered by these respondents varied in terms of the levels of reflexivity and civic action that they described, pointing to the complex and dynamic nature of these activities as sites of reception.

When activities, like informal learning from television, were anchored within the unquestioned ordinariness of everyday life, their contribution to civil society can be limited in scope. As this article illustrated, the invoking of ordinariness rendered the relationship between learning and civic action uncritical. Learning was described in subjective and localized terms for self-identity and interpersonal relations rather than reflecting on the power structures of everyday life. As Dahlgren (1995) argued, this limited the impact of these activities to the spheres of life that were personally experienced. This was the micro-level of the public sphere where citizens forge their identities and negotiate everyday life (Keane 1998). Learning at this level fixed on the immediacy of situated pedagogy, identifying and analysing problem-themes from personal experience rather than the dialogic pedagogy and critical transivity required by civil society (Shor and Freire 1987).

The integration of activities, like informal learning from television, into their daily life must be analyzed in terms of its engagement with civil society. As Dahlgren argues (1995: 12), 'the whole conceptual foundation of democracy is undermined' without attention to this sphere. Civil society links the socio-cultural realms of everyday life with the political sphere, creating a sense of solidarity and association between people through the networks of everyday power relations. (Keane 1991: 146). Informal learning holds these transformative possibilities but only where the learner is 'empowered to think and to act on the conditions around her or him, and relates these conditions to the larger contexts of power in society' (Shor 1993: 32).

Notes

[1] A research call to viewers interested in learning from television was broadcast on by RTÉ (Radio Telefis Éireann), Ireland's national public service broadcaster, during a three week period with over 70 people responding. This advertisement was broadcast free-to-air by RTÉ to source viewers for this research, along with access to

their archives and interviews with broadcast personnel as part of the RTÉ PhD Audience Research Fellowship under which this research was completed.

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