



onTrain

Online Training, the treasure within

**B. Online Training**  
**3. New learning approaches:  
formal, informal and non-formal**

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Co-funded by the  
Erasmus+ Programme  
of the European Union

The European Commission's support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein. Project reference: 2018-1-ES01-KA204-050702

# Content

Let's start	3
What am I learning here and why?	3
What content will I find here?	3
Formal, non-formal and informal learning	3
Learning contexts	4
The importance of the non-formal system	4
Teacher or trainer?	5
Examples	5
Exercises	6
Exercise 1: Where did I get that notion from?	6
Exercise 2: Recognise the system	6
Summary	7
Sources and Bibliography	7

## Let's start



Today's Europe is facing a transformation comparable to that of the industrial revolution. Digital technology is transforming our lives in every respect. Modern life offers the individual more opportunities and prospects, but it also presents greater risks and uncertainties. More and more people are continuing their studies, but the gap between those with sufficient qualifications to survive in the labour market and those who are irreparably excluded from it is widening. Moreover, the European population is ageing rapidly, which will lead to a change in the composition of the workforce and in patterns of demand for social, health and educational services. Finally, European societies are turning into multicultural mosaics. How can new teaching and learning methods provide solutions to these rapid and momentous changes?

### What am I learning here and why?

In this chapter we will try to understand why non-formal learning is so important nowadays, being it the centre of some important educational policies of the European Union towards a learner-centred and practice-based educational processes.

### What content will I find here?

In this chapter you will find definitions of formal, non-formal and informal learning, and you will learn why non-formal learning must be taken into maximum account. Then you will also find an overview of the main differences between the concepts of teacher in the formal system and the trainer in the non-formal system.

## Formal, non-formal and informal learning

We all know that formal learning takes place in education and training institutions and leads to recognised diplomas and qualifications. It follows a syllabus and is intentional in the sense that learning is the goal of all the activities learners engage in.

According to the European definitions (e.g.: the one provided by the Eurydice network that supports and facilitates European cooperation in the field of lifelong learning by providing information on education systems and policies in 38 countries and by producing studies on issues common to European education systems), non-formal learning is defined as learning that is characterised by an intentional choice of person, which takes place outside formal systems, in any body that pursues educational and training purposes, including voluntary work, national civil service and the private social service and in enterprises.

Informal learning is understood to be the one that, even regardless of an intentional choice, takes place in the performance, by each person, of activities in situations of daily life and in the interactions that take place in it, within the context of work, family and leisure time.

There are many reasons why it is worth stressing the importance of non-formal and informal experiences:

- they can cover different aspects that are lacking in regulated institutions, alongside formal learning;
- they are voluntary learning and their aim is often learning itself rather than obtaining a title;
- they are flexible and allow for more personalised and targeted learning.

## Learning contexts

We need then to distinguish:

- Formal context: schools, VETs, universities;
- Non Formal contexts such as work organizations or professional associations, where knowledge, skills and competences are developed mainly through learning based on professional relationships and practices, but also through training activities of updating and retraining designed ad hoc;
- Informal contexts such as the family, cultural-social-sports associationism, mass-media and new-media, the landscape-artistic-museum system, musical-theatrical-ludical and sports events, etc. in which people's real life takes place and in which attitudes are cultivated and knowledge, skills and competences mainly based on experiences and social relations are learnt.

## The importance of the non-formal system

The importance of the non-formal system (associations, popular universities, universities of the third age, etc.) has long been recognised by the European Union. There are several good reasons to give high priority to this educational system:

- it is not possible for the majority of the population to participate in long-term training courses;

- globalization, the extremely fast developing economy, produces rapidly changing social and economic scenarios;
- the population must be able to acquire strong skills and be able to adapt;
- above all, the local, national and European social model cannot tolerate having the majority of the population excluded from these educational processes;
- adult population will not only be citizens of this or that region, but they will also be European;
- this is a prerequisite for a strong Europe in the globalised world.

European citizenship requires knowledge of languages, digital competences and other cultural skills from which most adults are excluded.

## Teacher or trainer?

In the formal system we speak, not by chance, of a teacher, in the non-formal system of a trainer. The difference is not simply terminological, but of content. In the formal system, the school concept of the teacher prevails: they have to carry out an equal programme for all pupils, regardless of their background and needs. It is therefore the pupil who has to adapt to the methods and contents, in the non-formal system it is the opposite. In the formal system the selection of the teacher is done according to very strict state laws; a specialist degree with legal value is required, after which it is necessary to participate in selective competitive exams, but there is no specific training for adult education.

There is no training according to the specific background of the student, but according to the different disciplinary skills. While the compulsory school student is forced to go to school and study all the subjects imposed, the adult makes a conscious choice that embraces the entire learning activity: he chooses the discipline, directly or indirectly chooses the teacher, he is free to choose whether to continue or leave the course. The teacher, on the other hand, having no other obligation than to carry out a thematic training course, motivated by the pleasure of being chosen at each lesson by the students, finds it gratifying to adapt to the needs of the latter, adapting topics and methodology to individual learners. All this is a strong point of the non-formal system which, with the above premises, finds itself with a highly motivated and enthusiastic teachers. For a more detailed overview of the trainer's role in e-learning please read the L.U. 1c "New role of the trainer".

## Examples

Look at these examples, and at the same time clarifications of the terminology so that we do not confuse the characteristics of the "learning process" with those of the "contexts" and/or "environments" in which it takes place. We must distinguish:

- Formal contexts of education such as school, vocational training and university, institutionally and organisationally aimed at teaching and learning knowledge, skills and competences, to be assessed and certified in their intermediate and final outcomes;
- Non-formal training contexts such as work organisations or professional associations, where knowledge, skills and competences are developed mainly through learning based on professional relations and practices, but also on training activities of updating and retraining designed ad hoc;
- Informal Educational contexts such as family, cultural-social-sport associations, mass-media and new-media, the system of landscape-artistic-museum offers, musical-theatre-ludic and sporting events, etc., in which people's real lives take place and in which attitudes are cultivated and knowledge, skills and competences are learned, mainly based on experiences and social relations.

## Exercises



We do not keep track of everything we learnt in our life. But we can somehow recognize whether a notion comes a formal, non-formal or informal context. Let's see how.

### Exercise 1: Where did I get that notion from?



Show a learner a map of Europe and choose together a country. Then ask the learner to tell you everything he/she knows about that country. Then ask her/him to tell you whether those notions come from school, from a sport/cultural association he/she is part of, or from a direct experience she/he had or mass media. What needs to be considered?

### Exercise 2: Recognise the system



Get some colored post it notes and a blank sheet of paper on which you can attach them.  
Now ask participants to write down at least one example of learning action they have taken for each system (formal, non-formal, informal). Do it with different colors, it

will help you to better visualize the differences. The way they discover what non-formal education is has followed the principles of non-formal education itself.

## Summary



In this chapter you have learnt the difference between formal, non-formal and informal learning and their different educational context, and also why non-formal learning is considered to have a key role in the educational processes of these fast-changing times.

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