

Three processes of Learning: discipleship & leadership ... Prof Ted Ward*

The principles explained here are my summary of presentations given by Professor Ted Ward at the week-long launch of YWAM's University of the Nations in Lausanne in 1990. These insights have proved to be among the most transformative in our lives and ministries over the subsequent decades. However, in our experience they do not seem to be widely understood.

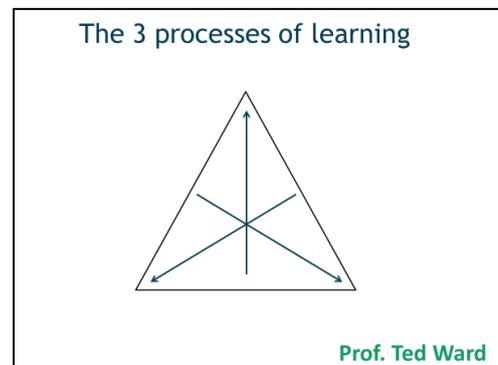
In the introduction to his presentation, Prof. Ted Ward explained that in the field of academic understanding of Educational theory, up until somewhere in the 1950's, there were generally two broad processes or contexts of learning that were commonly identified, described and contrasted. Only around that time was the third process of learning recognised and analysed in its functioning with relation to the other two. In this introduction he stressed that all three processes are equally valuable and important – they just work differently and have contrasting characteristics and outcomes. Further, Jesus clearly used all three in his ministry as recorded in the Gospels.

He also emphasised that he considered the recognition and understanding of this third, most recently classified learning process, was of particular importance to all those involved in the mission and ministry of the church in our diverse and changing times.

A simple diagram to help illustrate the principles

What follows in these diagrams, is our extract of how Prof. Ward summarised a simplified explanation of these three processes or contexts of learning and their inter-relationship. To do this he used the device of a triangle around which he arranged the three processes. We build this up as he did to provide a foundation on which to build these understandings.

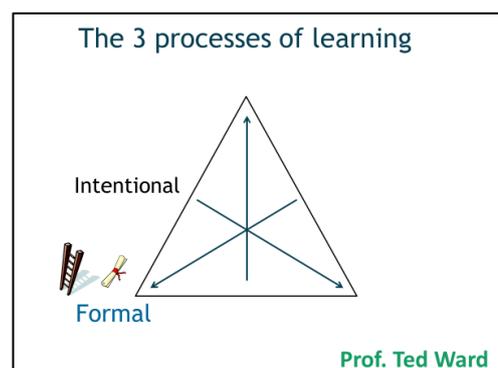
He first explained how the arrangement of the three contexts around the triangle worked. The three broad processes of learning sit at each of the three corners. Then each of the three sides (lines) of the triangle represent a defining characteristic or quality which is shared by the two processes at either end of the side (line). Furthermore, the process across the triangle opposite to each line, ... has the contrasting or opposite defining characteristic. This will be indicated by the arrows across the shape and will become clear as we build up the picture.



Formal Learning Processes (or Context)

The first process, that we most readily think of in Western cultures, when considering education, is Formal Learning. That is what is delivered in the context of an academic institution – a school, college or university. Or equally in most training courses.

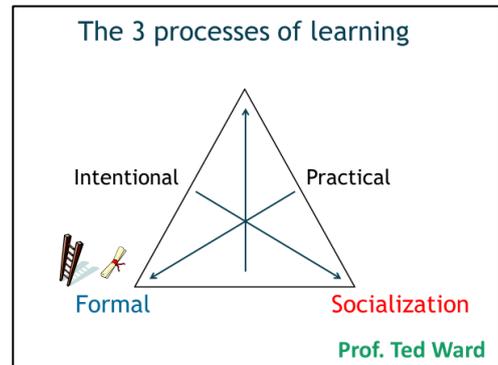
This process has as a defining characteristic, its INTENTIONAL quality. Participants organise their priorities to attend and there is a more or less pre-planned curriculum designed to cover a body of information, principles and theoretical learning. Professor Ward added that typically, formal learning processes are "ladder based". One concept, principle or area building on the next level in a hierarchy of understanding (numbers; addition/multiplication; equations; etc). Further, formal processes are often "qualification driven". Having assessments which lead to accreditations within the academic community and validate achievement beyond it.



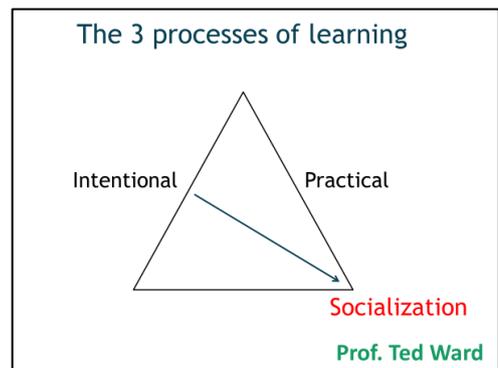
These Formal Learning processes are also the area that educational theory has explored the most with all sorts of insights on aspects such as individual's learning styles and different communication approaches. And one of the great strengths of Formal Learning in terms of its outputs, is the developing of all sort of abilities of comprehension and analysis in participants.

Socialisation Learning processes (or contexts)

Also well known and understood by Education theory, had been this second learning process given the descriptor of Socialisation learning. This describes all that we learn in the everyday of random relationships and community. Prof Ward illustrated this process with the example familiar to all of us, that of learning our mother language. This we all did as infants and children in the natural social contexts of family and village or neighbourhood. We all became experts at expressing ourselves without any formal learning process. We learnt the science of our language later at school in formal contexts.

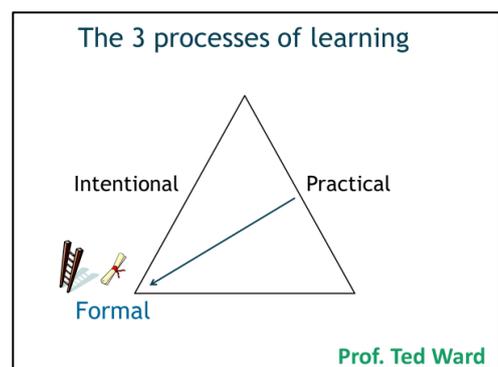


As the growing diagram illustrates with the word along the right side of the triangle, this Socialisation learning is defined by occurring in and through the PRACTICAL context of application in every sort of life event and circumstance. Mum teaches baby the word "spoon" as she wants baby to start feeding themselves! ...and so on and so on.



However, we now begin to see how the arrow across the triangle works. Socialisation's other defining quality is the opposite of that shared by the other two on the left-hand side... it is UNINTENTIONAL. In contrast to formal learning there is no planned family or village curriculum to teach the infant vocabulary, grammar, etc. Its native tongue is absorbed imperceptibly by immersion in the practicalities of life.

As these understandings and the diagram builds up, we can add the contrasting characteristic of Formal learning processes/contexts to its opposite side (right) ... This is indicated by the arrow across the shape to the word 'practical'. The second defining characteristic of Formal learning is that it is NOT PRACTICALLY based. It is certainly not that formal learning in the classroom context is impractical... Done well, it uniquely delivers understanding, comprehension and the ability to think and analyse. But it is not in a context or process that is principally organised around practical goals and activities.



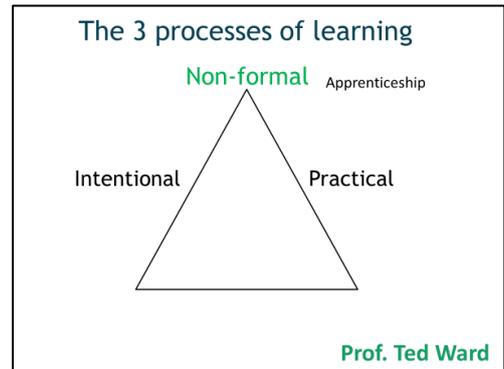
With these first two processes explained, the scene is set to complete the triangle with the more recently incorporated educational insights of the third broad process/context.

Prof Ward explained somewhat apologetically that the best title that they, the educational fraternity, had come up with for this third process/context, was by distinction from, rather than as a positive descriptor... namely they entitle them NON-FORMAL. So, we now explore his explanation, descriptions and defining characteristics of this third category of processes.

Non-Formal Learning Processes (or Contexts)

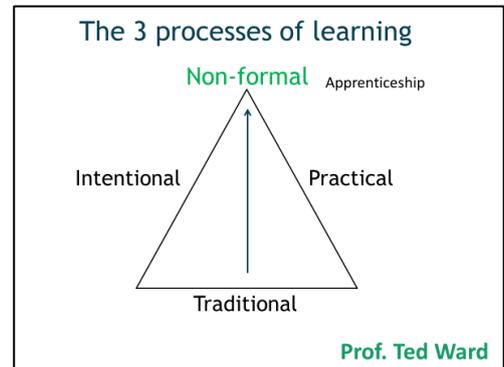
We recognise that these processes and their context were obviously always alive and well known long before this understanding and analysis was developed. Most typically this process of learning happens in the context of APRENTICESHIP. The apprentice carpenter yoked alongside the master craftsperson for training and formation in the craft and calling.

Once again, we quickly see how this Learning process has defining characteristics shared with both the other two. It shares (on the right side of the triangle) the fact that this learning is being gained in the practical context, as with socialisation. Apprentices learning principally by doing... in the workshop. The theory is explained but it's the putting into practice that delivers the primary learning. It's about skills, values and attitudes that are passed on by impartation from the master, processed through imitation and application. It also shares with Formal processes (on the left side of the triangle), the fact that this learning is intentional. Its tenon joints to make a table.



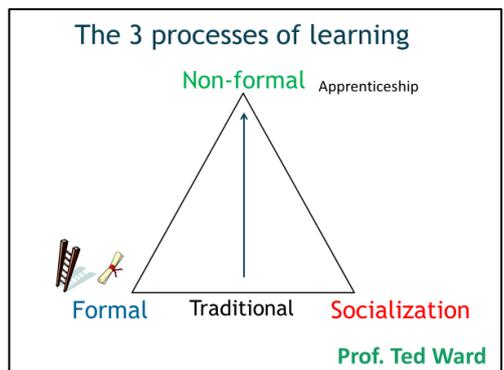
Here, another revelation moment for me came as Prof Ted explained how the academic educational fraternity had sought to identify the prime defining characteristic that sits along the final side of the triangle (the base). This quality would be the opposite of what is delivered by non-Formal learning... by apprenticeship.

Their conclusion was that what non-Formal learning opens up, is the capacity to innovate and develop NON-TRADITIONAL outcomes. And it would appear really significant for our post-Christendom context, that these learning processes particularly support the exploration of new possibilities



The final quality shared by Formal and Socialisation learning

Now as well as being the opposite for non-Formal learning processes, this final defining characteristic is the one that educational academics recognised as being common to both Formal and Socialisation processes. Their analysis and reflection led them to conclude that the shared characteristic of these two learning processes on the bottom side of the triangle, is the sense in which they tend to build on and reinforce TRADITIONAL patterns and norms. Socialisation being the primary vehicle of producing the values and world view of the family or village.

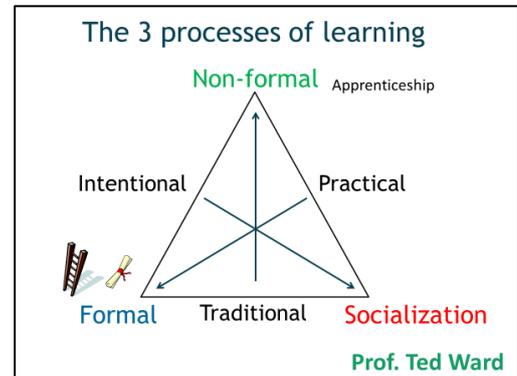


Prof Ward suggested that the same is true of the Formal, academic context. Certainly, we have noted that many young disciples passionate about the need for change in the institutional church to deliver mission, often come out of years of residential Seminary Formal training, paradoxically, now just as passionate about preserving the denominational patterns and traditions.

Completing the Picture

So, up to now, we have built up the picture by showing just parts of the overall diagram as they relate to each of the three processes of learning in turn. Now we put it all together in the figures on this page to illustrate how all three processes inter-relate. Each Learning Process/Context has its two defining characteristics named on the two sides either side of their point. And they have the opposite characteristic of the side across the triangle from them.

In his conclusions, Prof Ted Ward now made the point that whilst Jesus used all three processes... he worked in each of the contexts, when it came to forming missional disciples, the emphasis was on Socialisation ...come and see! (John 1:39) "come follow me" (at the start of each synoptic) ... and also on Non-Formal apprenticeship processes and contexts with the twelve and seventy-two. He modelled his ministry of the Kingdom with their assistance and practical involvement. And this fitted with the prevailing practices of the Hebraic rabbinical model.



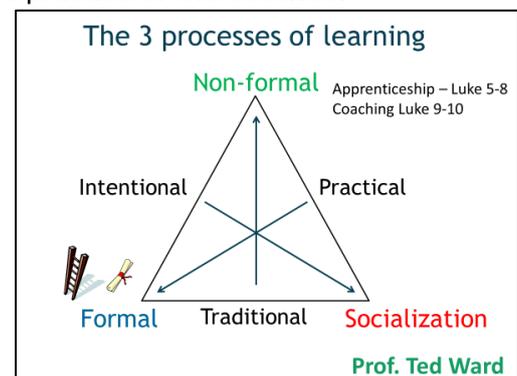
In the light of this, Ted Ward led all this through to a challenge for all missional leaders with training roles. Namely, that with a Christian goal of producing disciples and leaders in mission who are agents of Kingdom change in the prevailing culture and worldview... a priority emphasis should be maintained on Jesus' Non-Formal learning processes and contexts.

Non-Formal processes include Apprenticeship and Coaching

Finally, we would add some reflections of our own that we have made over the decades since, as we have tried to work out these transforming principles and insights. Whilst Prof Ward illustrated Non-Formal learning with the example of apprenticeship, we believe that COACHING is another almost equally important example. In an exactly similar way as we have described the characteristics of the non-formal... coaching operates with an intentional regime and is entirely focussed on the practical context and the practice of the coachee.

Interestingly, there is typically a progression in the non-Formal process from APPRENTICESHIP, when the master and apprentice work in the same location side by side as the master provides the model for imitation. To COACHING, which typically is delivered by an outside coach/mentor, intentionally reviewing the coachee's development in the practical enterprise.

And again, we relate this insight to the ministry of Jesus, particularly as recorded in Luke's gospel account. We can see this really important developmental shift taking place. In Luke chapters 5 to 8 we see a primary phase in which Jesus and the disciples are engaged together daily in practical ministry and mission and they observe him and he instructs them as assistant/apprentices... "you feed them!" (Matt 14:16; Mk 6:37 & Luke 9:13). The context and process are exactly that of apprenticeship. Then in chapters 9 and 10 there is the very significant shift to Jesus sending out, without his presence, first the twelve and then the seventy-two. And then on their return, there is the classic coaching process of questions and reflection together, as part of a review of their solo application of his commission. Jesus himself giving feedback of encouragement and challenge. There is also the implication of a multiplying process of apprenticing and coaching as the original 12 can become 72 as they are deployed in pairs, each gathering their own 12 as Jesus modelled, and so becoming 72! A combination of apprenticeship followed by coaching is intrinsic to the dynamics of multiplication which the Jesus movement has had at its heart ever since (Matt 28:18).



Some further observations and conclusions

And here is another crucial reflection on these insights and understandings. In the Western church there has long been recognition of the essential need to recover intentional discipleship which has been very weak in past decades. However, the response has been to develop all sorts of discipleship "COURSES". Almost all based on a FORMAL learning context and process. It would seem clear to us from the gospels that in the Kingdom mission context of the Gospels, Jesus primarily employed socialisation and non-formal processes in his forming of disciples. Our working definition of discipleship is... "a transformational journey with Jesus to become like him." Evidence is overwhelming that gaining all sorts of biblical knowledge has limited output on such a lifechanging process. It is achieved most powerfully by "immersion" and "impartation... life on life". And these are delivered by Socialisation and Non-Formal apprenticeship and coaching within the practical mission enterprise, rather than the classroom.

So, we would argue that for discipleship as for missional leadership, these processes and contexts of Apprenticeship and Coaching are of prime importance. And this is often a radical change of existing understanding and practice.

We would add as a final observation, that in the past couple of decades, processes of "collaborative learning" described as "Learning Communities" have also been increasingly recognised as having a powerful effect in supporting teams of leaders on a journey of innovation in response to a rapidly changing culture and context. These Learning Communities have developed intentional processes to facilitate the exchange of insights and ideas within a structured framework. These frameworks serve to enable teams to journey towards the development of plans for which the teams are accountable for implementation and for their associated learning. It is our observation that these Learning Community processes of learning in fact employ a process that is principally based on Non-formal learning but in a context that also enables greater Socialisation learning.

*** Bob Hopkins expanding on original material by Prof Ted Ward, Education Dept., Michigan State University, 1990.**