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**PILZ, Matthias (Ed.):**

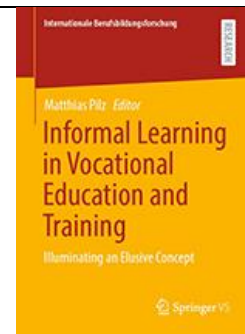
**Informal Learning in Vocational Education and Training.**

**Illuminating an Elusive Concept.**

Wiesbaden: Springer VS 2024.

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**Rezension von VERA BRAUN, Universität Hamburg**

The book is a compilation of contributions, which were produced in the framework of the 4th International G.R.E.A.T Conference in Cologne in 2022, focusing on a concept that, as the editor himself elucidates in the foreword and as the subtitle implies, is fuzzy: informal learning. Because of what it describes and what it stands for, it cannot be defined precisely and is hard to capture – its nature is *informal*.

The relevance of informal learning for vocational education and training (VET) and learning for vocational activities is beyond question. Harris (cf. 60), drawing on various authors, estimates the proportion of informal learning in the VET sector to be between 70 and 90%.

The book is not intended as a comprehensive, systematic overview of the subject matter. Instead, it is geared towards readers seeking illuminating and valuable insights into informal learning concerning specific inquiries, countries, or aspects. They will appreciate the diverse contributions and perspectives that the book offers as enriching.

Building on a preceding article that introduces the topic, the subsequent contributions are organized into four cohesive thematic areas:

1. Conceptual Approaches and Informal learning at the System Level,
2. Informal Learning in the Formal Education System,
3. Informal learning in an Informal Sector/Environment,
4. Assessment, Measurement and Validation of Informal Learning.

However, it is challenging to establish entirely distinct categories for the various contributions. A closing article completes the discussion and rounds off the anthology. Reviewing comments along the 4 major chapters can be found in Hordern's review (2024). I will address key aspects of some rather generally oriented contributions and offer potential readers an overview of what facets of informal learning they can expect to find in the articles.

Fuller's opening contribution presents a proposal for a comprehensive, empirically-based theoretical framework for studies on work-based learning – a core category of vocational learning that is closely associated with informal learning, as it occurs within real-world contexts. Accordingly, 3 key dimensions need to be considered, the three C's: Context (the workplace),

Characteristics (organisational and pedagogical features and practices) and Capacity (the possibilities and limitations of trainers and teachers).

In the book's second contribution, which draws from the history of VET theory, Gonon elucidates that informal learning has a longstanding presence in academic discourse and within the context of VET. This underscores Gessler's assertion in the Series Editor's Introduction that "[i]nformal learning is the most original and natural form of VET" (see V). Consequently, informal learning should not be regarded as a phenomenon exclusive to our contemporary era, which is characterized by increasingly formalized and pedagogized approaches to VET (cf. 34), bringing its own distinct advantages and disadvantages.

From this point forward, the book delves into more specific facets of informal learning.

Gericke's contribution about the English and the German cases illustrates that informal learning processes are influenced by aspects and values related to (school) culture and resulting in country-specific differences that researchers must consider. In line with this insight, the following countries are analysed by different contributions:

- Australia (Harris)
- England (Gericke)
- Estonia (Loogma & Aasa)
- German Togo (Adick)
- Germany (Fischer, Gericke, Probst & Annen)
- Ghana (Hermann & Olesen)
- Hungary (Benke et al.)
- India (Rengan & Vadivelu, Pilz)
- Japan (Sato & Ryan)
- Nigeria (Wolf & Lindemann)
- Poland (Benke et al.)
- South Africa (Hermann & Olesen)
- Spain (Marhuenda-Fluixá).

Additionally, Souto-Otero examines the European context, with a focus on non-formal and formal learning. Haolader and Shimu offer an international comparison covering five countries: Bangladesh, Türkiye, Malaysia, Germany, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Differences and specificities can also be seen depending on the group of people analysed and their relationship to systemic contexts.

The following special groups of people are investigated with regard to informal learning:

- Vulnerable people (Marhuenda-Fluixá)
- VET teachers (Loogma & Aasa, Gericke)
- International students (Sato & Ryan).

With entrepreneurial competency, one contribution focuses on a specific area of expertise (Rengan & Vadivelu). Gericke (car mechatronics) and Pilz (fishermen, motor mechanics, pineapple farmers, street food vendors, tailors) focus on selected professions, while Wolf & Lindemann examine the informal economy.

On the visibility, validation and recognition of informal learning, there are contributions exploring

- policy approaches (Hermann & Olesen)
- qualification frameworks (Haolader & Shimu)
- knowledge management (Probst & Annen)
- self-assessment with the AiKomPass web tool (Fischer).

Throughout the contributions, the many facets and dimensions of informal learning not only reveal its elusiveness, but also the inherent “ambiguity” (Harris, see 59).

In the final article, King invites the reader on a personal journey illustrating the role of informal learning in conjunction with chance and serendipity in shaping career and research trajectories. This article exemplifies the significant value that informal learning can provide due to its informal nature. Consequently, one is left to ask, in a somewhat heretical yet entirely justified manner alongside Harris (see 59):

"To what extent should informal learning be defined? Isn't it the case that the more one tries to place boundaries around it and research what it is, the more one runs the risk of formalising it into something which it is not?"

## Reference

Hordern, J. (2024). Book Review: Informal learning in vocational education and training: edited by M. Pilz, Springer VS, 2024, ISBN: 978-3-658-44340-5. In: Journal of Vocational Education & Training, 1–2. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2024.2417581>

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