

Force feeding or free choice? Applying free choice learning in the university context

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With the deregulation of the university sector and the move towards broad Melbourne-model degrees, students have more choices to make about which universities, degrees and units they enrol in. This has led to students being conceptualised as ‘consumers’, but from an educational perspective it may be more accurate to say that students are moving from directed learning to a free choice learning environment. Free choice adult learning has been extensively researched over the last few decades, particularly in museum studies, but the findings rarely cross over to tertiary institutions. One of the key features of free choice learning is the learner has control over what, where and how they learn as part of a lifelong learning process. We propose that recognising students as free choice learners is essential to creating effective, efficient and engaging units of study at the tertiary level.

In free choice learning, learning is typically conceptualised as a dialogue among the physical, social and personal contexts. That is, students will achieve different learning outcomes depending on the physical environment they are being taught in, the people they are learning from and with, and the background knowledge and expectations that they bring to the class. Free choice learning research would suggest that every student will learn different things from the same class. Comparatively, captive learning considers that all students will progress at the same pace and learn the exact same material. By recognising that learning is specific to an individual’s context, we can start to answer questions such as: Why are unit outlines and course outcomes so important for student satisfaction? Why is it so difficult for students to apply their learning in the workplace? How is student learning influenced by their experiences outside of university? Why are threshold concepts so hard to master? Why do we see individual and cohort differences in learning from the same class?

In this session, we will discuss the impact of the physical, social and personal context and how we believe lessons learned from informal education research can be applied in a formal educational institution. Participants are invited to debate our conceptualisation of the student learning experience and advance ideas about how applying the free choice model of learning might challenge their current teaching practice.