

Developing the art and science of free-choice learning

Higher education institutions such as Oregon State University represent the pinnacle of schooling, the “formal” education process by which people learn an important part of what they know. But 90 percent or more of a person’s life is spent outside of school, and “informal” learning makes up a much larger share of what people know. For the most part, however, informal learning has not received much attention in academia. At OSU, that’s beginning to change.

In 2003, Oregon Sea Grant and the Institute for Learning Innovation of Annapolis, Maryland, formed a partnership to establish a program in “free-choice learning.” Free-choice learning, explains the director of the Institute for Learning Innovation, John Falk, is a more inclusive term for what’s often called “informal” learning.

“Lynn Dierking [Associate Director of the Institute for Learning Innovation] and I suggested the term *free-choice learning* as a better way to describe the learning that occurs when the individual chooses what, where, when, how, and with whom to learn,” said Falk, who is a nationally recognized expert in this emerging field.



Visitors at the OSU Hatfield Marine Science Visitor Center explore a “touch tank,” one of several free-choice learning exhibits at the facility.

“It is the most common type of learning that people engage in,” he said. “We learn from museums, libraries, the Internet, television, film, books, newspapers, radio, and other people. Free-choice learning is so common that we have taken it for granted, despite its being as vital as the learning that occurs in school and in the workplace.”

The Institute is partnering with Sea Grant because informal education has been an important function of Sea Grant for 37 years, said the program’s director, Robert Malouf.

“Sea Grant established free-choice education activities at the OSU Marine Science Center [HMSC] in Newport in 1966,” Malouf noted. Today Sea Grant

manages and partly staffs the Visitor Center at HMSC. Sea Grant conceives of this popular venue, which attracts approximately 150,000 visitors annually, as a “laboratory for the study of informal or free-choice learning,” Malouf said.

“We are a university, and our role at HMSC therefore should go beyond offering free-choice learning opportunities to the public. We should also strive to improve the art and science of how the

public learns, through research and through the training of educators. That is exactly what we intend to do,” Malouf said.

The Institute for Learning Innovation (Institute) is uniquely qualified for the partnership with OSU. The Institute was established in 1986 as a not-for-profit research and development organization committed to providing leadership in free-choice learning. Despite the focus of its attention on nonschool education, the Institute’s professional staff comprises six who hold Ph.D.s, including Falk, whose joint doctorate in biology and education is from the University of California, Berkeley.

The goal of their program’s collaboration, said Malouf and



Falk, is the ambitious one of establishing an internationally prominent center for the study and facilitation of free-choice learning. They envision the collaboration as being broader than activities at HMSC and involving other OSU colleges and programs as well as external partners.

The collaboration initially is emphasizing science, particularly marine science, but opportunities and needs for research and education exist in many other areas, said Malouf and Falk.

Falk and several Sea Grant faculty are developing a number of initial projects which are expected to be unveiled in late 2004 and 2005. John Falk and Lynn Dierking have been granted courtesy faculty appointments at OSU, with the rank of professor.

Meanwhile, Sea Grant has also hired other key individuals to move its free-choice initiative forward.

Shawn Rowe, the new marine education and learning specialist with the Sea Grant Extension program, fills a position at HMSC vacated by the retirement of Vicki Osis, longtime marine educator there.



From left: Lynn Dierking, assistant director of the Institute for Learning Innovation; John Falk, director of the Institute; and Robert Malouf, director of Oregon Sea Grant.

Rowe received his doctorate in 2002 from Washington University in St. Louis, and his dissertation focused on how people learn in groups in museum settings. A senior colleague praised Rowe's research, saying that it "charted

new territory in the research on learning in informal environments."

Rowe's personal experience with museums and science centers includes projects at the St. Louis Science Center, Missouri History Museum, and in the Ukraine. One of his particular interests, said

recent experience as programs coordinator for the OSU SMILE (Science and Math Investigative Learning Experiences) program. Feldberg was awarded the Knauss Sea Grant Fellowship, during which she worked as staff scientist with the GLOBE program in Washington, D.C.

Rowe, is in developing "culturally appropriate activities" for people who don't usually go to museums.

If such people feel comfortable and included when they go to science centers, over time they might more readily pursue further education in science fields, he said.

In September 2004, Sea Grant also hired Melissa Feldberg to the new role of Education Program Development

Coordinator. Feldberg will act as representative, liaison, and catalyst for Sea Grant education programs throughout the university, region, and nation, said Jay Rasmussen, Sea Grant Extension program leader. "Much of her job will be developing strategies, and aligning and coordinating education program elements in collaborative endeavors and initiatives," he said.

Feldberg comes to Sea Grant with degrees from Wesleyan University and OSU and

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