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# Non-Formal Education as a Foundation for Active Learning

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## Abstract

This chapter will include several examples of how non-formal education serves as a foundation for active learning. It will relate how non-formal education organizations such as the scouting movement through the World Organization of the Scout Movement (WOSM), works to engage young people to be developed holistically. It will also mention non-formal active learning strategies and their relation to semiotic and esthetic stimuli. The role of semiotics in non-formal active learning will be exemplified, and the article will mention how self-commitment may be created when using non-formal education and active learning. Finally, it will be discussed how dialogism takes part in this process.

**Keywords:** non-formal education, active learning, semiotics, aesthesis, dialogism, embodied cognition, scouting, scout method

## 1. Introduction

The traditional Socratic method (method of Elenchus), has been a form of cooperative argumentative dialog used at learning institutions to stimulate critical thinking for many years. With the development of new technologies in the past 100 years, teaching and learning methods have evolved to add new perspectives and theories. These events have caused lecturers and students to become more active and participative, creating new ways to interact. Nowadays the learning process includes active learning to avoid students receiving passive information that does not relate to their needs. There are considerable studies involving formal education and active learning, but in the case of non-formal education, the information is more limited.

The chapter will describe how non-formal education is used to achieve active learning. The scouting method will be explained and discussed since the scouting movement is the largest youth non-formal active learning community in the world. Subjects such as how semiotic take an important role in this method will be mentioned, and also how the scouting movement uses esthetics and dialogism to achieve the scout's (learners) development goals.

## 2. The evolution of non-formal education

Non-formal education has been described [1] as a flexible education process with a defined methodology and most important, capable of adapting to the needs

and interests of students. In this kind of process, time is not a pre-established factor because it is defined by the student's pace, and it does not seek to provide a formal certification or scholar degree.

To understand the development of non-formal education, it is required to describe formal and informal education. Formal education is a model that has a systematic organized and structured curriculum, which is rather rigid. This process necessarily involves the presence of a teacher, a student, and an institution. Educational institutions administer the curricula and the final goal is to provide some kind of certification or degree [1].

Informal education, on the other hand, has no defined structure, it has no curricula and it takes place through experience. It consists of accidental or purposeful ways of collaborating with other persons and acquiring new information and everyday skills [1].

In the beginning, the boundaries between formal, non-formal, and informal education were well defined, but changes are being made due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the normal method evolution. Formal education has adopted non-formal methods to solve some of the online demands of students. At the same time, non-formal education is now using assessment recognition programs (ARCNIL) to get a certification. Svetlik [2], relates that non-formal education has become a social issue. It is mentioned that in order to achieve a more efficient knowledge transfer, formal education has become increasingly dependent, and organized. Non-formal education provides relief of bureaucracy issues. Additionally, non-formal education provides knowledge, but the formalization requirements have increased due to the demand for qualified employees. This has led in some cases to the need of creating some sort of certification for this process.

New knowledge demands require internal labor, and training markets allow the development of individuals with knowledge and skills as core workers. Organizations have established training using non-formal methods that transfer knowledge, and most important "skills" to workers. Svetlik [2], mentions that the assumption that formal knowledge and training could fluently bring formal curriculum and convey students, has been misled. It is argued that this is because teachers tend to overlook interdisciplinary knowledge. There might also be communication barriers between schools or researchers, also some companies might resist sharing firm-specific knowledge to preserve a competitive advantage. Polanyi, 1996 cited by Svetlik [2] mentions: "it is difficult to express a great deal of knowledge in an explicit form, and convey it with school teaching methods" Ideological biases and blindness can also be experimented by formal curricula. Finally, access to certain information can remain restricted due to a limited number of participants.

The information presented so far, leads to believe that formal education must be complemented with non-formal education, to seek not only knowledge but the development of real-life "in situ" skills. Since non-formal education is based on "learn by doing" it develops real-life skills by allowing participants to experience their learning, this is where active learning becomes an important factor for knowledge to take place. To exemplify the relation between non-formal education and active learning, this chapter will describe concepts as they are applied in the World Organization of the Scout Movement (WOSM), which is the largest non-formal education organization in the world.

### **3. Non-formal education and active learning**

Due to the problems of strategies that formal education programs may experiment to accomplish an integrated formation, non-formal education has been essential.

Educational institutions or other types of organizations, favor goal achievements in different areas to contribute to self-realization of the individual.

Nowadays, young generations have a lack of motor, emotional, and social skills. It seems they are more aggressive, anxious, dependent, and less creative [3]. These are some of the reasons why it is imperative that children, adolescents, and young adults are submerged in extracurricular activities. These activities not only give them tools for life, but they also contribute to the awareness of their learning process, so it can be applied in a formal-educational environment.

### **3.1 Active learning**

Learning is a process that implies the way in which people acquire knowledge, or modify the knowledge and skills they possess, in order to improve their task performance [4]. It is an active mechanism that depends on the learner's cognitive activities. It is facilitated by the analysis and reformulation of previous knowledge, and it results from the interaction and adaptation with the environment, in order to get holistically integrated into the world [5].

The Experiential Learning Theory described by Kolb, D. in 1984 [6], enhances the role of experience in the learning process, and its transformative power to create knowledge. It complements the benefits of active learning since the latter is defined as an engagement of activities to assess people's understanding and skills. This enables them to handle a particular situation, and keep active in their learning by evaluating, analyzing, and taking action [7]. In this manner, it is important to acknowledge the benefits of deep, meaningful learning, facilitated by this process, since it is a more effective means of education.

## **4. Scouting in education**

Scouting is a worldwide movement that involves more than 50 million people, distributed in over 200 countries and territories. It is the biggest youth organization in the world, and its mission is to contribute to the self-fulfillment of individuals in order to help them play a constructive role in society [8]. This is made possible by the implementation of a non-formal education process that helps develop capabilities throughout life, in order to make autonomous, supportive, responsible, and committed individuals [9]. Although in some countries or territories, scouting is not necessarily related to academic activities, in some places, scouting is part of the extracurricular activities of elementary (elementary school), secondary (junior high school), and high (senior high school) [10–12].

Today its educational program involves the holistic development of the children, adolescents, and young adults in six basic areas: affectivity, character, creativity, sociability, physical conditioning, and spirituality. Affectivity development is gained by the exploration, identification, and management of emotions, as well as the recognition of their wise use of liberty. Character growth is related to their ability to be congruent with their principles and values. Creativity is obtained through imagination, finding different routes of problem-solving, innovating, project development. In general terms, practicing their thought process. Sociability is developed by solidarity, meaning the identification of common interests and goals through empathy, thus creating a sense of belonging to a social circle. Physical conditioning involves not only the practice of physical activity, acknowledgment of the individual's limits, and general good health habits, but also contact with nature. This is a very important part of scouting, since it encourages to appreciate the environment's resources, and how to respect and use them intelligently. Spirituality is gained by

the identification of self as a small but important part of the world, creating a sense of inner peace and peace with others.

Since the foundation of the scout movement over 110 years ago, the educational program has evolved to attend the youth's needs, adapting itself to fulfill the requirements of the constantly changing generations. Nevertheless, the way that the program is implemented is based on a system that has been essentially the same since it was originated, and it is key to the organization's success: the scout method.

#### 4.1 The scout method as a way of active learning

The scout method (SM) is defined by the WOSM as a “system of progressive self-education activities”. It is based on the interaction of equally important elements that work together as a cohesive system. The elements are:

1. *Community involvement*: Active exploration and commitment to communities and the wider world, fostering greater appreciation and understanding between people.
2. *Nature*: Learning opportunities in the outdoors encourage a better understanding of the relationships with the environment.
3. *Learn by doing*: The use of practical actions (real-life experiences) and reflection(s) to facilitate ongoing learning and development.
4. *Symbolic framework*: A unifying structure of themes and symbols to facilitate learning and the development of a unique identity as a Scout.
5. *The scout promise and law*: A personal voluntary commitment to a set of shared values, which are the foundation of everything a Scout does and wants to be. The Promise and Law have a central role in the Scout Method.
6. *Personal progression*: A progressive learning journey focused on motivating and challenging an individual to continually develop, through a wide variety of learning opportunities.
7. *Adult support*: Adults facilitating and supporting young people to create learning opportunities, and through a culture of partnership to turn these opportunities into meaningful experiences.
8. *Team systems*: The use of small teams as a way to participate in collaborative learning, with the aim of developing effective teamwork, interpersonal skills, leadership as well as building a sense of responsibility and belonging.

Felder & Brent [13] mention that active learning is a way in which participants assume a dynamic role. They retain more knowledge when they experiment and reflect than just receiving passive information through their senses. Active learning takes time since participants are expected to take action, demonstrate, make models or review information, and finally review their findings.

The SM encourages participants to take an active role, develop skills, work by teams, learn by doing, and most important to make a self-commitment. This aspect becomes fundamental since participants oath to do their best. This concept reinforces active learning since it is the active learner who seeks to develop his full potential.



Another fundamental issue is the work of small groups, young people get to create their own natural team in which they are all friends and each scout has the opportunity to become a leader. These friendship bonds usually last a lifetime since they do not form regular teams as in formal education. Scout teams called patrols, live experiences that mark them for life, and the stronger the experiences, the stronger the bond that unites them. The patrol becomes the fundamental place in which active learning takes place, they decide which activities to do and ask the adult leaders to help them reach their goals. Patrols interact with each other and constitute a troop and the adults only act as facilitators and advisors for their activities.

#### 4.2 Scouting contributions to the United Nations 2030 agenda

WOSM has been exploring international development programs in which scouts have been earning Badges by developing projects that are created to solve the needs of the communities where they live. These programs are called “Better World framework”. It’s based on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGS). UN [14] states “The Sustainable Development Goals are the blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all. They address the global challenges we face, including poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, peace, and justice.”

WOSM is part of the United Nations (UN), therefore the adoption of these goals was an organization prerogative. This action created a worldwide active learning community in which youngsters collaborate in a very dynamic way with scouts from other countries. Global awareness became evident and the following international programs were created:

- *Messengers of peace.* It’s a scouting initiative, which encourages scouts to do community service and tell the story of their experience in order to inspire others.
- *Scouts of the world.* Scouting encourages young adults to take action by learning about local problems, creating a service project, and then taking action in the form of voluntary service.
- *Dialog for peace.* By recognizing that the world is diverse, the scouting movement encourages scouts to learn to find similarities unnoticed before and even come to respect and sometimes appreciate differences to find inclusive solutions to shared problems.
- *Interreligious dialog.* This program shows scouts that each form of religion must be respected and its active practice encouraged, scouts may have the opportunity to develop the spirit of mutual goodwill and understanding.
- *Scouts Go Solar.* It’s an initiative that shows scouts how to harvest solar power and seek to use natural sources of energy.
- *The World Scout Environment Program.* It has been designed to provide scouts with environmental awareness and take action to connect with nature in order to stop pollution and protect the planet.
- *UNESCO World Heritage Recognition.* It’s a program that seeks to recognize scouts that promote sustainable development actions.
- *He for She Program.* This program sponsored by the UN teaches scouts that women and men are equal and fundamental to achieve gender equality and allow women empowerment.

### **4.3 Challenges in the implementation of an educational program**

Scouting experience in different parts of the world is unique. The culture, economic, social, and security status, influence the ideal execution of the program.

Culture plays a transcendental role since not all educational objectives can be developed in the same manner, in countries that have distinctive sets of values, traditions, and customs. Even in the same country, language and family dynamics in different ethnic groups can influence the capability of developing certain goals in an area of interest. This is balanced by the program adaptation in conditions where the culture is not only respected but promoted as well. In many cases, economic status determines the permanence in the movement, where the administrative and operative activities have a cost. As with other institutions, membership fees are adjusted according to budgets, and economic strategies at different structural levels of the institution are suggested in order to minimize the financial burden. Social status, determined by the relationship between people of a broad spectrum of ages and genders, influences their capability of being involved in decision making and their opportunities to develop leadership skills. From the moment their cognitive abilities provide a sense of judgment on the youth, their participation in decision making organs is promoted and guided by the adult volunteers that facilitate their education. Nevertheless, there are still areas of opportunity, inequality is still present in different facets since it is a condition in evolution all around the globe. Security status affects the decision-making process. An inadequate satisfaction of basic necessities such as food and health sets aside the educational activities or modifies their application strategies. A practical example is a condition derived from the Covid-19 pandemic, where in the best-case scenario, people have to adapt to an online environment in order to carry on their education. But since there are areas of personal growth that involve social interaction and physical contact, the program execution gets compromised and it's more difficult to deliver.

The holistic character of scouting is determined by the growth of different areas of the being. But since its educational program is a balanced set of activities within and outside the scouting environment, there is much to consider in terms of its effectiveness influenced by the social and physical environment status.

## **5. Semiotics, non-formal education, and active learning**

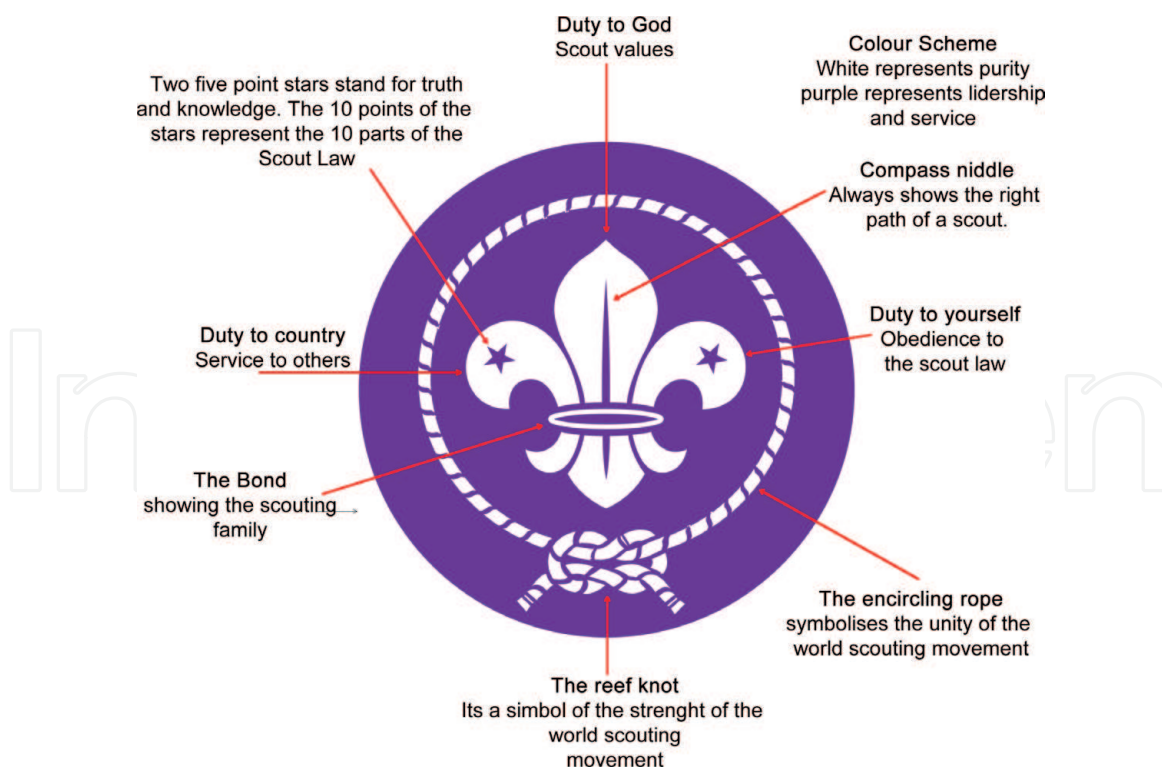
Friedman & Thellefsen [15] define semiotics as a way to represent knowledge using symbols, this refers to the production and conversion of meaning through the use of ideograms, images, or symbols. These authors mention that there are several systems used to organize and represent knowledge. They imply that a symbolic language may fulfill the following roles:

An interpretative approach, in which each individual might attribute meaning to a symbol by making a correlation between the symbol and some relevant event. This might include a socio-cognitive approach, semiotics, and pragmatics.

A descriptive/objectivist approach, where the learning process is guided by a facilitator and might include cognitive science, linguistics, and concept theory.

Non-formal education as it is used by the WOSM, uses both of the previous roles with one difference.

The objectivist approach defines the use of specific symbols that transfer knowledge. The meaning of these symbols has been defined by scouting authorities. Since non-formal education as used by the WOSM, has very well-defined educational goals, "badges" have been developed by National Scout Organizations (NSO) around the world to be awarded to youngsters that have achieved an educational



**Figure 1.**  
*World scout emblem explained. Copyright WOSM.*

objective. This badge is the formal recognition of achievement by the NSO and it is known by the international scouting community. This acknowledgment represents an extra stimulus on the youngster and reinforces the non-formal knowledge acquisition process. The objectivist approach defines the extrinsic representation of the badge. The rules that the youngsters need to comply with to get this badge and the acquaintance that young people are expected to have.

The interpretative approach represents the intrinsic meaning of the achievement. This is one of the most important tools of non-formal education, that has been implemented by the WOSM. Most of these achievement badges are delivered in a ceremonial environment which adds meaning to the occasion. Complex symbolic frameworks are created so youngsters receive an unforgettable ceremony. In this process, the personal esthetic meaning gets added to the learning experience.

The perfect example of semiotics it's the world scout emblem (fleur de lis) it is worn by scouts and scout leaders around the world to indicate their membership. The Scouting movement founder, Lord Robert Baden Powell of Gilwell, selected this emblem (**Figure 1**) to represent scouts around the world.

As you can appreciate, the world crest is an ideogram that receives an interpretative approach, this interpretation changes depending on which national scout organization uses the emblem. In Latin America National Scout Organizations, this crest also represents the scout oath, and the meaning attributed to it does not represent only an objectivist approach but it goes much further since it becomes enriched by an interpretative meaning often surrounded by an esthetic environment.

## 6. Esthetics and non-formal education

Casey, et al. [16] mention that an esthetic experience is lived and felt individually, and it relates to a sensory experience in which the person establishes beauty standards. It is a process where the esthetic object exists to be perceived by the audiences. Spectators become witnesses of various forms of sensory data input that



is found pleasing to the senses. The important part is that each esthetic experience gets completed only in the consciousness of the spectator, it is an active perceptual engagement between the object and the spectator. It is the personal perception, reflection, and feelings of the person who is experiencing the esthetic phenomenon.

Non-formal education as applied by the WOSM provides designed environments to exploit subjectivity. This allows the viewers to become an active part of the action, favoring the appearance of feelings that will be processed by the participant as embodied cognition. This will allow the youngsters to include high-level mental constructs and perform various cognitive tasks that will add personal meaning to the occasion. The SM gets enriched when youngsters not only get recognition for their work but also create personal bonds with other scouts and develop feelings associated with the events in which they were immersed.

Added esthetic value can be found not only in the meaning of the badge given to the youngsters but also by asking their loved ones to be present. In this way, family and friends can be present throughout the entire educational process and provide continuous support.

## **7. Dialogism and how non-formal education helps**

Jamail-Nesari [17] cites Bakhtin, M. when he defines dialogism as the process in which meaning is evolved out of interactions among the author, the work, and the listener. These elements are affected by the contexts in which they are placed. Bakhtin argues that understanding cannot be reached if a monologism approach is used, since it will only show an objectified world that corresponds to a single and unified consciousness. Bakhtin comments that monologs turn off the process of dialog, but are often used by formal education as the dominant approach for educational situations since education cannot be purely monological because there is always another perspective present in the classroom. Bakhtin proposes a different approach called Dialogism.

Jamail-Nesari [17] mentions that dialogism is a model of conversation used to practice speaking and provide examples of language usage. Bakhtin cited by Jamail-Nesari [17] proposes a different meaning for dialogism. It is mentioned “Any utterance, whether spoken or written, that people use in communication with each other is internally dialogic”. For Bakhtin dialog exists not only in spoken words but also in all sorts of expressions, movements, and interactions made to communicate information. Bakhtin proposes that dialogism is a process in which all participants must communicate with each other, there is always room for arguing because dialogism seeks that every person expresses a point of view. This process allows a great deal of freedom for interaction among participants, Bakhtin called this process polyphony (multivoicedness).

Non-formal Education as used by WOSM develops polyphony on different scales. The first one and most basic is when the youngsters get to pick their small group (part of the scouting method). Scouts not only choose their team but also their leader and the rules of their patrol, this is done eminently through dialog. Youngsters assign a formal definition of the duties of each member and seek to fulfill them at any time (meaning that scouts will always try to follow the scout principles). This is where most of the active learning occurs, right inside the smallest group, because each patrol member must work directly with other members to develop projects and seek to enhance their knowledge of various subjects. The next level called council level is where different groups get together in a specific region. At this level, Polyphony is worked in a different way through the use of youth forums, in which youngsters get selected by their scout mates to represent them.

In these forums, scouts learn about current topics and develop communication skills with adults and other scouts from their region. National forums occur once a year, selected youth participants initiate different communication protocols, they also discuss the problems they are facing and how to solve them. Finally, every four years the biggest scout event in the world unites scouts from over 250 countries and territories to experience the ultimate polyphony discussion. In the World Scout Jamboree, thousands of youngsters get together and adopt the model of the UN to work on the problems their communities and the world are facing. Some topics are decent labor, rights of persons with disabilities (inclusion), human rights, environmental actions, migrants and refugees, gender equity, youth, peace, and security. Each scout representative gets selected to speak about his own country and all the opinions, and conclusions are collected by the WOSM and then shared with the NSO and other institutions that express interest.

## **8. Active learning, semiotics, aesthetics, dialogism, and non-formal education a case of study**

WOSM has been divided into six regions worldwide, different actions have been taken by all these regions due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the pandemic was unexpected, many countries were unprepared to deal with the requirements and the coordination needed to overcome this disease. In response, every NSO started to involve scouts to respond actively to the needs of the community. Several examples of the Better World Framework projects will be mentioned below, with emphasis of the ones developed in the Asia Pacific Scout Region.

Afghanistan scouts created public awareness campaigns through the distribution of flyers and social media. Older scouts participated in the disinfection of public spaces, vehicles, residential areas, and orphanages. They also helped with the distribution of food and hygiene packages to families facing starvation due to the lockdown. Additionally, entire scout families got involved in sewing and distribution of face masks to police and medical personnel [18].

Scouts from Bhutan have done several health awareness actions, giving information to the communities, preparing postcards for handwashing and general prevention Covid 19 prevention messages, to assist in breaking the chain of transmission. Also, generating spaces of experience sharing after illness, in order to help psychological health, and volunteering to do Covid 19 surveillance duty with school teachers and general public [18].

Scouts from India distributed masks and sanitizers in their communities, organized rallies, door to door campaigns and graphic material for Covid and good health awareness, and posters for local commercial prohibiting entry without masks. They also made food distribution programs for people in need derived from the pandemic, as well as for street animals [18].

In Cambodia, scouts raised funds and organized a food relief operation. Scouts of China issued a COVID 19 guideline and shared it with other countries, they also volunteered to help pack medical masks. Scouts of Fiji focused on homeless people to help them understand the situation and to give them protective equipment. In Kenya, scouts provided families with resources for online school classes, and gave conferences to parents in order to assist their children's education. The Philippines gathered masks, shields, and raised money to help their communities. Scouts from Sri-Lanka distributed dry foods and vegetables for dozens of families facing difficulties from the pandemic. Many countries have changed their entire program activity set to virtual to avoid more infections, and have similar experiences in the development of projects in order to contribute to the resolution of the pandemic.

One of the most important part of the scouting method involves community engagement, this is where active learning takes place since scouting encourages youngsters not only to develop skills but to support their communities in a practical way. All this indoctrination is made using dialogism, in which scouts find personal meaning to specific words, ideas or even experiences as the ones mentioned above.

When scouts from all over the world realized that COVID 19 pandemic had exceeded the health sector capacity of Covid prevention and/or treatment, initiatives were taken without waiting instruction of scout leaders. Youth immediately searched for adult guide to identify ways to help persons in need. With the help of their families, they crafted face masks using their own funds, and donated them to hospitals and police stations. Scouts felt better because they were helping the cause and soon started to seek other ways to help the community, this is where esthetics comes in place since scouts are experiencing that they are doing something beautiful that makes them feel proud. Scouts were able to see the results of their work, so they even became more engaged to help the community.

As months passed by, scouting activities have changed, scouts continued to develop prevention materials making face masks and helping with sanitization of public places, thermal screening, and stress management in underprivileged shelter homes. All this process is being documented and it is being presented to the NSO. So participant scouts can get the international badge known as “Messengers of Peace” (MOP). This is where semiotics take place since all the persons who bear the MOP have contributed to the development of their own communities through a project. Scouts who earned the MOP badge attribute a special meaning to it, since it represents their own effort to help and participate in an active learning procedure in which they overcome all sorts of obstacles to fulfill their goal. These five elements combined, act directly into the youngster’s development and learning objectives.

## **9. Conclusions**

Active learning is one of the best ways to potentiate learning. Involvement creates interactions that enable youngsters to have a better understanding of different learning processes that they should go through. Non-formal education was designed to learn “in situ”, and one of the most important cornerstones of it is “learn by doing”, making non-formal education a foundation for active learning.

The program and SM of WOSM has proven for over 110 years to be one of the best places for active learning in the world. Millions of scouts work daily to ensure this, not only creating local interactions and regional activities but working with other scouts worldwide to develop joint projects that seek to answer their community needs.

This chapter presented how the world scout movement uses non-formal education and active learning to develop educational goals worldwide. It also explained the program, methodology, and core foundations of scouting. This gives a better understanding of how active learning is used in scouting, and the elements that the scouting movement developed over a century ago that helped build the largest youth community in the world.

The pandemic of COVID 19 changed the entire social and economic scenario. The scouting movement was not prepared to work entirely online. Scouting program was designed based on a face to face interaction, in this sense, adjustments had to be done worldwide to ensure the continuation of the movement. Despite this, online scouting is a reality and need to keep adjusting to youth’s needs and interests. This also means that there is an opportunity area within adult training, because of the lack of abilities on information technologies and social networks. Even additional

educational strategies that do not rely on technology can be helpful, in order to avoid the issues of lack of resources such as computer equipment or internet access.

Finally, one of the biggest contributions of scouting to active learning has been to develop a methodology that involves playing and learning at the same time, in this way, youth has an enjoyable time while learning actively and helping others.

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**Conflict of interest**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

**Appendices and nomenclature**

NSO	National Scout Organization
MOP	Messengers of Peace
SM	Scout Method
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
WOSM	World Organization of the Scout Movement

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