



iMOtion

Framing Informal Moments
(IM)
in Trainings

Informal Moments in Nature

A multisensorial way of promoting connection and wellbeing

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In this article, the authors share their experience about an outdoor training held after the first Covid-19 lockdown and reflect on the added value of **Nature** that's a **privileged place to experience Informal Moments**.

- Nature is a **Co-facilitator** of every learning experience, with its own soul and autonomous ability to influence mental and emotional stages and group dynamics. Nature facilitates socialization as it is **non judgmental** and brings us all on the same level, because it us in a condition of a constant honest challenge;
- Nature also helps us relax and find the right balance thanks to its many **benefits** on our **body, mind, and emotions**. Therefore influences group and personal **well-being**;
- We also explore further how we can replicate, even if only partially, the benefits of nature and its **outdoor** spaces in **indoor** and **online** environments.

The covid period quickly changed the nature of training courses and many jobs, and even the way of schooling. The health emergency situation forced both the



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work and education contexts to increase and make smart working, distance learning, and online training courses as accessible as possible to all. The emergency also allowed us to become aware of the benefits and inconveniences of this change, making us appreciate aspects of either the work or education context that we took for granted. Among the benefits of the increased use of technology, we certainly saw that working, studying, or attending a training course from home allowed us to decrease the number of trips and thus CO2 emissions with a positive impact on the environment. Among the inconveniences, we could encounter physical and/or mental health ones, especially among younger people, caused by immobility and excessive use of devices, the effects of which are now sadly well known! During this period, participants in the online courses highlighted how the lack of physical contact, spaces and informal moments of peer sharing, in many cases made the training itself unmotivating and less enjoyable. This situation led to the idea of applying for an Erasmus+ research project on the importance of informal moments in training. The project called " iMOtion", is aimed at understanding the value of informal moments in outdoor, indoor and online trainings and with different target groups of participants. The contribution below takes its cue from an outdoor training practice carried out by Kamaleonte after a year or so of stopping in-person training due to covid restrictions.

In March 2021, Kamaleonte proposed a one-day outdoor training course on the topic of "wellness in the team." 25 adults with different backgrounds participated in the course, 7 of whom were colleagues from public administration. This team of 7, had been in smart working for a year and had not, until then, had a way to meet personally either in the office or outside the office. The 'training activity took place in an outdoor setting immersed in nature on a beautiful sunny day. Nature did most of the work, stimulating in all participants a feeling of well-being and readiness to listen. During the morning session, a need to connect with each other in a more spontaneous way immediately emerged from the participants. The trainers thus decided to give participants an informal space of about two hours where they could decide how to use their time to explore the concept of well-being. The result of the learnings developed in the two hours was much more fruitful than the team of trainers could have imagined. In that time, most of the participants immersed



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themselves in nature in subgroups, some staying on the lawn, some walking on the banks of a river or in the nearby forest.

When learnings were shared, everybody highlighted the added value of the informal space in nature, as the felt emotions wouldn't have emerged so easily in an indoor context. The informal training moment was experienced positively by all and made the training more enjoyable and participatory. People felt free to contribute to the construction of common knowledge with their own experience. This made it clear that informal moments and spaces are important either in learning processes, as they make it enjoyable and participatory, or in productive and organizational processes at work, as they stimulate a sense of belonging. For the group of seven colleagues, seeing each other again after a year in a natural setting was a strong emotional moment that allowed them to reconnect with each other, making them aware of the importance and necessity of informal moments where they can be in touch, feel good, and share. Significant was the example of some participants who expressed that they missed those 15 minutes spent in the coffee area, where they could relax and have a chat or exchange important information with their colleagues on duty. Of particular interest, however, was understanding **why Nature was an added value** to the training as well as to its informal moments.

In outdoor training courses, there is always a Co-Facilitator with its own soul and autonomous ability to influence mental and emotional stages and group dynamics. It's an informal Co-Facilitator capable of teaching those who want to learn; "NATURE" itself.

For this reason, those who facilitate in nature and with nature, should know it, respect it, value it, and give it the space it needs to do its work informally, thus trusting that nature is capable of bringing out individual learning and authentic group dynamics. Those who work outdoors know perfectly well that the informal context in which the course is conducted already creates the environment for an informal atmosphere. A participant will never show up in a suit and tie or stilettos in outdoor training. Relationships among participants also become by mirror effect less formal, more relaxed and natural. Although the context makes the atmosphere of the training informal, the training being proposed may not necessarily be so. Paradoxically, outdoor training proposals,



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despite the informality of the context may be very structured and unwilling to offer moments and spaces of informality. To better clarify this concept, one should perhaps distinguish the difference between context, informal moments and informality in training.

The Context where the course takes place has an emotional and social impact on participants. Nature is definitely an informal context rich in stimuli that can affect the emotional state of the participants. It is scientifically acknowledged that the therapeutic value of natural aromas is oxygen therapy and aromatherapy. Working on a green lawn in front of a lake on a sunny day is different than working on a boat in the middle of the sea on a stormy day. The trainer also chooses the natural context in which to work based on the goals he or she wants to achieve with the course.

Informal Moments: these are those moments during the training when participants are completely free to choose where to focus their attention. These moments are influenced by their duration (e.g., half a day within a week-long course, or 20 minutes between sessions), by the resources available in the context, (example there are books, coffee and drinks, board games etc), and the context in which they take place (inside a classroom, outside the classroom, restaurant or other).

Informality in trainings or Informal Activities: these are those informal spaces and moments in which participants are completely free to choose whether and how to use the trainer's input. These moments are influenced by the time available, resources available, the context in which they take place, and the input given by the trainer. For example, at the beginning of a course where participants do not know each other, the trainer offers two hours for participants to explore the forest and activate a "spontaneous" dynamic.

Certainly nature fosters, both as a training context and in informal moments or activities, many stimuli for well-being, individual and group learning without the need for too many structured activities. Several times in discussions with colleagues, we wondered if parts of the benefits that Nature offers to make informal moments meaningful and valuable for those learning could also be replicated in indoor or online settings.



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While not as powerful, we agree that Nature can also be an informal co-trainer in Indoor and online settings.

Even during online or indoor training sessions, it is possible to use nature as a source of inspiration and relaxation to improve participants' productivity and well-being. One way to do this could be to introduce nature-inspired breaks, during which we invite participants to take a short break, perhaps as little as five minutes, to focus on the sensations that can be experienced in the presence of nature, using outdoor materials, such as stones, leaves, water, natural elements of various kinds, or recreating the natural conditions we find outdoors. We can recreate different natural environments inside a room, a beach, an indoor forest, or even a starry sky projected on the ceiling. In the case of online, we can think about using sounds, telematic images of nature, or even, where conditions allow, inviting training participants to go outside, perhaps going for a call outside, on a balcony, or in a garden.

During informal indoor/online moments, participants might be asked to close their eyes and imagine that they are in a natural place, perhaps in a forest, on the beach, or in the mountains, and to focus on the sounds, colors, and sensations that these places evoke. In this way we can help participants to reduce stress and improve concentration, preparing them to face the rest of the training session with greater energy and focus.

We also keep in mind that some natural elements are always available to us and do not have to be sought in an external environment. We intend to draw attention to the fact that we ourselves, as human beings, are nature. Our body, for example, is the first tool we can use as natural, offering small breathing exercises, or movement exercises during an online or indoor session.

Many of the benefits offered by nature, as demonstrated by various scientific studies, are strongly connected to our body, our emotions and our mind. Sensory experiences in nature help us reduce stress, influencing our hormonal levels; they help and improve our blood circulation, thanks to an increased oxygenation; they influence our emotions, interacting with the amygdala and the hypothalamus and therefore positively impacting also on our memory. Some medical research has shown the positive impact that natural panoramas,



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and in particular all shades of green in nature, have on the sense of sight and on the level of stress. It seems that being surrounded by plants not only helps us with oxygen levels but it also has a relaxing and calming effect on our emotions and stress levels. Studies like these invite us to reflect on the countless benefits we find in outdoor environments and the ways in which these can be recreated online and indoors. The key factor is our body, as all our senses, if properly stimulated, can help us develop pleasant informal moments full of learnings, thanks to the inspiration we can draw from nature.

When we want to recreate the conditions that in natural settings help us find our balance and well-being we can certainly be **inspired by nature** and look for simple strategies that can do the trick. One of these alternatives to real natural settings, which can be extremely useful, is the use of essential oils, which can be easily used indoors and/or in online training.

These aromatic compounds have a beneficial impact on our hormonal system and on our emotions that are very important in the learning process and memory functions. For example lavender is capable of lowering cortisol levels, the hormone linked to stress, and of positively influencing well-being and the physical and mental balance. Lemon essential oil can help restore energy, thanks to the vitamin C and its energizing scent. There are many essential oils that can be used, and each of them have their properties. In conclusion, using the natural elements can be extremely beneficial for improving the indoor and online experience, as well as promoting general well-being. By incorporating sounds, smells and images related to nature, we can create an atmosphere that stimulates the senses and promotes connection with the natural environment, even in indoor contexts. Scientific research has shown that exposure to nature, even if only through images or sounds, can positively affect our mental and physical state.

Nature thus becomes a silent but powerful co-trainer, capable of promoting concentration, relaxation, tranquillity, inspiration and vitality. Integrating nature into your learning or work environment not only enhances the overall experience, but it's also a way to remind us of the importance of preserving and connecting with the natural world around us.



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