

Blurring educational boundaries to make visible young people's agency in learning practices

Fernando Hernández-Hernández

Institution/Address: University of Barcelona. Cultural Pedagogies Unit. Fine Arts Faculty. Pau Gargallo, 4. 08028. Barcelona. Spain.

Email: fdohernandez@ub.edu

Juana María Sancho-Gil

Institution/Address: University of Barcelona. Department of Didactic and Educational Management. Campus Mundet. Edifici Llevant, 2a planta. Passeig de la Vall d'Hebron, 171. 08035 Barcelona. Spain.

Email: jmsancho@ub.edu

Expanding learning scenarios

Today the term learning reaches far beyond the classroom; the popular use of phrases such as lifelong learning or life-wide learning are a reflection of the ubiquitous status of the word in today's knowledge society. However, in educational discourse learning still remains closely linked to scholastic notions related to student assessment or curriculum objectives. Within this broad portrayal of learning, young people's agency is often ambiguous. On one hand, the literature often paints a picture of a body of connected youth who use new technologies to engage in learning activities tailored to their personal interests. On the other hand, there is increasing criticism around the notion of lifelong learning as a key competence, as educational policies seem to respond more to new market demands than to a holistic approach once promoted by progressive educators. Therefore a tension exists between research into learning experiences that contributes to the pedagogization of young people lives, and the studies that attempt to articulate and recognize a more personal and social form of engagement that, for some young people, is allusive in a formal school context.

Being conscious of this complexity and tensions the research group ESBIRINA - Subjectivities, Visualities and Contemporary Educational Environments-

(<http://esbrina.eu/>) of the University of Barcelona hosted, November 6th – 7th, 2014, the symposium “Blurring educational boundaries” dedicated to exploring the agency young people have in their learning practices, in formal and/or informal educational contexts.

The conference aim to problematize and interrogate participants’ understanding of the role of learning in young people's lives and look critically at research objectives and methods. We specifically seek to address the following issues:

1. The expanded notion of learning, and how it relates to how we understand and discuss the boundary between inside and outside school;
2. The relationship between learning and young people's use of digital technologies;
3. The methodological and ethical issues that arise when studying learning in informal and/or virtual contexts;
4. Advocate for doing research collaboratively (with young people); the advantages and limits of using 'with' as a methodological stance.

With the intention of contributing to these topics 21 papers from researchers from England, Finland, Argentina, The United States, France, Catalonia, Germany, Switzerland, Spain, Norway, Brazil, were presented. A selection of these papers was done, those closer to the aims of the journal, to be published at IJREE - International Journal for Research on Extended Education

The article presented by la Erstad (University of Oslo) explores, based on the 'learning lives project' (2009-2013) in a community in Oslo, the link between learning and identity formation as interrelated practices connected to the capacity to adapt to changing roles within different contexts. In this case, member of the research group have investigated changes and transitions in and between youth and children institutional and everyday lives. An important aim was to analyse how identities are shaped and developed in different settings over time. To cope with this objective notions such as of “Participation trajectories” (Edwards, & Mackenzie, 2008) and “Learning lives” (Edwards, Biesta & Thorpe, 2010) appear as fundamental. These notions allow tounderstand how young people make connections between spaces and experiences, and to how these resources actually move between contexts, as well as how people appropriate them in certain circumstances and are enabled to make use of them

in new contexts. By combining different research methods four youth's trajectories emerged in this study: of knowledge building, following their own interest, positioning in their learning identities and everyday activities using technologies. As conclusion, the analysis shows that learning activities as experienced by young people today are much more connected and expand across different settings than ever before.

The second paper, by Rachel Fendler and Raquel Miño (University of Barcelona) approaches tensions raising from blurred boundaries between school and non-school, virtual and physical sites, or formal, non-formal and informal education. They cope with these tensions by addressing the representation of learning practices, drawing on the contributions of 39 secondary school students to consider ways in which young people's learning practices ask to rethinking educational boundaries. The key notions to explore this research problem are situated learning and communities of practice (Lave and Wenger's (1991). Situated learning looks at the environment in which learning occurs, as manifested in the social terrain of communities of practice, and point the way for beginning to see learning as a spatial practice. Guided by an ethnographic approach the research presented indicates that young people began to reflect on learning in different spaces (at school, with sport, or with other activities) and to formulate how the movement from one to another was supported, and how these different spaces overlapped. The young people's participation in the project was an interruption in their everyday school lives, displacing them both physically and also in terms of their identity, in that we were asking them to occupy the role of researchers rather than students.

The paper by Imanol Aguirre (Public University of Pamplona) shows an investigation on practices of youth, considered as producers of visual culture, that deviate from traditional master-apprentice and expert-novice relationships and that take place along the margins of formal education in the realm of that Trend (1992) terms "cultural pedagogies". The focus of this research is on how and where young people acquire the knowledge that apply for their productions, the types of competencies that these types of knowledge are associated with and what are their attitudes and interactions in relationship with the learning processes. The research makes evident, based on interviews and a questionnaire that visual culture production provides to youth with the occasion to feel free for experimentation, being part of a community or audience which

dispenses recognition, trust and complicity and the opportunity to get many unexpected resources.

Finally, the contribution made by Kristiina Kumpulainen and Anna Mikkola, (University of Helsinki) offers an alternative conceptual framing to the disjuncture between “formal” and “informal” by re-framing this traditional divisive distinction between the two. From the authors approach, formal and informal learning are not conceptualized as discrete categories, but rather “formality” and “informality” are conceived as attributes present in all circumstances of learning. To exemplify this argument they analyze empirical data from a case study on elementary school students’ engagement in technology-mediated creative-learning activity. In their analysis, they demonstrate how attributes of formality and informality intersect in the students’ social activity and consider how this is related to their engagement, learning, and identity building. They conclude by considering the wider implications of a hybrid notion of learning as the interplay of formality and informality in social activities.

Four papers have in common two assumptions: (1) formal education does not take into account how youth are using knowledge in their outside of school activities; and , (2) youth learning goes beyond traditional institutional limits, particularly when they use virtual environments and participate in different communities of practices.

These contributions could help to rethink the roles of learning in the transitions and mobilities of youth in our current societies All these articles locating learning beyond the limits of schooling, in spaces of affect and intensities that cannot be measured and represented by external standards or its internal forms,. These learning environments contain activities that escape classification and coding strategies of analysis. This issue is articulated by Dennis Atkinson (2011, p.13), who has noticed that "within teaching and learning contexts it is quite possible for there to be learners whose ontological status of learners is not recognized so their potential for becoming is constrained and therefore they have no (or marginal) existence within the pedagogical space."

References

- Atkinson, D. (2011). *Art, quality and learning. Pedagogies against the state*. Rotterdam: Sense.
- Edwards, R., Biesta, G., & Thorpe, M. (Eds.). (2009). *Rethinking contexts for learning and teaching. Communities, activities and networks*. London, England: Routledge.
- Edwards, A., & Mackenzie, L. (2008). Identity shifts in informal learning trajectories. In B. van Oers, W. Wardekker, E. Elbers, & R. van der Veer (Eds.), *The transformation of learning* (pp. 163–181). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Trend, D. (1992). *Cultural Pedagogy: Art, Education, Politics*. New York: Bergin & Garvey.