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Chapter 1

Identity, Community, and Learning Lives in the Digital Age

Julian Sefton-Green and Ola Erstad

why learning lives?

In some ways, learning is as commonplace (and complex) and banal as living. It is difficult to imagine a state of 'not learning', and it is a truism to state that, in all our lives, we constantly draw on and develop knowledge through experience. The authors of this book take this for granted. Similarly, a long tradition of scholarship in the sociocultural tradition distinguishes learning from the processes of schooling; whilst schools and schooling are *the* dominant educational institutions in contemporary societies and determine much of what constitutes, defines and frames learning, how learning works in schools is not the end all and be all of the issue.

We use the phrase *learning lives* to describe two discrete but interrelated concepts. First, in developing further the sociocultural position is the idea that learning needs to be situated intricately and intimately in a matrix of 'transactions': experiences, life trajectories, voluntary and involuntary learning contexts, affective frames and social groupings that make up experience across our life-worlds. Our subjectivities, interpersonal interactions, our developing sense of ourselves, how we construct learner identities and narratives about what we know and can do are all part of how the authors of this volume see learning within a 'whole-life' perspective. This poses complex challenges for research to identify, describe and understand learning within such a web of influences and determinants.

Our second use of the phrase *learning lives* describes more the idea of learning *for* life. Although all definitions of learning imply this prospective use, we are concerned with exploring how learning occupies the forefront of the new forms of 'liquid lives' (Bauman, 2005) in 'second' or 'late' modernity (see Chisholm, Chapter 5) lived by the young and now centrally mediated

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by a range of technologies, and how broader contemporary perspectives on learning alter our understanding of the role of learning in preparing and coping with changing life pathways and transitions.

The phrase *learning lives* grows out of a broad set of influential studies appearing from different disciplinary fields during the last decades. These studies do not represent a single unified field of research, but they address certain key challenges to the ways in which learning is embedded in our lives over time and which become more apparent as we move through the twenty-first century. These are studies of an ethnographic nature, documenting literacy practices in different cultures (Scribner & Cole, 1981; Heath, 1983; Barton & Hamilton, 1998), studies of media use among young people (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 2004; Livingstone, 2002, Ito et al., 2010), studies of youth cultures (Fornäs, Lindberg & Sernhede, 1995; Pampols & Porzio, 2005), studies of place and space in children's and young people's geographies (Cresswell, 1996; Leander, Phillips & Headrick Taylor, 2010) or studies focusing on gender and schooling (McLeod & Yates, 2006; Rudberg & Bjerrum Nielsen, 2005). Few longitudinal studies have studied the timescales and pathways of learners (Lemke, 2000; Thomson 2009).

The rest of this introduction explores how our idea of *learning lives* might then be situated in a range of analytic and disciplinary perspectives and what its core elements might be in offering a series of *key concepts* to underpin the chapters that follow. This introduction also includes a discussion of why such ideas might be a useful corrective to contemporary approaches to education.

We first consider the relationship between theories of identity and theories of learning, and we follow this with a discussion about the meaning and nature of context. Next, we consider the meaning of learning for learners (and for researchers), thus leading to a consideration of debates about the purpose and nature of learning research in the current climate. We then describe the individual contributions to this volume, concluding with a section that poses a series of questions about the value of 'learning lives'.

LEARNER IDENTITIES

In many ways, it is very difficult to disentangle an attention to identity from an understanding of learning. Much of the focus of subsequent chapters explores the particular role of learning identity (see especially Arnseth & Silseth, Chapter 2). This role can describe the identity produced through or by learning, and/or the identity acting as a precondition or context for learning and/or the kind of identity required by the learner to be able to learn as part of the learning process (Sinha, 1999).

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Contemporary research, especially that from within the lifelong learning and adult education tradition, is especially interested in the centrality of learning identity to identity per se: 'People must become individuals through constructing or reconstructing their own biographies and life courses' (Glastra, Hake & Schedler, 2004). An attention to biography and the processes of narrativising life in this tradition reveals an interest in modes of identity creation. Ecclestone et al., for example, contrast du Bois-Reymond's 'choice-biographies' with Denzin's 'epiphanies' or 'turning points' in an attempt to theorise the connections between biography and social structure in the emergence of lifecourse theory. The introduction to a recent collection (Ecclestone, Biesta & Hughes, 2009) focusing on the idea of transition as a way into the nitty-gritty of identity work is especially concerned with how 'changing notions of the self' under the conditions of reflexive modernity (Giddens, 1991) reveal new kinds of stress within individuals and between them and social structures. Forms of 'biographicity' (Alheit & Dausien, 1999) emerge from such tensions to dominate as the primary process of identity-making.

These approaches open up ways of putting people in the messy materiality of their lives at the centre of educational research and seeing learning as part of a very wide range of social processes. Research within this broad spectrum of approaches examines life histories – how people construct narratives of their learning lives – thus positioning learning experiences as episodes within varying timescales and relating the meaning and purposes of learning to other lifecourse trajectories: family, work and so on (see contributions by Nixon [Chapter 10], Gilje [Chapter 12] and Nelson, Hull and Young [Chapter 13]). Questions of gender and class, as well as other important social determinants such as religious affiliation or ethnicity, are also key lenses through which the nature and learning of individuals can be positioned.

Yet, it is perhaps true to say that such approaches have been used primarily with respect to older people, certainly with youth as opposed to children and younger cohorts. This is partly common sense: older people have 'more' biography, or at least better access to the means of creating such narratives (see Chapter 13). Alternatively, and more critically, it is partly this process of denying children an ontological status and agency – a view heavily critiqued by the new sociology of childhood (Qvortrup et al., 1994) – that leads to a more closed developmentalist perspective when considering younger people's learning, one that implies that they can't draw on biographical perspectives. There are notable exceptions to this. Pollard and Filer's use of the idea of 'pupil career' addresses the idea of exploring how progress at school needs to

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be situated in a wider perspective that encompasses family and friends, as well as a broad-based understanding of classroom interactions (Pollard & Filer, 1999). Wortham's year-long study of individuals within a classroom that explores the complex, detailed interactions between peers and teachers showing how students construct and are constituted by certain kinds of more or less productive learning identities (Wortham, 2005). Yet, the centrality of school, rather than other dimensions of children's lives, stands in contrast to sociological and cultural interpretations of how identities are formed through family or consumption (see, for example, Lareau, 2003, and Pugh, 2009, respectively).

Of course, the idea of identity is itself problematic. It tends to be used as shorthand – or, as Moje and Luke put it – as a metaphor for a range of constructs of the person, referring to, inter alia subjectivity, a person, the personal or the self, as well as to the social or psychological models of the individual (Moje & Luke, 2009). Their review notes five key metaphors: identity as difference, sense of self or subjectivity, mind or consciousness, narrative and position. They suggest that all studies of literacy learning either implicitly or explicitly draw upon one or the other of these sociological or psychological models in any conceptualisation of learning and, equally, that it is impossible to frame any research enquiry into learning without the researcher drawing on one of these models.

This epistemological dependency on an a priori notion to describe or even investigate the idea of learning identity can lead to a kind of theoretical stand-off in which one ends up finding out what one began the enquiry with in the first place. In general, much current social theory is preoccupied with the impact of changing forms of individuation and individualisation, of changing and different notions of identity in the current era. How such changes relate to ideas about learning is an important focus. Work from this perspective is interested in schools, the role of technology in learning and the role of the home and other out-of-school experiences as key sites where changing forms of individualisation are both constructed and constituted by these shifting social practices. However, such research is, by definition, troubled by the challenge of finding, describing and locating or identifying identity in learning. What are the phenomena under observation when it comes to identity? What constitutes evidence in descriptions of identity or, indeed, learning? This theme is explored in Chapter 8 by Green, Skukauskaite and Castanheira, and in Chapter 3 by Drotner. Traditionally, learning research relies on traces of identity in talk and other kinds of discourse, but what other 'evidence' might research draw on to make use of this slippery concept?

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CONTEXTUALISING CONTEXTS

Whilst paying attention to contexts is often advocated by studies of learning in the sociocultural tradition, the authors collected here have probed further at this easy assumption. A larger theoretical frame exists behind this enquiry, relating to the questions just discussed about the relations between structure and agency and how we can imagine individuals in relation to identities; we conclude this subsection by revisiting these questions.

The specificity of contexts has received much attention in recent years (Cole, 1996; Duranti & Goodwin, 1992; Edwards, Biesta & Thorpe, 2009), but a central problem remains in defining the limits and nature of a context. At one level, as Edwards notes, all of life could be a 'context' but, with that perspective, how useful a concept does a 'learning context' remain (Edwards, 2009)? Whilst all action has to take place within a context, we also have to ask: Can we separate learning, and therefore learning contexts, from the everyday flow of experience? These are perhaps unanswerable and certainly difficult-to-research questions, although Green, Skukauskaite and Castanheira (Chapter 8) offer one kind of solution. A second order of questions is interested in what is particular to the context that influences the nature of the learning.

A recent review by Leander et al. has explored research around mobilities, looking at movement and spatiality in literacy research (Leander et al., 2010). This kind of approach raises questions about the role of time and scale, as well as about the idea of spatiality; that is, it uncouples places from their location and thus is interested in formulations of place as movement and as relationships. Elsewhere, Leander has explored these ideas in respect to research looking at on- and offline virtual and real worlds as a key locus embodying contradictions in spatiality (Leander & McKim, 2003). This approach suggests that we need to examine learning across a range of time and place scales to understand it better, however difficult this may be as an empirical challenge. Scholars have examined context in this uncoupled, highly spatialised fashion and have looked at learning across timescales. Jay Lemke has written about the idea of 'traversals', exploring how meaning travels across time and in relation to studies of learners (Lemke, 2000). Scale can, of course, refer to highly detailed 'building block' kinds of moments as well, as we noted earlier in the whole-life or lifecourse (and biographical) perspectives. Literacy studies have developed notions of learning events and learning episodes (Bloome et al., 2005). These effectively expand or contract the time-limited definition of context (Bloomer, 2001).

At the same time, other theorisations of contexts interest contributors to this volume. These revolve around investigating things (or objects or artefacts),

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people and networks. The impact of actor network theory (ANT) has helped researchers imagine the idea that objects and things bring with them to contexts agency and direction and thus they, too, play a part in influencing learning (Latour, 2007). This is also commensurate with a tradition emerging out of Vygotsky, lying at the heart of the sociocultural tradition, which has investigated the idea of 'affordances' (Wertsch, 1997). This concept has been influential in studies of the role of technology and learning, especially in how it enables researchers to examine the interplay of the learner in context.

The study of networks and how they can be theorised in relation to learning also has a long history. Current interest in social networks (Ito et al., 2010); dispersed learning (Brown & Duguid, 2000); innovation and reform (NSF Task Force, 2008); the position of school in relation to key actors, neighbourhoods, and local politics (Nespor, 1997) and, indeed, an interest in communities (Moje, 2000) are all examples of an attention to the sets of relationships pertaining to a context. Drotner (Chapter 3) takes up these themes in her contribution exploring processual methodologies.

Equally, describing people as contexts for learning can be explored in a variety of ways. Studies of the family, of parent-child interactions and/or of friendship groups and peer and youth cultures all characterise the role of other actors as part of the wider or more immediate context for learning. This concern underpins contributions here from Nixon (Chapter 10) and Sjöblom and Aronsson (Chapter 11).

Behind many of these notions of context, time, scale, spatiality, people, things and networks lie further assumptions about the interrelationship between individuals and society. We have already observed a contemporary interest in 'modern' forms of identity as part of this broader purview, but in relation to ideas about context, we need to consider the raft of theories that have attempted to rationalise this conundrum. Describing and analysing the interactions of what can best be generalised as 'people-in-context' is not a new project. The Bourdieusian *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1993)[1], the kind of 'force-field' constructed through ANT (Latour, 2007), communities of practice (Wenger, 1999), the notion of 'funds of knowledge' (Gonzales, Moll & Amanti, 2005; Cole & the Distributed Literacy Consortium, 2006) or even the Habermasian life-world, with its focus on intersubjectivity, practices and attitudes (Habermas, 1989), all refer to macro-level theories describing the production of self and learning in and through contexts. These questions animate Lemke's contribution (Chapter 4).

[1] For an extended discussion of *habitus* as a learning context, see Colley (2009).

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As noted in the preceding section, articulating the limits of agency without lapsing into a structural determinism has vexed theorists working within the sociocultural realm and has particularly troubled analyses of learning. Given our expanded and complex understanding of context and a use of multiple or performative constructs of identity, we would position *Learning Lives* within this matrix of ideas and within the debates that continue to unsettle work in these traditions. There is clearly no one single model to resolve these contradictions, but the studies in this volume aim to expose further the processes in which we can situate learning – and learning in context – in ways that help further our understanding of the circuits of cause and effect.

WHOSE LEARNING? (WHOSE LIFE?)

We have noted on several occasions so far a twofold methodological dilemma arising out of this synthesis. First is the acute problem of developing empirical methods to capture the difficult and subtle dimensions of identity and context. Second is the challenge of using research to validate post hoc propter hoc concepts that have been reified prior to research. Latour, for example, writes about how the social is proved through research into the social (Latour, 2007). Latour is particularly critical of how sociology produces its version of the social under the pretext of representing it, analysing this as a result of the contradictions arising from insider-outsider enquiry.

A key solution to this aspect of these dilemmas is a focus on ethnomethodological or emic perspectives (see Green, Skukauskaite & Castanheira, Chapter 8). This is important for our interests because it not only directs us to research that uses broad forms of qualitative enquiry located within an ethnographic imagination (Heath & Street, 2008), it also underscores the need for developing forms of analysis that can capture interaction – and especially that which might take place across the different dimensions of context in time and space – as is explored by Drotner in Chapter 3.

This debate also raises questions not simply about perspectives, but about power integral to the relationship between the researched and the researcher. In many of the studies collected here, this too is important because of the critical and counterintuitive ways in which we want to acknowledge those 'new' forms of learning that are often ignored, proscribed or perhaps even unrecognised by mainstream educational thinking. This challenge is taken up with authority in Chapter 9 by Brice Heath. A key common principle at work across this volume is that many kinds or modalities of learning are at work within our lives and that learners acknowledge these as meaningful, even if such learning is not defined or validated as such by more formal educational

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systems. This means that we have an interest in the self-definition and value systems developed by the communities and individuals explored here: see Gilje (Chapter 12) and Nelson, Hull and Young (Chapter 13). More than twenty years ago, Cohen developed the idea of 'really useful knowledge' (Cohen, 1990) to describe those kinds of knowledge that young people found meaningful and valuable within the exchange economies of various kinds of youth culture. This knowledge is to be distinguished from the kinds of knowledge deemed useful by social norms.

However, whilst we might be interested in kinds of learning and forms of knowledge produced by communities and individuals in a range of lifewide and lifelong activities, and we might also explore both the learning process involved in validating and credentialising such knowledge, we cannot ignore the fact that there are shared definitions of learning – Bruner used the term 'folklore' (Bruner, 1996) – and, of course, wider social norms that determine meanings here. People's understanding of learning and what it means to be educated is thus mediated by the repertoire available to them (Levinson, Foley & Holland, 1996).

This paradox – of valuing emic understandings and definitions of something which, by definition, carries predetermined meanings – is particularly acute in discussions about the alleged newness of learning centred in and around digital technologies. Reviews of a range of contemporary research studies continually point to the tension between characterisation of newness in learning – as a consequence of changing and different possibilities afforded by the landscape of new technologies (Jenkins et al., 2007) – and studies of how learning itself is recontextualised or recuperated[2] in this process (Sefton-Green, 2006). Whilst this debate in and of itself recapitulates the wider argument about who underwrites the values of research, it also highlights how fraught and tense is the contemporary struggle for educational legitimacy. Erstad and Sefton-Green explore these arguments in Chapter 6.

WHY *LEARNING LIVES* NOW?

This brings us to discussion of why debate about the meaning and purpose of learning is not only contested in the academic and theoretical arena but is also at the forefront of current policy concerns. A wide range of critics explore why education can well be described as being in a state of crisis (Claxton, 2008).

[2] See Gemma Moss' use of Bernstein making this case in respect of 'informal' out-of-school media learning (Moss, 2001).

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Across most of Europe and North America, and in other developed nations, intense attention has been paid to the organisation and structure of schooling. This has been accompanied by a deep interrogation of the purposes of formal education. Many nations have invested heavily in various types of systemic school reform, although there seems to be a general decline in investments in formal education as a proportion of gross domestic product (GDP) (Dumont, Istance & Benavides, 2010). Interest in innovation and reforms has also been accompanied by a raft of standardised benchmarking, as in the use of international comparators such as the Organisation for Economic and Co-operation Development (OECD)'s PISA tests.

Commentary about this attention and the nature of these changes mainly suggests that the educational systems of wealthy countries are being transformed by the changing needs of the global knowledge economy.

> OECD societies and economies have experienced a profound transformation from reliance on an industrial to a knowledge base. Global drivers increasingly bring to the fore what some call '21st century competencies'. The quantity and quality of learning thus become central, with the accompanying concern that traditional educational approaches are insufficient. (Dumont et al., 2010)

Although there is no shortage of critical interpretations of this shift (e.g. Edwards, 1997), the literature also reveals a renewed attention both to the role of new technologies within this settlement[3] (that is, equally as delivery agent, facilitator of dispersed learning and as cognitive support, amongst others) and initiatives to develop a 'new science of learning'. This perspective is developed further by Chisholm in Chapter 5.

Whether there really is a 'new science' of learning, or whether the idea is more of a rhetorical move, will unfold in the years to come. The OECD itself has focused study around what it calls '21st Century Competencies', as practiced by 'new millennium learners' (Pedró, 2006; Dumont et al., 2010; CERI, 2010). It has identified a cluster of behaviours, competencies and attributes 'of the moment', including the ability to learn together, co-operation and negotiation, self-regulation, meta-cognitive skills and learning environments that develop 'horizontal-connectedness' (Dumont et al., 2010). Some of these attributes, of course, stem from much older and more longstanding sets of values than those of the twenty-first century, but it is notable that such values carry such

[3] See also the raft of research and initiatives fostered by the MacArthur Foundation in the United States; http://spotlight.macfound.org/

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authority in the current era. This kind of approach mixes what might best be thought of as new kinds of subjectivity (self-regulation, cooperativeness, etc.) with an expanded understanding of how learning environments might offer different kinds of learning contexts, as is explored by Rajala and his colleagues in Chapter 7. Enquiries into a new science of learning (e.g. Kalantzis & Cope, 2008) are also as focused on the production of learning selves as they exist in new kinds of discipline or knowledge. Here, then, we can see how our interest in learner identity and contexts sits at the heart of these new frames.

In Europe more than North America, policy has also been driven by the lifelong learning agenda (Biesta, 2006). A current interest, especially as relating to European Commission policy, stems from the concern, noted above, to develop a fit workforce to face the challenges of the knowledge economy. This is part of a wider position arguing for an increased focus on individuals taking responsibility for their own education and training as part of an investment in their own social capital. Nevertheless, lifelong learning, its operations, institutions and values, derives from an older tradition, most prominent in the Germanic countries, known as *bildung*. From this point of view, lifelong learning is existential rather than instrumental, developing the whole person within the 'life-world' (Habermas, 1989). We hope that the idea of *learning lives* might offer a bridge between these two traditions, focusing attention on the development of the whole-person-in-context approach but bringing with it an understanding of the wider shifts in educational policy as they relate to subjectivities.

On a final note, before we introduce the contributors to this volume, we need to note that *learning lives* is not a totalising or programmatic offer. As an edited collection, by definition it contains a plurality of views. Our aim is to bring together a set of questions investigating learner identity (or identities), an expanded understanding of contexts, an interest in exploring the meaning of a diverse range of learning for learners and an interest in the changing nature of learning in ever-shifting policy contexts. In addition, we should make it clear that this is not an attempt to psychologise the external play of relations. We do not offer studies of the construction and determining influence of mind. Not only is this collection oriented towards the social, it also is held together by an analytic ambition to disentangle complexity and the accreted layers of meaning. In an elegant turn of phrase, Dewey described a concept of 'transactions', 'a moving whole of interacting parts' (cited in Biesta, 2009, p. 62). This almost machinic metaphor (Dewey was in fact writing about organisms in biology) sums up for us a play of forces within a social field that we hope to shed light on.

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