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978-1-107-04695-5 - Learning Identities, Education, and Community: Young Lives in the Cosmopolitan City

Ola Erstad, ØYstein Gilje, Julian Sefton-Green and Hans Christian Arnseth

Excerpt

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I Introduction: The Learning Lives of Groruddalen

This book explores the key themes that are at the heart of progressive and future-oriented analyses in education and social policy. The first of these is an examination of learning as a life-wide concept – we follow children and young people at home, in their families, with their friends, engaging in peer-led activities, at work, in their communities, and, of course, at school. Our focus is on examining the different ways that young people learn in these different contexts, and how the ‘learning identities’ that they develop over time ‘travel’ with them across different social situations. The second theme is how learning takes place across communities, and we explore this theme in relation to a particular community. Our aim is to suggest how diverse immigrant populations in a wealthy, post-industrial city in northern Europe integrate and conceptualize their education as a key route to personal meaning and future productivity.

We have used the phrase ‘learning lives’ as a way of capturing these two interconnected approaches. On the one hand, we examine learning as a 24/7 phenomenon. Learning is clearly something we do all of the time, but whether we learn differently in different social situations, and how we reconcile, ignore, and integrate both the knowledge and the meta-learning processes from all these different situations is not the usual focus for much educational literature, which commonly revolves around school. But learning is not merely a cognitive matter or something that exists in people’s heads – it has potentialities for the kinds of lives we lead in all sorts of ways, from opening up employment prospects to implications for family life, personal relationships, and civic identity. These two dimensions are brought together as learning *in* our lives and *for* our lives (Sefton-Green and Erstad 2013).

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This book draws on a four-year research project based in Groruddalen – literally the Grorud Valley – located to the northeast of the city of Oslo in Norway. Groruddalen is an important ‘character’ in our story because it has become a particular focus for urban regeneration and development, and because it has a high proportion of immigrant people who have settled in Norway, making it one of the key sites for multi-ethnic and multicultural life in what was previously and historically a very different sort of country. (We describe Groruddalen in more detail in Chapter 3 – the sort of place it is, and the kinds of people who live in its scattered communities along the slopes of Groruddalen.) Groruddalen is also a place subject to the full glare of policy intervention and, we contend, stands metonymically for a kind of future Norway, although this image is not without its conflicts, contradictions, aspirations, and ideals. Of course, within this matrix of ideas, learning is central. Not only does learning embody the possibility for future livelihoods that the young people of Groruddalen may inherit; it is also a site for many different kinds of community dreams, and a symbol for a different kind of ‘new Norwegian’ identity.

The particularity of Groruddalen has resonance beyond Norway, and Norway, too, is interesting as a form of society beyond its fjords and forests. Many countries in the developed world are experiencing social upheaval and challenge as a result of inward immigration and globalization. In societies that were historically homogeneous, such changes have resulted in diverse forms of cultural and interpersonal adaptation and accommodation. The traditional Nordic model of an equitable, high taxation welfare society with good social outcomes in terms of health, education, and quality of life stands at one point in the continuum of forms of social organization across the global North. Yet this is a society that has come under increasing stress despite its unprecedented wealth, itself the result of careful investment of natural resources. At the same time, the existence of large areas in modern cities of minority populations has created a series of policy concerns that has resonance for many countries not enjoying

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Norwegian wealth. The nature of the Nordic model, its attitudes to and organization of education and learning, as well as a description of recent social changes, are explored in more detail in Chapter 2.

The research project on which this book is based examined the learning lives of three cohorts of young people spread across Groruddalen. Living in the different centres that cluster in the valley, rising above the through roads, warehouses, and light industry that carpet its floor, we spent more than two years working with the children, young people, and their families, both inside and outside school. We organized our work to spread over two academic years; in the first year, the young person was at the top end of a distinctive stage within the Norwegian educational system, that is, kindergarten, junior high school, and high school. In the second year, we met these young people again in the first year of their next experience in elementary (or primary) school, in high school (upper secondary), or at work or in higher education. Not only did this research design give us the chance to study forms of change and continuity, but it also allowed us to explore the significance of transitions within and across stages in the educational system, and to investigate the kinds of projected actual and imagined trajectories that young people create for themselves throughout their learning. Chapter 3 explains the research process in more detail.

The next part of this introduction reviews some key studies that have explored the concept of learning lives, focusing on both longitudinal research and investigations of particular communities. It extrapolates the debate about key principles in learning science that have acted as our theoretical touchstones – these include the study of contexts, boundary crossing, learning identity, and social practices and trajectories. We then explain how the Nordic model and the Norwegian education system is rooted in the North European philosophy of *bildung* – a way of becoming a person – that turns our investigation of learning across contexts into a question about the creation of a learning identity that encompasses how people think about the purposes of learning, and how they use education to

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imagine their futures. Finally, the rest of the book is introduced in more detail, outlining the key arguments.

LEARNING BEYOND THE INDIVIDUAL

Socio-anthropological and ethnographic accounts of schools and schooling tend to situate narratives about individual trajectories within local and community-based contexts. A classic text here is Paul Willis's *Learning to Labour* (Willis 1978). Learning, in Willis's analysis, describes the broad processes of class identification and socialization rather than referring merely to questions of cognition. Questioning simple models of social reproduction, his book examines counter-intuitive forms of subjectification as working-class youth 'learn' to inhabit and adapt forms of behaviour, values, and identity by rejecting formal schooling in favour of masculine camaraderie – at that time the prerequisite for lives lived as employed, working-class men. Willis's analytical originality was to focus on how forms of 'not-learning' – as they would be described by the official discourse of the school and the educational system – are, in fact, forms of a hidden curriculum, a curriculum that was actually more powerful in shaping lifelong learning outcomes than the stated ambitions of school at the time (Giroux and Purpel 1983).

This attention to the development of forms of subjectivity as a learning outcome, and furthermore the location of those subjectivities within a local community-based political economy, has had a significant influence on accounts of schooling ever since. For example, Peter Demerath's study of the ways that families, young people, and schools negotiate and connive to ensure privilege is sustained shows how the idea of learning has been expanded from the notion of 'container classrooms' (Leander and McKim 2003) to include wider sets of relationships between teachers, school boards, parents, and young people as a key part of what constitutes the nature and purpose of learning in particular communities (Demerath 2009). Similarly, Elsa Davidson's account of the way that schooling stratifies privilege and disadvantage in the rarefied

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and idiosyncratic social world of Silicon Valley has expanded notions of learning to include the relationship between employers, family expectations, how a local economy functions in terms of its labour force needs, and the reproduction of social inequality (Davidson 2011). Both of these latter studies conceptualize individuals as developing themselves within the social context of a set of clearly defined institutional boundaries – in these cases, schools, the local economy, and forces of economic privilege. Individuals learn to negotiate these intersecting forces in ways that are inextricably related to their performance and competence in more conventional academic domains.

Nevertheless, despite their focus at a local level, these studies located within and around the work of particular institutions have not, in general, followed the school populations outside of these particular institutions so that, to an extent, one institution comes to stand for the wider set of social relationships. Socio-anthropological accounts of language and literacy use have tended, on the contrary, to explore language and literacy uses across different social contexts – with school standing for simply one kind of language use – and have examined the inevitable processes of hybridity and boundary crossing that takes place as we transfer language or literacy uses across social contexts. Sometimes study of the ‘other’ context is inferred by the way that language is utilized across contexts – a theme pursued, for example, in the detailed analysis of language use in school by Ben Rampton (Rampton 2006). In other instances, linguistic ethnography is used. The classic study of language learning out of school, in which language is framed as a community resource, is, of course, Shirley Brice Heath’s *Ways with Words* (Heath 1983), in which detailed observation of talk in all sorts of differing domestic and social contexts describes intimate moments of learning in the family. This is then contrasted with definitions and understandings of learning as defined by formal schooling.

In an important extension to this approach, the 1998 study *Local Literacies* (Barton and Hamilton 1998) intensively examined

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literacy events and episodes among adults across concentrated periods of time. The study showed how individuals deploy a range of literacy learning across social contexts, and traced the history of particular literacy uses through an individual's accumulated learning. Barton and Hamilton showed how particular literacy practices, built up over time, were deployed laterally across different social contexts, and they argued that this concept of literacy could be said to reside in a particular community as a form of cultural capital or cultural resource.

While Barton and Hamilton (1998) develop the concept of literacy practices and events to theorize social processes that connect people with one another, and where literacy in all its forms has a role, a kindred concept has been developed by scholars and activists working with Hispanic communities in the United States around the concept 'funds of knowledge' (Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti 2005). This concept moves beyond literacy events to all kinds of social practices, from cooking and food knowledge to other kinds of domestic cultural activities, and research in this vein explores these practices as part of learned cultural repertoire. The concept of funds of knowledge has been used to support schools and other educators to understand cultural practices as belonging to particular knowledge domains and as historical and learned – in the same way as literacy events.

All of the studies mentioned so far have tried to find ways to account for learning outside of school, as something that is located in the particularity of the local and community levels, and which can be observed circulating – especially in the case of literacy practices in the Barton and Hamilton study – across a range of social contexts. Crucially, and building on Paul Willis's work, all of these studies deploy forms of ethnographic investigation in order to approach their subject matter (Willis 2000). Not only does ethnographic investigation allow for longitudinal studies showing movement across time, this approach also seems to be the only way of investigating the kinds of transfers and crossovers that happen between and around varying

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social contexts. Ethnography allows for studying the way that individuals change over time and can identify phenomena, which might be said to constitute markers of subjectivity and a sense of self. Multisited ethnography (Marcus 1995) appears to offer appropriate methodologies for exploring questions of identity, learning, and place (Vadeboncoeur, Vellos, and Goessling 2011). However, developing analytic procedures to move from ethnographic observation to ways of theorizing larger claims about how individuals develop, or how communities determine the meaning of learning, is obviously not straightforward.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CONTEXT AND IDENTITY

Sociocultural conceptualizations of learning underpin all of these ideas about learning as social practices that circulate in particular communities. These conceptions derive from the principle that meaning is socially constructed and therefore has to be understood in socio-historical frameworks rather than being conceptualized in purely psychological and cognitive terms. The history of educational theory is polarized around this opposition (Alexander 2001). While we might venture to suggest that the understanding of learning – which dominates professional and political discourse around schooling and how young people develop and grow up – is frequently psychological rather than sociocultural in orientation, wider studies about learning in the community and outside of school are significantly social. Yet the sociocultural framework still has to account for the interplay of individuals and change within individuals over time (Wertsch 1998).

Contexts

The notion of ‘context’ is one of those seemingly intuitive ideas that appear to disintegrate under close scrutiny. In an article published in 1997, Emanuel Schegloff asked the questions ‘Whose text? Whose context?’ (Schegloff 1997). He argued that there could never be any intrinsic rationale for defining any set of social situations as a formal

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context for learning, but that it is the *analysis* of the learning that discursively frames the context. In other words, we need to question why we might describe certain social situations as a context for learning beyond their apparent utility in our analysis and who might do this. This conundrum was developed in a more recent volume (Edwards, Biesta, and Thorpe 2009) that rehearses the problem of what it means to define the parameters of a context (see also Erstad 2013). Acknowledging that this is a long-standing conceptual challenge, Richard Edwards suggests that by bringing together a diverse range of literature exploring learning studies from the workplace, in the home, and community, from communities of practice and social anthropology as well as organizational science, does at least force educators who focus only on the classroom or the curriculum to revisit core assumptions (Edwards 2009).

One of the key challenges in defining learning contexts, suggested by Schegloff (1997), is the problem of the assembly of seemingly unconnectable and disconnected elements. It is one thing to be able to describe physical constraints and objects that belong in certain places – even exploring these in the temporal dimension, such as in the classic learning context of the classroom. However, transferring such a model to other social situations from a domestic kitchen, to a sports field, or playing a computer game, is more often than not a process that requires the underlying model to be constantly modified. Furthermore, other notions of context often revolve around relationships, such as between teacher and taught, or expert and novice. And, finally, context may exist more in the structure of certain kinds of talk or discourse, which may or may not determine a relational rather than a physical location. These three shifting properties of context – physical/temporal objects or settings, roles and relationships, and structural discourse – make it difficult to isolate an in-principle model of what might constitute a learning context. In the empirical work described in this book we draw on this vocabulary as a way of identifying learning going on across a range of social contexts.

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We follow individual children and young people in this book, and explore their participation and interaction within and across a range of social contexts – the person or the individual (their history, their personality, and their subjectivity) is thus a crucial element in our analysis. It is well known that the concept of identity is complex and indeterminate in social science research (see, e.g., Benwell and Stokoe 2006). In their study of the relationship between literacy learning and identity, Elizabeth Moje and Allan Luke take a rhetorical approach, exploring identity as a series of metaphors present in the literature (Moje and Luke 2009). They argue that contemporary theories of identity stress how identities are social, fluid, and reflexive, and that identity is best thought of as a process that is produced, generated, and developed over time (p. 418).¹ Our interest is in the way that individuals produce (or are produced by) learning identities in the different contexts where we follow them and, as importantly, how such identities are reproduced and circulated as they travel across and between these contexts clearly builds on this kind of theoretical approach. We have been concerned to trace how ‘being a learner’ impacts on and is part of these processes of identity work, especially how the particularity of growing up in the community of Groruddalen itself impacts on an emerging learner identity, and how the educational possibilities in Groruddalen establish horizons for the young people who live there. Further, the idea of learner identity also relates to how young people from immigrant backgrounds take up these learner identities differently from their non-immigrant Norwegian peers.

A key concept for us, then, has been the idea of ‘the position of the learner’. This idea takes from the literature concepts such as models of performance and role, and explores how individuals are

¹ Moje and Luke (2009, p. 419) offer a synthesis of the concept that simplifies a range of theory into five dimensions. These are identified as difference, a sense of self/subjectivity, mind or consciousness, narrative, and position.

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positioned as learners in a range of social contexts, and how they learn to adopt and adapt to those roles as contexts change. Different social contexts position us as learners with differing degrees of autonomy, authority, and agency, and it is in the ways that individuals learn to take up, reflect on, or reject these roles that we can see how their positions as learners are incorporated into and become part of larger projects of identity work, including the formation of subjectivities (Holland 2003). In Chapters 4, 5, and 6 we explore the range of different roles – or positions – that learners take up or are ‘given’ in order to show how such positioning plays a part in larger claims we might want to make about other people’s identities. The question of agency, which is how far such positions are imposed or require consent or are even negotiable, is, of course, central to our argument.

We have been particularly influenced by Stanton Wortham’s notion of a learning identity (Wortham 2006). This phrase captures both the idea of the identity that is produced as a learner – how individuals position themselves in relation to the activities of learning – and the idea that we are all ‘learning to be’ (our identities, ourselves). Wortham’s year-long study of middle-schoolers in one class over an academic year makes two key points. First, Wortham (2006) makes the case that forms of social identification are inextricably part and parcel of academic learning – it is impossible to talk about learning in an institution without in some ways understanding it as part of a wider activity of the development of a social self with a particular focus on status and social position within groups of students in any one classroom. Second, Wortham draws on Jay Lemke’s work on timescales, showing the to-and-fro between local, short- and longer-term forms of identification (Lemke 2000). We were in the privileged position of being able to follow our cohorts of young people into their homes and during their peer activities, thus exploring some of Lemke’s timescales and trajectories, and we were therefore able to expand the idea of learning identities to encompass forms of learning and social interactions beyond the boundaries of academic activity in school. We were able to capture the family’s sense of