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Researching “Learning Lives” – a new agenda for learning, media and technology

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For the past 10 years we have been both vexed and inspired by the idea of "learning lives". The phrase has become a kind of totem for us hinting at a research agenda, a set of principles and values in education including a critique of some of the dominant ways of approaching the relationships between learning, media and technology. In this article – maybe polemic might be a more accurate word – we revisit the history of our interest in this term in order to explicate the meaning(s) of the phrase and to set up a series of challenges for research into young people's learning.

Towards new critical agendas

In 2009 we noted that the most explicit academic use of the phrase "learning lives" came from an adult education project¹ where the use of narratives produced by adult learners can shed light on the place, purpose, impact and effect of education over time (Erstad, Gilje, Sefton-Green, & Vasbo, 2009). In the extraordinary changes in educational research over the last 20 years, galvanised by the significant restructuring of social and economic life across the societies of the global North (Ball, 2007; Ball, 2008), this learning lives approach seemed to offer a way of swimming against the tide of research which was inordinately focused on the relationship of what happened inside schools to learning and pressures towards standardisation of learning outcomes (Hattie, 2013). The socio-cultural paradigm - the main alternative to the non-cognitivist, psychologist tradition inspired by Thorndike (Ladwig, 2010) - has always been insistent that education is fundamentally a cultural construct, that it depends on changing definitions of what it means to be educated (Levinson, Foley, & Holland, 1996) and that school is only one site amongst many where learning takes place (Scribner & Cole, 1973). Yet, funding for projects which examines learning in places other than school and understanding the role of learning as a lifelong, life wide project was and still

is silenced from many policy debates and popular understandings about how education works in our societies.

Both of our early work in media education was steeped in the new literacies tradition (itself framed by socio-cultural principles) and in the 2009 article we drew attention to the range of scholarship investigating the ever-changing place of digital technologies in young people's lives where school was clearly only part of the picture and any attempt to theorise what learning might mean in relationship to technology had to take a much broader perspective. Not only were we intrigued by the intra-and inter-personal dimensions of technology use, but we took from the adult education narrative tradition a sense that learning was something that affected all aspects of how young people were learning to live as well as the changing place of learning in their lives. As we wrote at that time:

The life-history approach is clearly consonant with some of the literacy location-based studies and draws attention to the nature of social change; to inter- and cross-generational experiences; to the distinctness of types of cultural change; and to the contexts of learner's lives - both in their micro specificity, like the digital bedroom' and larger spaces such as the family or institutional experiences. We are particularly interested in how learners' narratives about themselves (both past and present) become resources which are then mobilised within the learning process. (Erstad et al., 2009:100)

It is not surprising that - especially in Ola's case- we oriented towards the Germanic and Scandinavian traditions here, because the philosophy of *Bildung*- which animates both educational philosophy and attitudes towards national education systems in those countries, is much more focused on these kind of whole life, personal, values driven and civically orientated impacts.

Specifying our research approach

By 2016 we had played with the learning lives idea sufficiently so that rather than focusing on its origins in narrative we were interested in exploring how we could "follow" learners across spaces, timescales and trajectories. In a forthcoming volume *Learning Identities, Education and Community: Young Lives in the Cosmopolitan City* the idea of learning lives became a question of tracking "learning identities" (Wortham, 2005) over time and seeing

how these "travel" across different social situations (Erstad, Gilje, Sefton-Green, & Arnseth, 2016). In this volume we had set out to explore how everyday social interactions for young people in a valley to the north-east of Oslo provided a range of different learning contexts where they had developed different forms of learning identity (whether these be in online gameplay, learning to cook, hanging out with friends on a sports field and so forth). Our initial ambition had been to track how these different identities were structured and constrained or enabled and enhanced across all these different kinds of social setting and interaction. However, as the project developed (2009 - 2011) learning lives came to mean something slightly different again.

We had deliberately set out to explore not just how forms of learning might circulate but what function learning has – as an ongoing process – on learners. How the young people, who grew over the two years of our fieldwork and who we met at different stages in the life course (from pre-schoolers to those just entering tertiary education or the workplace) drew on their emerging sense of what their learning could do for them (and therefore what purpose education was seen to serve), and this became a dominant theme. In the context of our fieldwork, the newly socially diverse populations of a rapidly changing Norway, learning lives became a way to investigate questions of cultural identity, of Norway's institutional response to its now racially diverse population, so that our initial interest in contexts for and of learning mutated into a focus on the work that school does amongst others in creating dimensions of national identity – of civic participation and identification. This was particularly acute when it came to understanding how people draw on versions of what it is to be educated in order to imagine and to make futures for themselves. Paradoxically then, the more we looked into "learning lives" outside of the school the more we were struck by the overwhelming power of schooling in terms of how it frames knowledge as well as how it authorises pedagogic relationships to the point where our initial interest in approaching all forms of learning disinterestedly and agnostically did not hold up under scrutiny (Bernstein, 2000; Baker, 2014).

Conceptualising digital technologies, schools and learners lives

This recalibration in our approach was particularly important when trying to disentangle a focus on learner identity – how individuals perform as learners within pedagogic frameworks – and on the uses of digital technology in and out of school. In general our learning lives interest stressed a neutral approach to digital technology seeing it very much in the tradition

of historical analysis of media which have emphasised that, contrary to popular hype, there can never be not-media and that in some ways knowledge and learning is always structurally mediated (Luke, 1989; Buckingham, 2000). Our work showed very much how what may have been characterised as organic and "native" digital media use is now simply an extension of the ways that the school society frames, categorises, and authorises knowledge penetrating ever more deeply into hitherto more private individual spaces.

In a similarly "learning lives" inspired research project into the everyday lives of 13 to 14-year-olds in a class from an ordinary London comprehensive school, one of us, Julian, has taken this agnostic attitude into the everyday place of digital technology even further. In a co-authored volume, *The Class: living and learning in the digital age* (Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016), digital technologies were seen to primarily serve functions of control. Within a school, technology supported processes of surveillance and homogenised variety and difference, flattening out any theories of learning into standardised measurable outcomes. At home digital technology was regarded much like any other public utility, water or electricity, a necessary unnoticeable part of the infrastructure. The technology both enables form of connection and disconnection especially as young people were taking care simply to use it as yet another mechanism to avoid adult eyes. In this project, as with our joint work, the most active process at work was the power of the school to define what constitutes appropriate kinds of knowledge, ways of learning and pedagogic relationships however much traditional forms of such dimensions might be redefined by the changing nature of Norwegian or British society.

However, this finding whilst on the face of it seeming to undermine the value of a "learning lives" approach actually serves to support its need. Even if the evidence points to how both discourses of learning and the uses of technology are only becoming ever more incorporated into singular narrative dominated by the logic of formal schooling (Baker, 2014), so that our initial interest in excavating varied and diverse kinds of learning experiences – a sort of up-to-date digital version of Mike Rose's studies of older working class histories (Rose, 2005a; Rose, 2005b) – seems not to have been proven in fact, a lack of evidence is in itself worrying.

It was for this reason that the other of us, Ola, reviewed a range of Norwegian-based research, most of it funded from an educational technology perspective with the aim of reasserting the moral and social purpose of such work within a progressive vision for the

purposes of education in complex modern societies (Erstad, 2013). That volume argued for the need to thread together a response to social changes often exemplified by everyday digital technology use and the need to assert key values around which a national education system could create both personal individual meanings and civic solidarity. Key to the argument was a way of asserting a purpose for educational research that goes beyond acting as a technocratic handmaiden to the ever more centralised and unequal nation state.

Unsurprisingly, it looked to a vision of learning lives research not so much because such research could in and of itself demonstrate forms of learning and living counter and complementary to the work of the public education system, but because it enables researchers to examine how lives are lived and how to orientate research to explicating and analysing values that count.

In an earlier volume we suggested that focusing attention on learners and their lives, conceptually and empirically impacts on the analytical category of "learning" itself (Sefton-Green & Erstad, 2013). As research into media, technology and education – as evidenced perhaps by many of the articles in the pages of this journal – continues to pay attention to the role of media and technology as a meaningful and determining variable in education, so paying attention to learning is left by the wayside. This is not a sneer at the moral inadequacies of researchers, since attention to technology clearly reflects wider social, and more importantly funding, priorities as has been eloquently argued by others (Buckingham, 2007; Selwyn, 2010). However, we do suggest that bringing a learning life perspective to bear almost always requires research to address the key question of how to use knowledge to make a better society. Refusing to exclude wider social contexts and learners' life trajectories forces these messy perspectives into the picture.

Areas for investigation

A learning lives perspective, we now think, depends on three areas for investigation. First of all is the challenge of how to capture, theorise and describe the travel and trajectories if researchers are truly to "follow" learners through, around and in their learning across everyday life. Disentangling the quotidian and faithfully describing movements across timescales and social places (Leander & McKim, 2003) is complex, expensive and takes time: it is not necessarily calculated to appeal the current education research funding regimes. Secondly, it means refusing what seems to be the most apparent levers of change, namely media and technology. Whilst this might sound slightly perverse in the light of our earlier

work and in the pages of this journal, we would argue that a key problem for those of us interested in technology is precisely to find a way not to overstate its importance and to continue to find ways to show how it brings into play wider social and political questions of power and meaning. And thirdly, learning lives approaches needs to address the pedagogicization of everyday life and the schooled society (Tyler, 2004; Baker, 2014). Learning lives approaches helps us see the changing place of the meaning of education and institutional pedagogies across all the nooks and crannies of everyday life. Here paying attention to the changing discourses of learning, the new and ever more homogenising "folk theories" (Olson & Bruner, 1996) across our societies (Biesta, 2011) is, we suggest, necessary if we want to show how young people make sense of their experiences of education and learn how to be, how to live, in an increasingly unjust and unfair world (Putnam, 2015). Without this sense of purpose, we would find it difficult to know what the point of doing education research might be.

Endnotes

¹ See Gert Biesta's project 'Learning Lives: Learning, Identity and Agency in the Life Course' (2003-07).

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