Blurring Educational Boundaries to Visualise Young People's Agency in Learning Practices

Fernando Hernández-Hernández &
Juana María Sancho-Gil

Expanding learning scenarios

Learning takes place beyond the classroom and school. Notions such as lifelong or life-wide and life-deep learning reflect its ubiquity in the knowledge society (Banks et al., 2007). However, in the educational discourse learning remains closely linked to scholastic concepts related to student assessment or curriculum objectives. In these pervasive settings, young people's learning often seems to be ambiguous. On the one hand, the literature offers a picture of a body of connected youth who use digital technologies to engage in learning activities tailored to their personal interests. On the other, there is an increasing criticism around the notion of life-long learning as a key competence, as educational policies seem to respond more to 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 pedagogisation of young people's lives, and the studies that attempt to articulate and recognize more personal and social ways of engagement that, for some young people, are allusive in a formal school context.

Taking into account this complexity and tensions, the RTD project Living and learning with new literacies in and outside secondary school: contributions to reducing drop-out, exclusion and disaffection among youth (MINECO. EDU2011-24122), developed by the research group ESBRINA-Subjectivities, Visualities and Contemporary Educational Environments[1] of the University of Barcelona, hosted in November 6th and 7th, 2014, the international symposium "Blurring educational boundaries" dedicated to explore young people's agency in their learning practices, both in formal and/or informal educational contexts.

The symposium aimed to problematize and interrogate the participant's understanding of the role of learning in young people's lives and looked critically at re-

---

1   http://esbrina.eu

search objectives and methods. We specifically sought 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), taking into account the advantages and limits of using 'with' as a methodological stance.

These topics were addressed in 21 papers submitted by researchers from England, Finland, Argentina, United States, France, Germany, Switzerland, Spain, Norway and Brazil. A selection of these papers, those closer to the aims of the journal, were selected to be published in the International Journal for Research on Extended Education (IJREE).

The paper presented by Ola Erstad (Norway), based on the 'learning lives project' (2009–2013) in a community in Oslo, explores 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, members of the research group have investigated changes and transitions in and between youth and children institutional and everyday lives. An important aim of the project was to analyse how identities are shaped and developed in different settings over time. To meet this objective notions, such as "Participation trajectories" (Edwards & Mackenzie, 2008) and "Learning lives" (Edwards, Biesta, & Thorpe, 2009), appear as fundamental. As a conclusion, the analysis shows that learning activities, as experienced by young people, are connected and expanded across different settings. And there is a diversity in the ways boundary crossings develop.

The second paper, by Rachel Fendler and Raquel Miño Puigcercós (USA and Spain) approaches issues arising from blurred boundaries between school and non-school, virtual and physical sites, or formal, non-formal and informal education. Drawing on the contributions of 34 secondary school students, they consider ways in which young people's learning practices suggest the need to rethink educational boundaries. The key notions were "situated learning" and "communities of practice" (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Situated learning looks at the environment in which learning occurs, as manifested in the social terrain of communities of practice, and points out the way for seeing learning as a spatial practice. In the ethnographic cases performed *with* young people, students began to reflect on learning in different spaces (at school, with sport, or with other activities), on how they moved from one to another, and how these different spaces overlapped. As young people were asked to play the role of researchers rather than students, the project was an interruption in their everyday school lives, displacing them both physically and in terms of their identity.

The paper by Imanol Aguirre (Spain) shows an investigation on young people's practices as producers of visual culture, that deviate from traditional master-appren-

tice and expert-novice relationships and that take place at the margins of formal education in the realm of what Trend (1992) designates as "cultural pedagogies". The focus of this research is how and where young people acquire the knowledge they apply in their productions, the types of competencies associated to these types of knowledge and what are their attitudes and interactions in the learning processes. The research, based on interviews and a questionnaire, evidences that visual culture produced in this conditions gives young people the opportunity and the occasion to feel free for experimentation, being part of a community or an audience that dispenses recognition, trust and complicity and the opportunity to access to many unexpected resources.

Finally, the contribution made by Kristiina Kumpulainen and Anna Mikkola (Finland) offers an alternative conceptual framework to the disjuncture between "formal" and "informal" education by re-framing this traditional divisive distinction between the two. From the authors approach, formal and informal learning are not conceptualised as discrete categories, but rather "formality" and "informality" are conceived as attributes inherent to all circumstances of learning. To exemplify this argument they analyse empirical data from a case study on elementary school students' engagement in technology-mediated creative-learning activities. 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.

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

These contributions could help educators and policy-makers to rethink the roles of learning in the transitions and mobilities of young people in today's societies. All these papers locate learning beyond the limits of schooling, in spaces of affection and intensities that cannot be measured and represented by external or internal school standards. These learning environments contain activities that escape classification and coding strategies of analysis. This issue is articulated by Dennis Atkinson (2011, p. 13), who argues 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, Equality and Learning: Pedagogies Against the State*. Rotterdam: Sense.

Banks, J. A., Au, K. H., Ball, A. F., Bell, P., Gordon, E. W., Gutiérrez, K. D., ... Zhou, M. (2007). *Learning in and out of School in Diverse Environments: Lifelong, Life-wide, Life-deep.*

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. Advances in Cultural-historical Activity Theory* (pp. 163–181). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Edwards, R., Biesta, G., & Thorpe, M. (Eds.). (2009). *Rethinking Contexts for Learning and Teaching: Communities, Activities and Networks.* New York: Routledge.

Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Trend, D. (1992). *Cultural Pedagogy: Art/Education/Politics.* New York: Bergin & Garvey.