Identity, Community, AND Learning Lives IN THE Digital Age

EDITED BY

Ola Erstad & Julian Sefton-Green

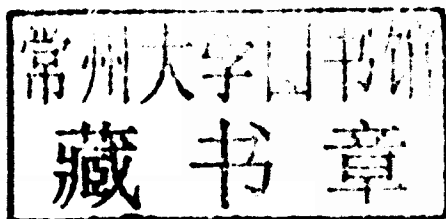# Identity, Community, and Learning Lives in the Digital Age

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IDENTITY, COMMUNITY, AND LEARNING LIVES
IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Recent work on education, identity and community has expanded the intellectual boundaries of learning research. From home-based studies examining youth experiences with technology, to forms of entrepreneurial learning in informal settings, to communities of participation in the workplace, family, community, trade union and school, research has attempted to describe and theorize the meaning and nature of learning. *Identity, Community, and Learning Lives in the Digital Age* offers a systematic reflection on these studies, exploring how learning can be characterised across a range of 'whole-life' experiences. The volume brings together hitherto discrete and competing scholarly traditions: sociocultural analyses of learning, ethnographic literacy research, geospatial location studies, discourse analysis, comparative anthropological studies of education research and actor network theory. The contributions are united through a focus on the ways in which learning shapes lives in a digital age.

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Contributors

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Ola Erstad is professor in the Department for Educational Research, University of Oslo, Norway. He has been working within both the fields of media and educational research, especially on media literacy/digital competence. He is leader of the research group TransAction: Learning, Knowing and Identity in the Information Society. He is involved in several research networks on digital media and education nationally, across the Nordic countries in Europe and internationally. Recent publications are 'The Learning Lives of Digital Youth – Beyond the Formal and Informal' (*Oxford Review of Education*, 2012) and 'Content in Motion: Remixing and Learning with Digital Media' (with Drotner & Schrøder, 2010).

Øystein Gilje is a postdoctoral researcher on the project 'Learning Lives' at the University of Oslo, Norway. His doctoral thesis 'Mode, Mediation and Moving Images: An Inquiry of Digital Editing Practices in Media Education' (2010) investigated young people's remixing practices by using a sociocultural and multimodal perspective. Gilje also led the research project 'Making a Filmmaker' (2007–9) on young filmmakers' learning trajectories in Scandinavia. Gilje has published his work recently in international journals, such as *Written Communication, Visual Communication* and *Nordicom Review*.

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Kenneth Silseth is a research Fellow in the Department of Educational Research, University of Oslo. He is a member of the research group TransAction at the Faculty of Education and has, in previous work, been investigating a wide range of themes linked to young people's use of new media. In his thesis, Silseth explores constructions of learning, identity and intersubjectivity in young people's use of digital technology in and out of school.

Björn Sjöblom is a postdoctoral researcher in the Department of Child and Youth Studies, Stockholm University. His research revolves around children

and youth's computer gaming, especially in co-located settings such as Internet cafés and LAN parties. Drawing primarily on video data, he studies situated and multimodal methods of communicating within such contexts. His dissertation 'Gaming Interaction: Conversations and Competencies in Internet Cafés' (Linköping University, 2011) deals with young players' interactional management of collaboration, disputes and gaming competence, and with how such interaction lies at the heart of participation in this gaming culture.

Audra Skukauskaite is an associate professor at the University of the Incarnate Word. Her research and teaching interests focus on discourse and ethnographic research in education, open-ended interviewing methodology, impact of reforms on teachers and student learning in diverse classrooms.

Randy Young (nom de plume RelixStylz) is a musician, composer and multimedia artist from Oakland, California. He translates perspectives on urban life into the verbal, visual and musical languages of hip-hop culture, producing critical understandings of social, political and aesthetic experience for social media audiences.

Acknowledgements

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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).

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

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?