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Learning Lives Connected: Digital Youth across School and Community Spaces

Vidas de aprendizaje conectadas: Jóvenes digitales en espacios escolares y comunitarios

ABSTRACT

Whereas most studies of learning explore intra-institutional experiences, our interest is to track individual learning trajectories across domains. Research on young people's use of different media outside schools shows how practices of using digital media are different from practices in schools in both form and content. The major challenge today, however, is to find ways of understanding the interconnections and networking between these two lifeworlds as experienced by young people. Important elements here are adapted concepts like context, trajectories and identity related to activity networks. We will present data from the ongoing «learning lives project» in a multicultural community in Oslo. We will especially focus on students of Media and Communication studies at upper secondary school level. Using an ethnographic approach we will focus on how learners' identities are constructed and negotiated across different kinds of learning relationships. The data will consist of both researcher-generated data (interviews, video-observations, field notes) and informant-generated data (photos, diaries, maps).

RESUMEN

Aunque la mayoría de los estudios sobre el aprendizaje hablan de las experiencias intra-institucionales, nuestro interés se centra en el seguimiento de las trayectorias de aprendizaje individuales a través de distintos dominios. Las investigaciones sobre el uso de los diferentes medios por los jóvenes en el entorno extraescolar muestran cómo las prácticas aplicadas en el uso de medios digitales difieren de las prácticas en el entorno escolar, tanto en forma como en contenido. El reto principal actualmente consiste en encontrar formas de entender las interconexiones y la creación de redes entre estos dos mundos de la vida, tal y como las experimentan los jóvenes. Aquí los elementos importantes son los conceptos adaptados como contexto, trayectorias e identidad, relacionados con las redes de actividades. Presentamos datos del «proyecto sobre vidas de aprendizaje» actualmente en curso en una comunidad multicultural de Oslo. Nos centraremos especialmente en los alumnos de educación secundaria post obligatoria que cursan estudios de Medios y Comunicación. Con un enfoque etnográfico, nos centraremos en la forma en que se construyen y se negocian las identidades del alumno en distintos tipos de relaciones de aprendizaje. Los datos incluyen datos generados por los investigadores (entrevistas, observaciones a través de vídeos, anotaciones de campo) y datos generados por los participantes (fotografías, diarios, mapas).

KEYWORDS / PALABRAS CLAVE

Learning lives, learning trajectories, school, community, connections, identity, ethnography, social networks.
Vidas de aprendizaje, trayectorias de aprendizaje, escuela, comunidad, conexiones, identidad, etnografía, redes.

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1. Introduction

The changing role of media in our societies, and especially the impact of digital technologies since the mid-1990s, has implications for where and how learning might happen, whether situated or distributed online or offline. On one level, being a learner has always meant operating within and across different spaces and places. Traditionally connections between sites have been framed within the hotly debated issue of transfer (Perkins & Salomon, 1992; Beach, 1999), which dominates both popular and academic mindsets. Still, current opportunities to move across «sites of learning» means that understanding how one context for learning relates to another has become a key concern when conceptualizing and investigating learning and knowledge in the 21st century (Edwards, Biesta & Thorpe, 2009, Leander & al., 2010).

Educational research has mainly been focusing on learning activities within the classroom (Sawyer, 2006). During the last decade the influence of digital technologies on classroom activities has become a key area of educational research. This research shows how teachers and students struggle to implement and define fruitful learning practices using digital media in different subjects and on different levels in school (Law, Pelgrum & Plomp, 2008). Furthermore, institutional practices are often described as barriers to school development related to the integrated use of such media. Several critical voices have also been raised about the strategies pushing the implementation and use of digital media in schools (Selwyn, 2011). In contrast, research on young people's use of different media outside school shows how practices using digital media vary from practices inside school in both form and content. Leisure time activities employing digital media have been described as an alternative route to engagement and learning that are better adapted to 21st century needs than traditional school learning and future employment within the creative industry (Gee, 2007; Ito & al., 2010). These developments imply a need to better understand the connections between different practices, exploring media as an embedded part of everyday activities.

Our discussion is informed by the following two research questions:

- How are learning and literacy practices among young people connected between different contexts and over time?
- How can we study connected practices as part of young people's evolving learning identities?

A major challenge today is to find ways of understanding the interconnections and networking between different life-worlds as experienced by young people. During the last decade there has been a growing interest in the research community across disciplines to better understand how knowledge travels from one setting to another, and how this is experienced by learners in their everyday lives and practices, online and offline. This can be seen in the rethinking of key concepts like «context» (Edwards & al., 2009), «trajectories» (Dreier, 2003) and «identity» (Lemke, 2007; Wortham, 2006). In this article we will present data from an ongoing project in Oslo, Norway. We will concentrate our analysis on one 18-year-old boy and one school project he took part in to exemplify ways of studying learning lives and how practices connect.

2. Connected lives – learning, literacy and identity

In studying connected lives, we need to go beyond issues of access and context-bound use and look more closely at the everyday practices of young people and how digital media create different trajectories of learning for different people. Ito and colleagues (2010) in the US describe this as «media ecologies». In the large scale «Digital Youth» project, they manage to document the broader social and cultural contours, as well as the overall diversity, in youth engagement with digital media. The concept of ecology is used strategically to highlight that: «The everyday practices of youth, existing structural conditions, infrastructures of place, and technologies are all dynamically interrelated; the meanings, uses, functions, flows, and interconnections in young people's daily lives that are located in specific settings are also situated within young people's wider media ecologies… Similarly, we see adult's and children's cultural worlds as dynamically co-constituted, and likewise, the different locations where youth navigate, such as school, after-school, home, and online places» (Ito & al., 2010: 31).

In their findings, they refer to certain genres of participation, in what they describe as «friendship driven» and «interest driven» categories. Furthermore, they have identified different levels of commitment and intensity in new media practices. These genres of participation are then interpreted as being «intertwined with young people's practices, learning, and identity formation within these varied and dynamic media ecologies» (ibid.). However, we should be careful when emphasizing differences between online and offline activities. As Nunes (2006) has made explicit, we live in the intersection between the online and offline as part of our everyday practices. In exploring digital youth, it is also important not to get caught up in con-

ceptions that might be too general (Buckingham & Willett, 2006). The level of digital competence and technological interest among young people varies greatly.

Recently, there has been a growing interest in linking learning and identity formation as interrelated practices connected to the capacity to adapt to changing roles within different contexts (Holland, Lachicotte Jr, Skinner & Cain, 1998; Moje & Luke, 2009). Many of these studies have criticised the institutional practices of education, claiming that the resources, identities, and experiences students develop in other settings are not properly recognised or used as an anchor for developing their skills and knowledge in school (Heath, 1983; Kumpulainen & Lipponen, 2011; Wortham, 2009). In the same vein, scholars have started to question the relevance of educational practices for the future workplace and for civil society, suggesting that students are not sufficiently able to re-contextualise the curriculum and make it relevant to managing problems and challenges in practices outside educational institutions (Guile, 2010). In policy, coordinating the skills and knowledge required, and likewise, the dynamic, changing relations in the economy and society, is crucial. A dual focus on learning and identity allows us to analyse how learners move between and interweave different contexts, by looking at their positioning practices over time (see also McLeod & Yates, 2006; Thomson, 2009). Furthermore, we are inspired by Wortham (2006; 2009), who empirically showed how communities and institutions shape young people into specific kinds of learners.

The notion of «trajectory» provides an analytical means for understanding learning activities across time and space. Participation trajectories are closely linked to identity as a «capacity for particular forms of action and hence a capacity to interpret and use environmental affordances to support action» (Edwards & Mackenzie, 2008: 165). We use the notion of trajectory as a way of identifying the pathways that a person, or an object for that matter, follows within and across situations, over time. Edwards and Mackenzie (2005) argued for a detailed analysis of the formation, disruption, reformation and support of trajectories of participation in the opportunities for action provided (p. 287). We ought, then, to explore how participants are not merely situated in time and space, but also how they are actively networking learning resources across space-time (Leander, Phillips & Taylor, 2010: 8). If we merely point out that learning is situated in context, we will be missing the fact that people themselves actively establish contexts of meaningful action (Van Oers, 1998). To analyse how people do this is particularly important in knowledge economies, in which people are regularly faced with new challenges that require an innovative use of knowledge and expertise. Furthermore, new technologies enable faster access to, and distribution of, texts, pictures, or other knowledge resources. When researching these issues, we need to understand how these new phenomena may be adapted to other contexts, e.g. a school essay, or a mash-up video on YouTube (Burgess, Green, Jenkins & Hartley, 2009; Warschauer & Matuchniak, 2010).

In the case of socio-cultural approaches, issues of identity are treated as closely interwoven with learning in order to participate in various kinds of practices (Linell, 2009). To become a proficient member of a practice is also to take on a certain identity – as a gamer, a skateboarder, or a chess player. These identities are made available through practice –as observa-

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ble action, language use, texts or other types of cultural resources– and newcomers can take on or appropriate these identities as they become more central members of the practice (Gee, 2000). People perform multiple identities and participate in a range of practices. At times, there may be connections, other times there may be tensions, and sometimes, there might be no relation whatsoever (Silseth & Arnseth, 2011). How these connections or tensions are established has consequences for a person's participation trajectories.

3. Learning lives

«Learning lives» refers to the coherence between learning, identity and agency in the individual, framed by a biographical approach which studies peoples' learning trajectories over their life course. Personal histories and future orientations are used to create «narratives of self'; these selves are central to productive learning. In a «learning lives» approach, the connection between learning and identity is important because it specifies how different learners engage in learning activities across settings. Learning does not end when one leaves the school grounds at the end of the day.

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Challenging our conceptions of «context» is important because it informs us, in an analytical sense, of the way we interpret and understand the interrelationship between people, their learning identities, and the circumstances they are involved in at different times and in different places. Edwards, Biesta and Thorpe (2009) relate the discussion on context to the broader discourse of lifelong learning where context is an outcome of an activity or is itself a set of practices. To emphasize the process of networking between people and environments, they use the term contextualizing rather than context. Practices are not bound by context, but emerge relationally and are polycontextual, i.e. they have the potential to be realized in a range of strata and situations based on participation in multiple settings. Once one looks beyond the context of conventional situations for education and training, allowing learning contexts to be extended to the dimension of relationships between people, artefacts and variously-defined others mediated through a range of social, organizational and technological factors, then the limitations of a large part of conventional pedagogy becomes clear (Edwards & al., 2009: 3). This raises an important point concerning how contextualizing and networking involves different types of learning and different contents, and implies different purposes, which might be variables in the values defined for them.

To pursue this issue further, it is possible to address three different focal points: 1) by concentrating on people as they move in and between practices, and examining how they are enabled to sustain their participation; 2) by focusing directly on the tools and signs to determine how they are interpreted, communicated, and made available in a practice; 3) by scrutinizing the structuring of the practice itself, i.e. how is it organised and how is it made learnable for newcomers. In this article, we will focus primarily on persons, as we draw on different data types from a wide range of practices and situations to produce condensed portraits of the selected participants.

4. Methods and context

We will draw on data from a comprehensive study involving ethnographic fieldwork related to three different age cohorts: 5-6-year-olds; 15-16-year-olds; and 18-19-year-olds. We monitored children and teenagers in these cohorts as they went through important transitions in their formal education, and we studied the changes and transitions in and between their institutional and everyday lives. An important aim is to analyse how identities are shaped and developed in different settings over time.

In our project, we have focused on one particular community in Oslo, with a dense multi-ethnic population. Both historically and discursively, this area is representative of the broader changes in Norwegian society over the last three decades. In the 1950s and 1960s, working-class and lower-middle-class families moved to this area, and many people were able to obtain low-interest, government-subsidized loans to

purchase their own homes. During the past twenty years, several different immigrant groups have either arrived in Norway and moved directly to apartments in this area, or have moved to the area from other parts of Oslo, looking for the less expensive, more spacious properties here. For this reason, public discourse has always presented this area of Oslo as a challenge, and at the same time, as the image of the new, multi-ethnic Norway. In this regard, the population is culturally and linguistically diverse; such cultural diversity in urban areas is a relatively new phenomenon in Norway. The Municipality of Oslo, supported by large investments from the State, has undertaken to transform the community over the next 10 years, and we felt that we could use the intervention program as a unique opportunity to develop a community-based understanding of the learning lives of young people in and out-of-school, and to frame the analytical perspectives within a particular social and geographical context.

We used an ethnographic approach, based on recorded interviews and other data collection tools, in order to create detailed descriptions of the learning lives and learning contexts of three cohorts of young people. The study consists of interviews, observations and field notes, video recordings of selected episodes and activities, participant-generated materials in the form of diaries and photos, and maps produced together with the participants. At the time of writing, we are starting to sort the data and are in the process of developing analytical categories that will facilitate systematic comparison across the data sets, which will be analysed to produce meaningful studies of learning moments, learning processes, learning contexts, and their interconnections.

Our challenge has been to develop and use methods that enable us to understand how learning occurs across different sites and locations, including: learning across institutional frames, between informal, semi-formal and formal locations; learning on- and off-line; learning through play; and learning across a range of cultural and interest-driven spaces.

While there has been considerable interest in the academic, policymaking, and innovation spheres in learning across contexts as a way to harness the energies of actual learners (Thomas & Brown, 2011), it is still a challenge for researchers to understand and describe how this takes place. As pointed out by Leander et al. (2010), «following» learners across and between sites is complex. Sites are varied and include physical sites, such as home, school, or with peers; virtual spaces, such as online environments, gaming, social networks, and mobile technologies; and conceptual sites (tracing, translation, and re-configuration of understanding across contexts).

While we can understand a great deal about how people make connections between spaces and experiences, we still face the challenge of gaining knowledge on how these resources actually move between contexts, how people appropriate them in one set of circumstances and are enabled to use them in other contexts. Methodological challenges are practical (how to track and physically follow learners), ethical/-legal (how to ensure access and trust across social domains), and conceptual (the circumscription of what might actually constitute evidence of learning) (Bloome, 2005; Edwards & Mackenzie, 2005; Erstad, Gilje, Sefton-Green & Vasbø, 2009; Sinha, 1999; Wortham, 2006).

5. Researcher-generated and participant-generated data

Each student was given specific assignments: to take different kinds of photos, such as pictures of their school route, places they remembered from childhood, and photos of their homes. Altogether, we collected more than 200 digital photos during spring of 2011. As a result of these relatively open-ended assignments, the informants provided us with a large number of very diverse photographs. One of the most interesting aspects was the way in which immigrant children included pictures of their relatives, as well as photos from their journeys and visits back to their countries of origin. As part of the research design, we used these artefacts as a starting point in follow-up interviews. As more than half of the informants in the study would be leaving their local community during summer 2011, we intended to compare those who left the local community to those who chose to stay.

Based upon a preliminary analysis of the interviews, several issues have emerged. An important (albeit unsurprising) finding is that most of the pupils in secondary school moved across a very limited local community, close to their homes. When talking about place and movement, many of the participants made it clear that they recognised some invisible border in their local neighbourhood, which they did not cross. The interview data enabled us to understand how they positioned themselves in relation to other socio-economic groups.

In order to attain our objective of tracing movement and flow, we needed a flexible means of data collection and analysis. A possible solution is to combine a detailed analysis of interaction with the analysis of texts, models, or artefacts of any kind, alongside

observation of action in and between situations (Baker, Green & Skukauskaite, 2008), thereby alternating between different levels of analysis.

On the one hand, an interaction analysis can show detailed instances of emergence, whereas observation and the analysis of photographs, maps and artefacts can provide insight into broader changes and flows. Detailed studies can enable us to problematize some of the broader claims or provide richer and more detailed descriptions of generic patterns. Observations over time can provide us with knowledge that might force us to reconsider the analytical claims resulting from studies conducted over a much shorter time span. By analysing these different kinds of data, we aim to understand the trajectories of young learners during their crucial educational transitions. Bearing in mind that we have just started to analyse our data, we will limit our analysis to providing a telling example of one participant. We are unable to provide a detailed analysis of how participation trajectories are actually negotiated; nonetheless, we shall provide an overview of how some of the youth we have studied managed their learning and identities across practices and over time.

It is not our intention to provide a whole list of the practices and activities in which young people engage, as this would be too complex and demanding. The aim is rather to provide some background to the following analytic example, insofar as this helps us suggest and point to connections and boundaries between practices, which may have an impact on young people's participation over time. In our analytical perspective, there are multiple trajectories of development and participation. How people become who they are is the result of complex negotiations and cannot be reduced to societal and individual variables.

6. A portrait of a young learner

Mathias lives with his mother in an apartment block. His parents are divorced. He has spent his summer vacation in the mountains ever since he was a young child. He describes these experiences as life-changing moments for him. There are 4 computers in his home, and he has both a laptop (Mac) and a desktop computer in his room. He has always practised sports and currently attends Thai boxing training sessions several times a week. He uses Facebook actively every day, and reads newspapers online. Mathias is not very motivated at school and that was partly why he chose «Media and Communication» studies. From his perspective, this is an easy subject with a lot of freedom, which suits him. In class, he is very sociable, but spends a lot of time on different projects with a friend. He wanted to start higher education in order to become a real estate agent because his career as a musician in the community was not a serious option for future employment and that is why he gave it up on starting upper secondary school. After secondary school, he started military service and was considering the possibility of a military career, which would seem to satisfy his interest in nature and his serious training efforts.

7. Mathias and the «Street Art» project

In one «Media and Communication» class we studied from November 2010 until May 2011, five boys did a project on graffiti in urban spaces in Oslo. It was a school project, in the sense that the whole class had to do a project for a certain length of time. Students were free to choose the theme for their project and their co-workers. The idea for the project had to be approved by the teacher before they began, and the final product was to be evaluated by the teacher.

Two of the five boys in the group knew a couple of local graffiti artists; they invited the other three to join their group. The basic idea was to create a portrait of the two artists. The boys submitted their proposal to their teacher, who approved their idea and also made some suggestions about making the project along the lines of a TV documentary about graffiti in urban spaces in Oslo.

At that time, there was a broader discourse in the city among politicians and the general public about the pros and cons of graffiti. The boys agreed that this might make the production more interesting and started to outline their plans for the documentary. They searched for public information and newspaper articles about graffiti in Oslo, and they drew up a list of people they might interview. They also read books about graffiti artists like Banksy, which were available at school or at the local library.

The students spent a couple of weeks reading and writing in preparation for the different sequences of the documentary. They needed to plan how they were going to do things and to determine who should be responsible for what. They also had to make arrangements with the people they wanted to interview. We focused on two of the boys in the group, whom we were also studying in some other projects. Considering that one of the boys was a former rapper in the community and was used to being «on stage», and another had done quite a lot of filming and editing in his leisure time, it was decided that one of them would be the reporter in the documentary and the other the camera operator.

Image 1: One of the boys filming the two graffiti artists out in the community.

The documentary is approximately ten minutes in length. Our interest lay not so much in the actual documentary, but more in the example it provided of how practices and knowledge are connected in the process of its implementation as a school assignment. The main theme in the film is the contrast between the bottom-up perspective of street artists who paint graffiti, and the top-down perspective of politicians concerned about the costs of cleaning graffiti from public buildings, etc. The film starts with footage from the local community of the students themselves, and then Mathias, who is the reporter, comes on screen explaining that they are going to discuss the question of graffiti from a bottom-up and top-down perspective. Most of the film is comprised of snatches of interviews with the two graffiti artists and the politician, followed by a few sequences of the graffiti artists painting graffiti on a public wall where this is permitted. The film then shows some interviews with students from their school giving their opinions on graffiti. The film was not well-rated by the teacher, mainly because of the poor sound and film quality of most of the sequences, due to the technical problems the students had with the camera.

Nonetheless, this project, just like several other projects we followed during this period, is an example of the ways in which students can use the community as a learning space and draw on different «funds of knowledge» from their own experiences of having been brought up in the community where their school is located. The community becomes a resource that they can draw on as part of their school projects. In the case of Mathias, this connection between school activities, i.e. making this film, and his own experiences and practices in the community was expressed in several ways.

Mathias plays a lead role in this project because the theme is something he is particularly engaged with. On one level, he sees the issue of graffiti as being important in relation to his having grown up in this community. Graffiti is something that is discussed in the community, and in the city itself, as a controversial issue in the tensions between youth culture and the adult discourse, which considers it a problem. Mathias can see the pros and cons of both positions, but he knows the two graffiti artists in the film personally and therefore has a special involvement in this issue.

Urban space is something that plays an important role for Mathias in several ways, and something that the film specifically focuses on. Mathias grew up in this community, and in the interviews and in his own documentation of his learning life, different spaces and places are important to him. This is partly due to his interest in sports and his experiences as a rap artist.

The youth club where the two graffiti artists operate and which is portrayed in the film, is the same club where Mathias used to record and perform his rap music.

While we were there, it was obvious that he knew many of the people at the club, adults and young people alike. He seemed to have a special status as a youngster who had been active in the club, even though he no longer had any relationship with this club. While we were there, Mathias showed us around the recording studio and the club, and told us about when he performed concerts with several hun-

Image 2: Mathias showing me the recording studio where he recorded his rap-music.

Image 3: Mathias at Thai-boxing practice.

dred young people present, which was obviously very important for him. He talked about this as a way in which he performed himself as a person, changing from a rather shy person to someone who was «on stage» performing in front of others. When discussing this period in his life, which is also part of the «Street Art» film through the different spaces portrayed therein, Mathias explained, as follows, the role it had in his life then, and the impact it has on his learning life now.

– I: When did you start to be interested in rap?

– Jo: I guess I started in 7th grade. I wasn't very old at the time. After that, it just developed and kept on growing. However, over the past year, it has become less important. I've lost interest because I want to put my efforts into other things, like school and things. It is a risky future to be a rapper in Norway. It's not really a smart choice.

– I: How did you feel about school at that time, in 7th grade?

– Jo: In 8th grade it was worse, and in 10th grade I had to get good grades to get to where I am now. But while I was at upper secondary, I thought more about the future and that is why I became less interested in music. The sensible mind took over. I was probably not the smartest at school, but what I did with music – that was what I could do and there was no one that could do it better than me at that time. I felt like, this is my thing. I feel like I manage school, and also I have trained a lot. I feel that I am still good at music. I know many musicians that are very good, but it is not enough to be good. Everything has to connect.

Being a rapper feels like life-changing moments for Mathias. However, he also talks a lot about being close to nature, in the mountains with his grandfather, as special moments for him as a person. He has two sides to his learning identity. One is connected to being bored with school, and his interest in rap; the other is about sports and body discipline, which is obvious from his interest in Thai boxing and his future orientation towards a military career. After starting military service when he left upper secondary school, he wrote in his diary about his very disciplined life and about the learning trajectories involved therein, where he can draw on his experiences from Thai-boxing.

Mathias and the students in the group used the community as a resource to make their film for a specific school project. The theme is something they were engaged with, and something they had opinions about, thus defining this learning process as more authentic. On a more personal level, it is clear that for Mathias, the main person in the film project, this connects to many sides of both his previous and current learning life in the community. He negotiates learning trajectories that he defines as important for the project; at the same time, he makes connections regarding his life outside school and the importance it has had for his positioning towards learning and school.

8. Concluding remarks

Through our illustrations, and especially, through the example of Mathias and one of the projects he was involved in as part of a school assignment, we have attempted to provide examples of connections and boundaries between practices. From kindergarten through primary school, children learn schooling. They learn to engage with objects in certain ways, to behave as students, and to negotiate their identities in relation to subjects and peers. In school, they learn discipline and focused attention, and that it takes work to succeed. Sometimes, they find that the skills and identities developed, or the resources available in the community, are useful and can be re-contextualised and mobilised in school to manage the tasks and problems they encounter. With peers, they may learn that it is important to be skilled at football, or that it is more important to run faster than the others than to be better

at maths. In upper secondary school, the same focus and attention is required to succeed and get good grades. If you do not succeed academically, there are certain trajectories that close down in terms of pursuing a more theoretical education. Certain activities, like engaging in volunteer work, sports activities, or political organisations, might be a source of support, as they foster organisation of time, hard work, and discussion. Again, success here might enable you to pursue a career in upper-secondary school, where you have more freedom to choose subjects that interest you. Nonetheless, any such choice also means that certain trajectories are no longer possible. If you pursue more practical subjects in high school, e.g. media production, then skills, experiences, and identities pursued outside formal settings, i.e. having made digital videos of you skateboarding with friends after school, might be very important to succeed.

We have tried to show that activities and practices provide different ways of structuring activities that can make it easier or more difficult to re-contextualise skills and identities developed in other practices. It is the complex negotiation work in and between these practices that determines whether individuals are able to successfully engage in their learning lives.

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