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# Learning at Not-School

**A Review of Study, Theory, and Advocacy for Education in  
Non-Formal Settings**

**By: Julian Sefton-Green**

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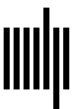
**By: Julian Sefton-Green**

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## 7 Conclusion

The English sociologist of education Basil Bernstein once famously noted that “schools cannot compensate for Society” (Bernstein 1970). As I have worked my way through the argument of this essay, I am tempted to remark ruefully that not-schools cannot compensate for schools either. In other words, some of the burden of aspiration that we all heap on formal education cannot and should not be placed on the non-formal sector either. We need to be cautious about how investing in and developing the non-formal learning sector can and cannot compensate or even remediate some the challenges evident in public education systems. In particular, I have paid attention to the distinctive features in the kinds of learning found in the non-formal sector, or what I have called *not-school*, to help us understand the sector better and imagine how it might contribute to the broader ecology of learning opportunities available to young people today.

The main aim of this report has been to review key directions in the literature and address what it might mean to talk about learning in the non-formal sector. I have raised the question of

how the institutions within this sector, which can be defined by what they are not—school—might offer an institutional frame for characterizing a type of learning. Most of the literature is cautious about this idea, and reverting to broad sociocultural theories, offers notions like participation structures to explain the quality of learning enabled by organized out-of-school learning. Although it has proven difficult to disentangle forms of learning we know and take for granted from our school systems and from shared understanding of what it means to learn and be educated, there are certain kinds of practices and ways of engaging the inter- and intrapersonal self in learning activities that do seem distinctive to the participation structures on offer.

We can summarize this attention to the self in terms of (a) a mode of engaging, and valuing individual's sense of themselves and (b) the quality of relationships between adult and peer. The peer education philosophy, particularly prominent in northern Europe, describes a "method for young people themselves to develop a further understanding of modern youth life and their own place and perspectives inside this."<sup>16</sup> Scholars like Rhodes and Hirsch focus more on the semiformal mentoring roles available in organized settings (Hirsch 2005; Rhodes 2004). As we have seen, a common focus is attention to the subjective well-being of young people, their self-esteem, identity work, confidence, interest in social outcomes, quality of relationships, and other civic virtues—as well as of personal development well captured by the German concept of *bildung* (Chisholm 2008).

A number of theorists have commented on how the not-school sector offers a distinctive kind of position within a broader ecology of provision. McLaughlin and Hirsch refer to

this as a form of “intermediariness” of developing forms of social organization that deliberately and specifically sit between more traditional or conventional systems and structure (Hirsch 2005; M. W. McLaughlin et al. 2009).<sup>17</sup> We have also noted how the in-betweenness of the institutions also serve pathfinder functions, developing activity or curriculum that later might become incorporated into the mainstream. However, the tendency toward institutionalization—which many scholars suggest we need to be wary of as destroying the distinctiveness of the provision—is not always straightforward, and there is an absence of studies exploring the cost-benefit and indeed the plausibility of scaling up or mainstreaming from community-based innovation.

### **Historical and International Perspectives**

A secondary ambition here has been to offer both a historical perspective on writing about not-school projects as well as to compare some international studies. One contention is that the sector is sufficiently developed—despite its precariousness in terms of sustainability, funding, and longevity—to allow for the value of alternative heuristics and especially those beyond local program evaluations.

One key background theme in our discussion has been the reframing of the meaning of lifelong (over time) and life-wide (across locations) learning. In a European context especially, scholarly discussion about lifelong learning has argued that individuals are now addressed with increasing urgency by policy having to both take responsibility for their own learning and to

invest in themselves as economic resources to exploit changing employment opportunities (Edwards 1997; Griffin 2000). The terms of this discussion do impinge on some of the aspirations of the non-formal learning sector, as the politics of lifelong learning suggest a desire to maximize return on investment and that all forms of education—loosely, strongly, or narrowly defined—will become incorporated in this project of developing human capital.

Such a vision is quite contrary to the person-centeredness of much of the literature we have examined in previous chapters. It does, however, mesh with some of the historical trends identified toward the end of chapter 3.

There we described three key shifts in the literature about not-schools over the last twenty-five years. We noted a different kind of emphasis on the individual as opposed to the community as an object of intervention. This is not to say that current scholarship isn't interested in community but that the older literature more explicitly demonstrates its interest in groups, neighborhood, and community, whereas contemporary scholarship tends to focus at an individual level. Second, as observed in Hirsch's work, we can see the emergence of a debate around the instrumentalization of learning, as we have just described above, with a tendency to bring out economic rather than social values—that is, being more interested in producing workers than citizens (Hirsch 2005). Writers like Hirsch are concerned that the kinds of spaces that are opened up in not-schools don't become overwhelmed by this changing agenda.

Finally, we have noted a tendency among policymakers and scholars alike to pedagogicize more and more of everyday life.

This is an ugly term that nonetheless captures the process whereby all interactions and transactions between children and adults are turned into opportunities for learning and developing educational outcomes. From this perspective, the very idea of in-formal learning may at times seem to threaten the sorts of boundaries that society deems appropriate for children and young people (Corsaro 2005).

### **Identity, Metalearning, and Embedded Practices**

The discussion in chapters 3 through 6 have revolved around a nexus of ideas and practices that, although not offering a specialized theory of learning has nevertheless answered the question posed in the introduction: what might be the generic features of learning within the frames associated with this field? I have offered a reading of scholars who have examined creative media-making production practices, exploring the place of identity in curriculum activity and, above all, a way of working with people as learners so that broad underlying capacities can be realized and developed. As noted earlier, this report attempts to characterize the value of developing the inter- and intrapersonal self, which has been so central to the mission and purpose of not-school activities.

However, it has proven more complex to answer the question: what are the traditions and conventions of pedagogy at work in organized out-of-school settings? Many of the studies cited have found it quite straightforward to address curricula in these contexts; and whether they have invoked youth-work traditions or, as we have seen, the studio or media practice, the out-of-school

settings themselves haven't been a major issue. It may be that such concerns are not that salient for enquiry in this field.

Given, as I have argued, that much of the experiences of participation are valued precisely because of what they are not (school) and made meaningful through contrast and comparison within any individual's learning ecology, I suggest that a key function of analysis of this sector is that it enables us to see how modes of learning may or may not be transferred across experiences. It helps us raise deep challenges in understanding what it means to talk about the quality of learning pertaining to these experiences (Sefton-Green 2004). As observed in chapter 2, helping us think about learning as a set of plural activities rather than an individualized unitary mode may be an important critical implication of study in this area. However, being able to reflect on when and where we are applying a common sense of what constitutes learning as derived from experiences of schooling always needs to be brought back into perspective.

In chapter 7 of *Between Movement and Establishment* (M. W. McLaughlin et al. 2009), the authors attempt to identify conceptually different ways of explaining change to understand at a theoretical level how to describe and analyze social innovations. They use the idea of "cultural frames" and "social logics" (chapter 7). We need a similar way of theorizing this new discourse about learning to enable us to get a grip on how not-schools might be able to legitimize the kinds of learning they espouse: in McLaughlin et al.'s terms, to examine whether any of these kinds of learning represent a type of "in-betweenness" (8). Part of the challenge in this report has been to describe a conceptually new landscape of learning that can be captured only by

more established educational language. Although this might always be the destiny of any radical movement, the issue here is contemporary, and our understanding of what learning is and what might be possible is always going to be determined by the tone and flavor of educational discourse around us—and that varies from culture to culture, possibly from country to country.

### Implication for Further Study

This conceptual dilemma isn't helped by empirical weaknesses and absences in the research literature. Chapter 3 contains a series of criticisms of the reach (especially in terms of international and intra-nation spread and depth) and composition of the research field. Even if there was some agreement about the mix of identity-based, person-centered, production-based curriculum and pedagogy, the unanswered questions about the institutional frame, participation structures, and indeed the place of not-schools within the wider ecology of education provision include:

- What defines progression, or, for that matter, achievement? Is there a place for accreditation?
- What does the learning mean to the teachers (if that's always the correct term) in this sector? Or to the learners? In what ways is it defined as learning or education, especially if as noted above, there is tension between the limited language of learning available and the desire to develop conceptually or strategically new or different kinds of educational experiences?



- Over what timescales—what life-trajectories—can we or do we make sense of the not-school experiences? How can we make connections between learning and outcomes such as employment? How can we connect learning in not-school situations to other kinds of educational experiences, especially if we are interested in learning-to-learn or metalearning capabilities?
- And especially, what are the points of correspondence with more conventional learning systems, definitions, vectors, and histories? How might the totality of learning experiences connect within and across people?
- Finally, if we are interested in community or neighborhood, how can we trace the experiences of participation and belonging at levels beyond the individual?

These are all difficult research questions. They also suggest that in some way focus needs shift away from the specifics of the sector (as much as possible at this time) and toward understanding the totality of learning across and within the lives of individuals and communities. That too is a tough challenge for research: but without evidence and informed theory, we run the risk of perpetuating naive advocacy and self-fulfilling evaluations.

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