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International Journal of Educational Research

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijedures



Representing *learning lives*: what does it mean to map learning journeys?

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 27 October 2015

Accepted 12 May 2016

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Learning lives

Map

Learning journey

Narrative

Context

Habitus

ABSTRACT

'Learning lives', a double articulation both describing lifelong and life wide learning and the role learning plays in developing identity, relies on a process of portrayal. The vocabulary used to make sense of learning across contexts and over time is spatial in origin and metaphorical in application. Key terms include: mapping, connecting, navigating, tracing, pathways, vectors and networks. I suggest that we are now developing ways of representing learning that depend significantly on forms of narration, the filmic gaze and a visual frame making the concept of a "learning journey" more visible. Yet as we appear to capture and represent complicated forms of learning in "non-educational" contexts so the paradigm of studying such learning as movement is thrown into question.

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1. Introduction: mapping learning

the mapmaker's work is to make visible
all them things that shouda never exist in the first place . . . like borders,
like the viral spread of governments (Miller, 2014, p. 17)

I have recently been involved in several projects that have followed or tracked individuals and cohorts of young people over extended periods of time and across a wide range of social contexts (Erstad, Gile, Sefton-Green, & Arnseth, 2016; Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016; Sefton-Green & Brown, 2014). As, in their different ways, these studies have analysed the ways that learning identities (Wortham, 2005) are positioned and enacted across different social contexts or explored how young people construct career trajectories for themselves (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997), it is clear that a common way of accounting for "learning lives" (Erstad & Sefton-Green, 2013 and see Section 1 to this special issue) is to draw on a cartographical language and talk about maps or mapping. Indeed, there is a whole vocabulary used to make sense of learning across contexts and over time, which is fundamentally spatial in origin (see also Ingold, 2015) and therefore, I suggest, metaphorical in application. Key terms in this vocabulary include the ideas of: mapping, navigating, connecting, tracing, pathways, vectors and networks as well as the more common, learning journey and, at its most contentious, the role of education in social mobility.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2016.05.003>

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This article reflects on the hidden assumptions and values implicit in any vector or trajectory based paradigm found in this kind of language and considers why the idea of mapping may be so popular at this time. Whilst mapping might appear to offer a helpful and progressive way of making sense of some of the key transitions in young people's learning lives, I also want to open up some of the limitations in the language and in particular suggest that the current popularity or interest in the term and its application may well derive from a broader cultural interest with the documentary gaze, big data and forms of digital surveillance and therefore carries with it a set of associated challenges. The more that we live in a world that can be reconstructed via digital traces across a huge variety of virtual, personal, social and institutional life (Schneier, 2015), the greater our capacity to appear to "know" how individuals appear across social contexts and therefore the greater our belief that we can track or map the processes involved in this travel. However, this article will question the relationship between these changing ways of knowing and the validity of using cartographical language to describe any such relationships.

Indeed, a key aspect of mapping itself is that it draws on a particular mode of representation (Corner, 1999; Cosgrove, 1999a) that is, of course spatial but (usually) two-dimensional and linear. Using such modes of representation as a way of understanding learning across contexts both stretches this metaphor and illuminates the discussion. The second theme will thus be to explore the tension between traditional ways of understanding learning across contexts through forms of narrative (Bathmaker & Harnett, 2010; Trahar, 2006) and more strictly, narrativisation, (that is the act of constructing narrative through talk, see Goodson, Biesta, Tedder, & Adair, 2010; Goodson, Loveless, & Stephens, 2012) with emerging ways of representing learning across contexts as diagrammatic charts and maps in several recent instances of educational research. As big data makes the discipline and theory of network analysis (Scott & Carrington, 2011) more accessible, new forms of representation seem to be emerging (Lima, 2011) that, on the surface can look like ways of mapping learning across contexts.

Finally, I want to reflect on how maps constitute ways of knowing, (originally captured by historiographical studies of the relationship between early maps and the colonial imagination, Cosgrove, 1999b; Luke, 2014). I want to take the insights from that early work into the critical understanding of how early maps constituted a power/knowledge relationship, that is the role maps themselves take on in claiming knowledge of a place, in order to examine why education research might be interested in mapping learning across contexts. My concern is to disentangle any notion of the predictive and, with reference to young people, to disavow the teleological. By this I mean that the research I shall explore inevitably frames young people's learning as a form of travel—to and from starting and finishing points. A map, as the historiographical studies show, must impose as much as it may explain and therefore may only appear to illuminate the complexity of understanding learning across contexts. Like many (all?) discussions of learning, maps are no more than forms of representation.

In particular, I am concerned that this language of movement and of travel is another set of clothes to dress up a fundamental understanding of learning as a form of transfer, of taking from one place and applying in another. Whilst the concept of transfer has received a considerable amount of critical attention and is highly contested (Beach, 1999; Bransford, 1998) and indeed is not the focus on my current argument in the sense that the term is mainly understood in the literature, I do want open up the idea that the metaphor of mapping and tracing learning journeys does carry within a residue of such a deeply held apparently common-sense principle of educational theory, that as we follow learners or trace their learning we are in some sense explicating learning as a kind of "crossing-over".

The article first of all explores the relationship between the visual and the conceptual in studies of how learning might be charted: questions about the practicalities of representing learning. It then goes on to examine the role of narration in learning—fixing what might be thought of, as time-based maps, thus exploring what it means to represent movement and change. Finally, it speculates about contemporary modes of representation derived from cinematic or more accurately documentary gazes as well as forms of representation produced through big data; all of which suggest new kinds of representational maps but which, I argue, need to be taken as cautiously as we now know to do in respect of the ideological work done by conventional maps.

2. Charting learning—fixing relations in time and space

One of my recent attempts to chart learning consisted of a diagrammatic representation of the social and cultural catalysts and disconnections that, I argued, influenced the pathways to a creative career (in this instance I was examining young people who are entering diverse fields of digital creativity from coding to computer game animation, Sefton-Green & Brown, 2014). We had interviewed nearly 40 people from their mid-teens to early 20s all of whom were either expressing an interest in, or who had started studying for, or who had actually found employment in these fields. The purpose of the study was to examine the kinds of factors that influenced career choice, interest development, opportunity, motivation and the development of domain-specific expertise. Here is an extract from one case.

As is conventional in these kinds of charts, the axes (in my case, People, Places, Identity and Futures) are set against a timeline (again not untypically broken into school stages) derived from analytic concepts. Although I would make the case that these four axes themselves emerged from a process of coding interview data and represent a way of organising, clustering and categorising ideas and themes as Fig. 2 demonstrates, it is of course disingenuous not to acknowledge that the language used to describe these concepts derived from my interest in this topic and the argument I wanted to make. The use of a chart-like template to layout these linguistically derived concepts as a way of summarising discrete unbounded experiences is a profoundly and analytically driven process of representation.

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