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Everyday watching and learning in an Indigenous Australian community

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ABSTRACT

In Indigenous communities around the globe, the time and space needed for the learning of language, ways of being, cultural practices and beliefs, and local history have been limited by changes brought on by formal education, modernity and globalisation. However dynamic these factors and processes may be, introduced Western institutional practices, values and expectations have nonetheless eroded the learning that occurs in the everyday environment, and schooling has reduced the time spent acquiring culturally-specific knowledge systems, languages and world-views. Research has demonstrated that shared cultural practices and beliefs are vital for identity strengthening in Indigenous Australia. However, studies of the process of this learning and teaching remain few. Examined here are three learning events embedded in the everyday social context of a remote Aboriginal community in Australia. Based on an anthropological and art historical research project that investigated the creative, social and cultural world of an Aboriginal community, this paper focuses on community-based learning events in the quotidian environment. Revealed here are the immediate needs and desires of community members and the manner in which local-specific values, practices and knowledge are transmitted inter-generationally. We argue that these events are a key factor in identity strengthening, cultural continuity and cultural renewal.

1. Introduction

Learning the cultural practices of one's social world is key to identity formation for young people growing up in communities throughout the world, as it is in small Indigenous communities in Australia. It is well-understood that traditional teachings and knowledge provide a basis for positive self-image and healthy identity in Indigenous society (Dockery, 2009). Indigenous identity formation experiences tend not to derive from schooling in remote Australia, but rather are acquired through everyday participation in the specific socio-cultural practices of that community. In remote Indigenous communities, socio-cultural schemas continue to underpin the practice of everyday life and the construction of social identity, however without opportunities to acquire such practices and knowledge, the well being of individuals and families may be impacted. Research in Indigenous Australia (Gibson, 2008; Myers, 1989; Stanton, 1989) indicates that shared cultural practices and beliefs are vital for identity strengthening. In his work with Warlpiri

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people, for example, Eric Michaels (1986, p. 129) has discussed the social nature of culture and identity formation, when he argued that ‘culture is what you teach your children and is not biologically inherited’. Despite these observations, the *process* of learning and teaching such practices and worldviews remains under-researched. Following on from Wolcott (1982, p. 86), who asks ‘what can we say about learning that is not school related?’ this paper takes an in-depth look at learning in the social environment in one Indigenous Australian community in the east Kimberley region of Western Australia.

In this Indigenous Australian case study, we take a socio-cultural approach to learning by examining the community-based learning that occurs in the everyday, social environment. While schooling is a relatively recent phenomenon, community-based learning can still be conceptualised as the norm in many Indigenous settings. This mode of informal learning is also termed socialisation, tacit learning, observational learning or learning through intent participation or pitching in Greenfield (2004) and Rogoff, Paradise, Arauz, and Correa-Chavez, M., and Angelillo, C. (2003). At times, this form of learning is hard to identify and can go unnoticed (Bock, 2010; Paradise & Rogoff, 2009). We have chosen three events from everyday life to present a detailed analysis of where and how learning and transmission occurs within an everyday world that is culturally and historically constituted (Holland & Lave, 2009). Importantly, in our case study, this learning is initiated and directed by local Indigenous community members. This examination has roots in the work of Vygotsky (1962, 1978) whose pedagogic theories highlight how individual development is formed from social, cultural and historical contexts. Vygotsky proposed that the environment shapes the development of human thought; hence, learning has a social character and is interdependent on the environment and our own experiences or socialisation. Social theorists Holland and Lave (2009, p. 1) concur stating that how people participate in, and acquire, new social processes including the production of their lives, work and relationships depends in part ‘on the changing historical circumstances that have shaped and do shape the ongoing social world they inhabit’.

We take as our starting point the premise articulated by Kral and Schwab (2012, p. 45) that: ‘learning is a fundamental feature of human life’. We build on inquiries into the anthropology of learning that incorporate an understanding of socialisation, history and the individual into the knowledge acquisition process (Lave, 1982), and how individual and collective trajectories of identity formation (Holland & Lave, 2009) impact learning by drawing on two key studies. Firstly, Gaskins and Paradise’s (2010, p. 83) simple description of Adi, the Yucatec Maya girl who learns tortilla-making without any deliberate periods of concentration as a clear example of observational learning. Adi, who regularly spent time around her mother when she made tortillas, learnt the skill by silent absorption, observation and from her own initiative—‘with no evidence of verbal instructions and no encouragement’. This



Fig. 1. Location of Warmun community. Based on google maps, 2017.

<https://www.google.com.au/maps/place/Warmun+WA+6743/@-17.0264896,128.2060734,14z/data=!3m1!4b1!4m5!3m4!1s0x2c9c741c915a140b:0x400f6382479c7b0!8m2!3d-17.0265277!4d128.2236271>.

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