



Futurelab Seminar Series

Re-thinking Learning Networks: Home, School and Community

A provocation paper

By Tim Rudd, Senior Researcher, Futurelab

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A note about this paper:

The following text has been written with the intention of stimulating debate at the forthcoming seminar series and as a prompt around some of the wider issues to be explored by seminar participants. It does not necessarily represent the views of Futurelab but rather it is presented as a tool to provoke more radical thinking about how the education system might be reorganised to harness wider social and cultural resources, learner experiences and informal approaches to learning, especially through using digital technologies.

THE NEED FOR CHANGE?

The failure to adequately consider and build upon the broad spectrum of skills and resources that learners have, or can access in the wider community, is symptomatic of an immature education system. It is a signifier of a system that is portrayed as the purveyor of 'preferred' and 'valued', yet limited body of knowledge, but which has its form and content shaped as much by a necessity to attain targets that assure political capital, as it is by sound pedagogical underpinnings. This short-sighted short-termism, which systematically ignores individual and cultural differences, thus institutionalises inequalities, limits educational possibilities and will continue to fail those it purports to serve.

HOME-SCHOOL LINKS AND INFORMAL LEARNING: WHY DO THEY MATTER?

There are currently tensions within existing policy and practice, which generally sees relationships and links between home and school as a uni-directional means of extending the school and transmitting the values of formal education into the domestic sphere. This relationship looks to be further enshrined by current policies, which largely fail to draw upon or incorporate the range of skills and competencies of individuals and other organisations that exist in learners' home-cultural backgrounds. It may be further argued that the extension of the school into the home is a prescriptive model that ironically places a further perceptual barrier between formal and informal knowledge acquisition and thus predisposes individuals to success or failure based on their ability to understand and decode the prescribed body of knowledge presented. Moreover, the current model fails to incorporate the dynamism and complexity that exists within people's social and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, it is less likely to provide educators with a deeper and more valid understanding of learners and thus remains unlikely to truly extend and enrich the school as a reciprocal community learning resource and a place for knowledge creation.

LEARNER VOICE IN A PERSONALISED SYSTEM?

Understanding informal learning and the contexts in which it occurs is essential if a more personalised approach to education is to be delivered. Not only are there key things that can help us understand the nature of learning in its broadest sense, but also it is clear that we must fully understand the socio-cultural contexts in which learning occurs, if learner voice is to be embedded into educational environments. As David Miliband (2004) stated: "Personalised learning is about tailoring education to individual need, interest and aptitude to fulfil every young person's potential". However, without a sound understanding and knowledge of every child's need and experiences, and by implication, their broader social and cultural backgrounds, how can a truly personalised system be developed, and how can we really represent learner voice and offer real choice?

Arguments against tapping into these broader skills and competencies are often based around issues pertaining to cost effectiveness and sustainability in terms of both human and intellectual resource. However, what is the real cost of failing to build upon resources that clearly already exist and provide a customised service to each learner as a basic right? Currently, we have a system that is not fulfilling its potential because its institutions are viewed as 'learned' rather than learning institutions, ones that are based around knowledge recall and regurgitation within rather than knowledge creation and understanding beyond the formal learning environment.

As Moll (1992) suggests, we need to study individuals in their complex social circumstances in order to gain a more complete understanding of them, the skills they have and the wider resources that may provide a basis for learning. A mature educational approach would not ignore what already exists as a basis for building powerful learning experiences. Freire (1993) suggests that community-based informal learning should focus particularly on issues of collaboration and knowledge exchange to empower learners to become responsible and autonomous, and in so doing, promote social justice. In this sense we see a greater emphasis on networked rather than linear models of learning, on culturally relevant experiential learning rather than decontextualised abstractions.

The current formal system of learning however, seldom engages with the learners' 'wider world' in such a way but rather expects individuals to take part in a system that ignores such differentiation by presenting an arbitrary body of knowledge, often presented as 'preferred' or 'ideal' knowledge. As a result, certain individuals or groups find themselves in closer proximity to this 'cultural arbitrary' than others, essentially guaranteeing some an advantage over others, yet this is presented as a natural outcome of 'fair' competition. Moreover, even those who seemingly fare better in this system still do not receive an education that best builds upon cultural resources and informal learning experiences. It is possible for schools, families and communities to link and provide opportunities for mutual and relevant support by drawing on local culture as a foundation for learning. In taking this as a starting point, there is greater likelihood of schools really embedding learner voice, catering more for specific interests, motivations and learning styles of students.

IS EXTENDING SCHOOLS THE ANSWER?

Recently, much has been made of the emergent 'extended schools' agenda, and how theoretically this could offer opportunities for broader relationships between the school and the wider community. However, the focus is arguably skewed and tends to explore *how the school can extend into the community or outside school lives of learners*, rather than starting with an assumption that education can be improved by listening and incorporating learning experiences that occur beyond the school. Furthermore, whilst informal educators may play a greater role, the terms on which they might become engaged are firmly set, "running pre-packaged programmes and constrained by inappropriate targets... They have lost touch with informal education as a non-curriculum form and the possibilities for learning that flow from associational life" (INFED 2004/5).

Failing to account suitably for the differences individuals have in terms of experience, culture, prior experiences, motivations and interests, is to effectively embed and institutionalise inequalities in a system based on proximity to ways of behaving and interacting with formal pre-set and pre-defined bodies of knowledge. Differential outcomes may therefore merely represent the externalisation of the formal education system's failure to educate flexibly and responsively. Knowledge and, moreover, the need for it, currently appears set and fixed but rarely negotiated. Not only might this be seen as elitist but as the 'consumer' or learner did not choose to be educated in this way, it will also undoubtedly lead to disempowered and disaffected learners. Disaffection is not just something affecting those deemed to fail but affects all those alienated from the process of learning at some stage in their formal education. Disaffection is a system failure, not an individual deficit. After all, the consumer does not

necessarily choose to attend school and be educated in this way. Knowledge and learning are situated and thus are not free from the context in which they occur (Leontev 1978). Moreover, various groups are likely to have a different relational position to any specific context, which in turn may be related to their own socio-cultural background and class position. Part of the process of helping individuals learn effectively therefore is to situate learning episodes in situations or language that is 'real' to them. However, our system does not endorse, draw upon or pursue this to any significant degree. Ironically, a system that fails to do this simultaneously takes on even greater responsibility for teaching and learning. Rather than education being something that occurs in many sites and therefore requires broader cultural ownership across a range of organisations and institutions, formal institutions become the key and often sole providers, yet they appear to be ill-equipped to cope with unsustainable levels of responsibility in terms of providing an effective and differentiated system. Extending the school further may not necessarily be a sustainable policy initiative, unless the focus and emphasis is reversed.

INFORMAL LEARNING AND NEW TECHNOLOGIES: THE NEED FOR A NEW APPROACH?

In thinking about how we might extend 'funds of knowledge' and utilise them as a basis for more relevant learning experiences, it is possible for us to consider other ways to mobilise ICT more effectively.

Despite the relatively large financial investment in ICT in UK schools, nowhere is there a clearer example of how the centralised arrangement and organisation of knowledge results in a limited use of the full potential of resources. The ways schools approach and regulate ICT in schools has meant that more often than not learners are essentially 'powering down' at the school gates. As Cuban (2001) suggests, in terms of their embeddedness and use as a learning tool, school computers remain "oversold and underused". The education system's 'appropriation' of computers as a form of knowledge has resulted in both their decontextualisation from their wider application and purpose, and a recontextualisation into a technocratic vision of 'official knowledge' primarily delivered as a subject with associated competency measures and prescribed methods for instruction.

The often very structured way in which schools manage and organise the use of new technologies means that their full potential, as a possible facilitator of knowledge investigation and exploration, has not been realised. Rather than a tool that can transform learning possibilities and experiences, the use of computers is usually a 'bolt-on' exercise. As far back as 1992 Goodson and Mangan drew on Sendov's (1986) 'waves' model to illustrate the developmental stages that computers in education might pass through. They suggest that in the 'first wave', economic and vocational pressures assure it remains an appendage to other curriculum content and purposes of the school. In the second 'wave', further ideological and educational penetration occurs, with computers becoming utilised to deliver other subjects, gradually altering existing classroom cultures. At best, this is probably the stage we are at currently. However, in the 'third transformative wave', education changes radically and becomes an "interactive and deeply engaged set of learning activities..." (p274). With relatively few exceptions, it would appear we are still far from such a third wave. However, with enough will and commitment to providing a more equitable, differentiated and customised system, it is possible to see how things could move forward. At present the system is failing to capitalise on the range of potential educational and social opportunities new digital technologies might afford. As Papert (1993), one of the most enthusiastic proponents of the educational potential of ICT, noted, schools have been largely unsuccessful in harnessing the cognitive potentialities computers have to offer children. Moreover, computer literacy has become defined in a somewhat technical and limited sense. He further argues that there has often been a tendency to define and confine the use of computers to specific contexts and situations whereby knowledge is 'banked' for future (occupational) use. Cuban (2001) further argues that there has to be a deeper commitment to education that addresses social and civic goals, whilst Clark (2001) suggests that there is a need to shift the general focus away from policies trying to

provide technological solutions to ICT access (and curriculum requirements), to broader aspects of inequality that are overlooked, including how ICT might be more usefully applied in order to meet social and cultural needs and requirements.

Considering the relatively limited access individual pupils have to ICT and computers in schools, and the relatively restricted and often prescriptive manner in which they are used, then it is not difficult to see that other options should be at our disposal. Consider how things might be different if we looked more positively at the resources learners own and currently access outside the school as tools to support learning. Imagine if one aspect of using ICT was to focus more on the critical decision-making skills about when best to access and apply which particular technologies that may be available to them. Learners should be allowed to map out broader access to resources, to understand possibilities and to configure these into their daily practices. Whilst we cannot simply exchange the current model for another overnight, we must consider how to best to harness rather than hamper and regulate the use of digital technologies as tools for enhancing and creating new learning episodes and future landscapes. Moreover, we need to consider how we might empower learners to best mobilise the whole range of powerful resources that exist in the informal setting to produce more dynamic, purposeful and relevant learning experiences. The time has come to build upon informal learning, broader experiences and organisation of resources to support enhanced use of new technologies to support learning. Furthermore, it is also time to move away from the notion of using digital technologies merely to support and deliver existing curriculum related knowledge and move towards a 'third wave' vision that sees them as dynamic tools that can radically alter and enhance what is possible in terms of learning experiences.

THE SEMINAR SERIES

In the first seminar of this series, ***Learning in the home***, we will be specifically focusing on home learning in order to identify and explore differences in approaches to learning, and consider how cultural and experiential differences may effect or regulate the way we interact with more formal learning and methods of instruction. Furthermore, we will consider examples and research in this area to help provide a better understanding of the core issues and consider examples and ideas surrounding how digital technologies might best be utilised to support home learning and informal learning.

In the second in the series, ***Learning within communities***, we consider a range of approaches to learning within communities, drawing out the key components for successful learning in more informal settings. We will consider the role new technologies have played in these relationships and how they might enhance them in the future.

In the final seminar, ***Linking and re-thinking home, school and communities: current and future policy***, we consider how future policy and practice may better account for and develop relationships between the formal and informal spheres. We will critically examine current approaches and focus on next steps for policy development.

The overall aim of the seminars is to generate new knowledge, outputs and new ways of thinking in relation to an important and relevant area of research and policy focus. The series will raise important issues for those working in this area and the outcomes will be used to try and influence those who are able to contribute to change in this field. Moreover, the events themselves will draw on contributions from all individuals to inform the content of a subsequent publication.

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