Capturing ‘free-range’ learning outside the academy: researching women’s informal networked learning in community contexts

Helen Aberton, University of Melbourne, Australia

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Introduction

Central to contemporary discussions within the field of adult education are questions about how we frame an understanding of learning and context. Participation in adult education and in learning is now construed as life-long and life-wide and policies designed to promote lifelong learning have given attention to non-formal and informal learning as a potential way to meet the need to increase social cohesion and improve economic competitiveness (EC, 2000, pp.4). In keeping with Delors’ (1996) pillars of education in Learning: The treasure within, the learning goals of adult and community education (ACE) in Australia according to (Beckett and Helme 2001, pp.14) are:

- Learning to know
- Learning to do
- Learning to live (together)
- Learning to be.

Some of these goals underwrite formal education (the academy); others refer to learning outside the academy. As Rooney comments: ‘learning includes education, but education does not include all learning’ (2007, pp.6). Outside education, informal ‘free range’ learning takes place as people participate in everyday living - pursuing interests, socialising, home-making (Eichler, 2005) and trying new ventures or experiences.

It is assumed that increased understanding of informal learning ‘has the potential to widen access to educational opportunities, empower disenfranchised learners and introduce greater flexibility within the educational system’ (Gallacher, Edwards and Whittaker, 2006, pp.225). Therefore, the study of informal learning and not its precise definition (Colley et al., 2002) is my matter of concern.

In this paper, firstly I outline how the study of informal learning is a matter of concern, but is limited by conventional framing and research methods. Secondly, I discuss an alternative framing, where context is considered a ‘weaving together of people and their tools in complex networks. The network is the context’ (Russell and Yañez, 2003, pp.336 emphasis in the original cited by Thorpe Miller and Edwards, 2005, pp.6). Thirdly, I outline the implications of this framing for my research including the rationale for the methodological choice of a practice-based approach to ‘free range’ learning using actor-network theory (ANT) as my lens. My focus is on women’s informal learning in voluntary community organisations and data for my doctoral research study (in-process) were collected from women participants in an Australian rural town. The argument is made that ‘free range’ learning can be ‘captured’ and understood by using the interpretive frame of ANT supplemented by narrative methods. I describe how ANT is used to ‘capture’ ‘free range’ learning as the relationships of practices across networked spaces are traced to and from sites of learning. I sum up by discussing briefly the contribution of a combined
practice-based learning and ANT approach to research in education and adult learning.

**The study of informal learning as a matter of concern**

According to the dominant epistemology of learning, the learning which resides in individual minds is the traditional benchmark against which the relative worth of all types of learning have been judged (Hager, 2005). However, this has been challenged by alternative understandings of learning, such as experiential learning, ‘other’ ways of knowing in indigenous communities (Verran, 2007) and ‘knowing-in-practice’ (Gherardi, 2006). In the learning theory literature the complex and relational nature of learning is apparent, but ultimately our approach to research depends upon the theoretical position adopted (Hodkinson, 2005). ‘It is not a view from nowhere’ (Law, 2007, pp.153).

New knowledge (informal learning) is often a by-product of other life goals and objectives and may not signify as learning for the subjects of research. Nor has everyday learning always been recognised or valued as legitimate or worthwhile knowledge by the learners and educational researchers. Thus it follows, that if research is framed from within traditional educational research paradigms, not only is there the danger of codifying informal learning to meet academic requirements and in so doing reinforce the notion that only the latter counts (Fraser, 1995 cited by McGivney, 2006, pp.21) but possibly issues framed in educational terms could be more appropriately framed in other ways (Edwards, Gallacher and Whittaker, 2006).

Other difficulties and limitations of traditional discourse and research methods for ‘capturing’ and making informal learning more visible have been documented in the literature. Given that learning occurs in everyday life, the traditionally limited conceptualisation of learning and standard research methods (Livingstone, 2005; McGivney, 2006; Sawchuck, 2008) are inadequate for studying the ephemeral, the indefinite and the irregular (Law, 2004).

Traditionally sites of learning (‘contexts’ such as education institutions) (Thorpe, Miller and Edwards, 2005) have been viewed as bounded settings or containers. Rooney (2007) makes a move to look at learning differently by introducing the concept of a ‘learning landscape’. This moves away from the concept of bounded contexts and the privileged position of ‘sanctioned sites of learning’ (education) over the not sanctioned sites of learning (neighbourhood centres) where learning also takes place (ibid). While a useful metaphor, the notion of a bridge suggests a fixity that ANT theorists would contest.

By conceptualising context as a complex network of connections weaving backwards and forwards throughout all learning domains in everyday life (including educational institutions, the community, the workplace and home) limits imposed by modernism and postmodernism can be bypassed. In other words the poststructuralist methodology of ANT provides generative resources for thinking informal learning anew.

**Context as network – methodological approach**

Framing context as a network requires a shift in focus from individual minds and groups in face-to-face interaction, to questions of how activities are organised across space and time, and how organisations of space and time are produced in practice (Nespor, 1994). Therefore, if learning contexts are ‘distributed across the social order and embedded in social practices’ (Edwards, 2005, pp.1), the context is a ‘field of practices’ (Gherardi, 2006). It is therefore an outcome of activities or sets of practices which are practically and discursively performed and performative. These practices connect and overlap in hybrid
spaces, and ‘thirddspaces’ where realities not governed by traditional discourse are allowed to emerge. ANT as a ‘practice lens’ provides a way to conceptualise and talk about these activities or sets of practices which are structured as networks. It involves the recognition and understanding of local places as nodal points in networks of social relations, discourses, material resources and representations (Nespor, 2002).

The concept of knowing in practice enables us to focus on the fact that, in everyday practices, learning and knowing are not separate activities; they instead take place in the flow of experience, with or without our being aware of it (Gherardi, 2006, pp.14).

Therefore learning can be studied as ‘knowing in practice’ (Gherardi, 2006). In this framing knowledge is studied as a process, human and material, aesthetic as well as emotive and ethical, and it is embedded in practice, as the domain where doing and knowing are one and the same (Gherardi, 2006, pp.xii). Practice is also where ‘subjects and objects take shape, language becomes discourse, and knowledge is mobilized and maintained’ (emphasis added). Furthermore, in giving priority to practice over individuality, materiality is restored to view, displacing mind and reason ‘as the central phenomena of human life’ (ibid, pp.xviii - xiv).

**My doctoral research**

My study of informal learning focuses on women in voluntary community organisations (on the understanding that local places are nodal points in networks) in the rural town of Lakeview (population 5000) Victoria. Practices as sets of seeing, doing and saying are my chosen units of analysis, and not the individual or the collective actor (Gherardi, 2006, pp.xiv). As materiality is considered to be ‘tangible knowledge’ (Gherardi, 2006, pp.xiv), it follows that knowledge is constructed through concrete practices. ‘The concrete activity of producing and using knowledge becomes visible and observable, as well as describable (and one does not have to) assume the intentionality of people or (have) to delve into what goes on inside their heads’ (ibid, pp.xvi). Adopting an ANT sensitivity, ‘it is the practices (including the people) that come first. It is their materiality, their embodiment, their diurnal and organisational periodicities, their architectural forms, that are central. And those practices are often pretty obdurate. In this way of thinking practices make the world’ (Law, 2007, pp.145). I set out to ‘follow the practices’ moving up from situated practices to the institutional order or conversely moving down to the people and things in-situation i.e. to explore a connective web which branches in all directions.

Although the practices (not individuals) are the units of analysis, I began my ethnography by first developing a rapport with 20 women (aged 30-96) who have or have had a profile in the community on account of their practice in local activities. In individual semi-structured interviews (narrative inquiry method) I elicited additional depth and understanding by triggering memories with photographs, artifacts, newspaper clippings and questions such as ‘Why did you join the Garden Club?’

Narrative methods have helped me to capture the richness and depth of the experiences as demonstrated in my discussion of data - Scene 2 below. In an attempt to widen the possibilities of researching instances of learning, memory work (as an interpretive method) was also used. I am aware that these additional methods sit within research traditions which are somewhat unlike ANT. However, in order to ‘capture the experience of ‘free range’ learning, these methods are powerful. At a practical level they afforded a close relationship with my participants and thus deeper insights. It was a way to build trust.
Analysis of data

I begin with the local and the particular

Scene 1: Inside a corrugated iron shed (with a cement floor) at Lakeview’s Agricultural and Pastoral Society’s Showgrounds – October 2007

The members of Lakeview Garden Club work to prepare for the exhibition and judging of the Horticultural ‘Section Q’ of the Annual Show. For many years this has been the Garden Club’s responsibility. Over a three day period, I was engaged in following the practices of seeing, doing and saying (Gherardi, 2006, pp.xiv). I interviewed, observed, videotaped and listened to comments as the participating women were engaged in practices such as talking, cleaning and demonstrating, as they set up benches for the exhibition of flowers and plants.

In her description of the Garden Club’s activities, Jane (a participant) said that ‘they all knew what they were doing’ and Laura (another participant) explained that in her first year when she helped: ‘I didn’t have a clue. I was just looking around and thinking… Last year and this year I was much more organised with it’ (Interview 1). And Meg (the Club Secretary) described the group as ‘just a terrific bunch of women to work together’.

So what is being learned in practice? I can only begin to list the observable enacted skills:

- Organising and setting up a display
- Working co-operatively with shared understandings
- Managing a conflict which threatened a breakdown of practice.

There are skylights in the roof and the temperature (C30˚) in the shed made it uncomfortable for the workers and the living floral display. Therefore, according to Laura, the people (the Show committee) running the Show wanted to put the flowers on the other side and move the (display of) Art work over …(but)… the Horticultural Section of the Show has always been a really good feature – being the first shed as you come in the gate. That is the first shed they (the public) come into.

And she went on to explain that the initial visual impact of the flowers would be lost. The dilemma was addressed by agreeing that ‘next year we could put some shade-cloth over the skylights to save the expense of duplicating the existing purpose-built benches’ in the suggested alternative location (Laura: Int 1).

As Gherardi (2006, pp.56) suggests, these moments of breakdown of practice occasion … learning when there is interaction and negotiation of power relations within a circumscribed territory.

On Show Day, as I was being escorted around the exhibition by Jane I came upon prize-winning roses. Jane explained that her husband’s name was on the Certificate because he pruned the roses which grew in what she called ‘the boys’ garden’.

Scene 2: The boys’ garden

At Jane’s home, in an earlier interview I had asked: ‘Why did you join the Garden Club?’ Jane described the details of the death of two children (both boys) in accidents seven years apart on their family dairy farm. The second accident triggered the family’s decision to leave the farm and move into the town in 1987.

Jane takes up the story at the time of the second accident:
So it changed our life a lot. But in that time you learn to live with it a little bit. But within 12 months he (my husband) wanted to sell the farm again (he had wanted to sell and leave the farm after the first death seven years earlier). I said ‘…we have got to go out this time.’ So we did, and that is why we have got our rose garden here. And that’s why I joined the Garden Club; because I went to see one of our neighbours who I knew was in the Garden Club and I said: ‘How can I find out how to take the boys into town with roses or something?’ She said: ‘I’ve got a good lady in Garden Club that will take you under her wing. She is a real rose lady and she’ll tell you which ones will be right for your garden.’ And that’s what happened.

I went to Maureen’s one day, and she came in to the block where I wanted to put them. She gave me all these rose books. She was fantastic! ‘These ones are good for showing; these ones are not; these ones are good for colour; these ones are good for perfume.’

So that’s how I sort of learned a little bit about it. Then I also picked for the names – like ‘Gold Bunny’ (Chris loved rabbits), ‘Angel Face’ (‘cause Ben was only three). In the end we ended up with 57 roses. All were given to us by neighbours, friends, relatives…I have learned a lot (Jane, Int 1).

I was profoundly affected by the story and by being in the boys’ garden. For me too, it is a site of learning. It is a tangible material site of embodied knowing and learning for the family. A place where the boys continue to live, but the presence of ‘Gold Bunny’ also reaches out to the farm site where Chris loved the rabbits. It is a learning site where the family enacts grief and memories.

It is also where gardening is performed. Jane reflects on how she learned through practices (reading books, talking with Maureen, being shown by Maureen) about the aesthetic materiality of roses (perfumes, colours), pruning and showing.

The community’s support is materialised in the rose garden. All 57 roses were given by neighbours, friends and relatives. Furthermore, there is a reciprocity. The garden is shared with the community. On the day before the actual Show, Jane had risen at 4.00 am to prepare the 20 floral entries she (and her husband) had entered in the competition. She explained that it was a lot of work at a busy time:

but we have got to do it for the town, because the town needs the support and we like to fill the benches… I have never done any floral art before, so I thought I would have a try.

It is also a public site of knowing and learning. From time to time Jane has an ‘Open Garden’ such as for the ‘Aged Care’ residents of the town, her fellow Garden Club members or for Red Cross fund-raising. The Red Cross event was in aid of the victims of ‘The Bali Bombings’ Oct. 2002, where of the 202 killed, 89 were Australians. And so the boys’ garden connects with global terrorism.

As Latour (1990) comments, networks ‘draw things together’ by gathering diverse places and times within common frames of reference and calculation. This ‘gathering’ process results in very distant points finding themselves connected to one another.

In a rural newspaper Jane was quoted. ‘We have that (the rose garden) instead of going to the cemetery because it’s more of a living thing’ (The Weekly Times, Nov. 14, 2007, pp.83). The same newspaper article featured the importance of a garden in the lives of
rural people and the effort required to maintain a water supply during the prolonged
drought in South East Australia. As there are restrictions on the use of Lakeview’s
reticulated water supply, Jane and her husband are paying AUD $120.00 for 13,500
litres of bore water per fortnight to fill water tanks for their garden. And so the network
spreads out and doubles back on itself as one traces and analyses the intertwining
relationships between social and material processes.

And it is through the practice of research that this conference paper connects the
garden with worldwide researchers.

**Conclusion**

In this paper I have used empirical research data to demonstrate the power of ANT as a
methodological approach for researching ‘free range’ informal learning. Firstly I referred
to the difficulties and limitations of informal learning research. Then, taking the view that
informal learning occurs in complex heterogeneous networks where social and material
processes are entwined, ANT is a way in which the materiality and tangibility of
networked practices can be focused up, and this focus on material practices reveals the
embodiment of learning. Furthermore, supplemented by deeper understandings of
experiences provided by participants, ANT acts as a window onto the world of informal
‘free range’ learning and facilitates the ‘capture’ of instances of embodied learning.
Therefore this combination of approaches makes a contribution to research in education
and adult learning by extending our view and understandings.

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