Learning08: Methodologies and Practices for Approaching Learning as a Social Phenomenon Inside and Outside of School

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Blurring the lines for learning: how children make meaning with digital technologies in informal learning environments

There are an increasing number of settings, namely after school clubs, youth clubs, museums, libraries, where children can learn informally. However, there is a need for research in their pedagogic and social role as complementary to formal learning in order to realize their immense potential.

This paper presents research that draws on a three year longitudinal study of an after school computer club and a series of technology-enhanced workshops at the British Museum. The research assumes a change of focus for studying learning more holistically; from viewing children in passive roles to their being more active, from a content-based to a process-based pedagogy, from individual to group participation, from a focus on learning as a psychological phenomenon to one on learning as a 'social practice'. It attempts to bridge the gap that exists between children's uses of digital technology at home and at school.

The research study develops a double strategy for macro a micro analysis: the macro analysis uses socio-cultural theories to describe and explore the role of informal learning and the concept of mediation. The idea of 'tool' was interpreted to incorporate a wide range of technologies, artefacts (for example pen, paper, book, computer, digital cameras) and social semiotic (for example ideology, signs, educational discourses, language, behaviour,) to make a variety of multimodal representations (stories, songs, poems, dance, music, etc). The micro analysis develops the concept of 'activity' and three components to incorporate the importance of diversity of children's voices and choices: '**technology, tools and artefacts'** (For example children's using laptops), '**information, knowledge and design'** (Children pursuing their own interests) and '**communication, multimodality and practice'** (children scaffolding each other). This paper illustrates how Wenger's theoretical work on Communities of Practice has been useful in identifying the particular kinds of negotiation, identity and reification that characterize the learning that happens in informal settings.