

# Location, location, location: rethinking space and place as sites and contexts for learning

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## Abstract

This essay considers the role of context and site in common understandings of learning in general and describes models of learning that exist as complement, supplement or remediation with 'standard' versions of schooling especially those invoked by the idea of informal learning. It then looks at the 'geo-social' relationships of learners, homes, communities, non-formal learning spaces, regions, schools, nations and the globalised economy trying to tease out what may or may not change in future scenarios to offer different kinds of learning processes, experiences and activities in all of these domains. The essay concludes by reflecting theoretically on how our dominant paradigm of learning - socio-cultural frames - both constitutes and is constituted by the idea of space, contexts, and sites.

**Keywords:** learning environments, sociology, home, school, community, relationships, cultural

## Introduction

There are two deeply entwined themes at the heart of this essay. First is the question of how the 'geo-social' relationships of learners, homes, communities, non-formal learning spaces, regions, schools, nations and the globalised economy may or may not change to offer different kinds of learning processes, experiences and activities. The essential argument here is to explore how different kinds of social relations, especially those which are located in reconfigured and/or virtual spatial relationships create different kinds of possibilities for learning. But there is also a second reflexive and more theoretical theme at work in the construction of the idea of sites and contexts for learning. It is only really socio-cultural understanding of the transactions involved in learning which place a premium on, and an interest in, sites and contexts for learning. From this point of view we need to explore how ideas about how we learn are bound up in our attempts to conceptualise the role of space and place within the learning process.

Some of the key ideas relating to the first theme were laid out in the Beyond Current Horizons challenge by Gill Valentine<sup>1</sup>. Valentine identified three important trends which have underpinned recent policy interest in learning (especially in relationship to ICT). These include:

- The Changing Relationship Between the Spaces of School, Home and Community
- The Future of the School as a Physical Offline Space
- What New Sites of Learning are Emerging?

The other paper in this series by Andrew Harrison<sup>2</sup> asked a series of questions within these frames, probing in more detail the relationships between the physical (and virtual) institutions of schooling as *the* place for learning and learning in other sites.

The essay is organised into four parts. The heart of the essay, Section 3, will take up these challenges, exploring in more detail the literature which is concerned with analysing learning from a spatial perspective. Quite what the spatial means and/or adds to our understanding of learning will, of course, form a key part this section. And whilst the challenges described above are concerned mainly with home and school and, to an extent, community (in this context primarily considered in terms of locality rather than affinity grouping), I will additionally attempt to look at larger scales (region, nation and the global) considering a series of 'locations' which may act as determinants on learning. Each part of this section concludes with an explicit consideration of how each 'space' might play out in future scenarios.

The final part of the essay will then consider the implications of how this analytic frame (derived, as I have said, from socio-cultural formulations of learning) may or may not limit our ability to consider the meaning and function of context in learning in the future. However this essay begins by considering the role of context and site in learning in general (Section 1) before examining theories of formal and informal learning in Section 2, which is the most common way in which learning across different contexts is usually understood.

## **1. Sites, spaces and contexts: stories about learning**

As is appropriate for an essay attempting to imagine possible futures, I want to begin by considering one of the most powerful narratives about education from the past, namely Thomas Hardy's novel, *Jude the Obscure*. First published in 1895, it tells the story of a young rural child desperate to learn and study but excluded from university – symbolised by the distant spires of Oxford – by class and poverty. The novel makes a great case for the virtues of informal learning, in what we might call, different sites, and describes the early years of Jude hunched over books, reading surreptitiously and subversively as he delivers milk, for example.

The book exemplifies some key themes for our purposes and implicitly sets up a contrast between out-of-school learning as characterised over a hundred years ago and contemporary processes. Jude is a good example of a motivated, engaged learner. He learns outside formal schooling structures and systems (albeit obviously aping them at a deeper level, as shown in descriptions of him learning bits of the classics he does not 'understand'). If *Jude* described a young boy playing his PSP under a desk we would, I suggest, categorise it as a subversive, transformative experience - which is what Hardy does. Indeed, the way Jude's learning mimics forms of inclusion (reading the classics exemplifies the way that the possession of knowledge creates status, for example) is also a very contemporary educational concern. Yet, paradoxically, learning for Jude only reinforces his class-based exclusion just as it appears to open doors for him, and in the narrative of this novel such aspirations lead to tragic consequences. Although *Jude* is a fiction, studies of working class auto-didacticism unearthed by Jonathan Rose, place his existence and these principles in very solid historical fact (Rose, 2001).

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.beyondcurrenthorizons.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/bch\\_challenge\\_paper\\_spaces\\_places\\_gill\\_valentine.pdf](http://www.beyondcurrenthorizons.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/bch_challenge_paper_spaces_places_gill_valentine.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.beyondcurrenthorizons.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/bch\\_challenge\\_paper\\_spaces\\_places\\_andrew\\_harrison.pdf](http://www.beyondcurrenthorizons.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/bch_challenge_paper_spaces_places_andrew_harrison.pdf)

Although not examined as such, spaces of learning like the milk cart and above all, the dreaming spires of Oxford, are also important. On the one hand learning only takes place in the space of the mind and so (like the milk cart) context is unimportant: it's what happens cognitively that counts. On the other hand, Oxford, its architecture and colleges, is a profoundly embodied and material place from which Jude is physically excluded. It is difficult to separate Oxford from what Bourdieu, writing years later, would call its 'symbolic power' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990).

These twin poles of context (as both immaterial and embodying power) have been modified by more recent theory and again it is primarily through narrative that we can apprehend the deeper processes at work. In one of the classic studies of 'situated learning', Lave and Wenger (1991) describe how Vai and Gola tailors in Liberia learn through apprenticeship. Rather than offering an account of learning as a disembodied cognitive process, they describe learning as a profoundly social process where it is indeed the materiality of interpersonal, contextual and linguistic interactions which provide the engine for learning. Building on notions of affordance offered by physical, social, linguistic and semiotic resources (Wertsch, 1997), these scholars represent a tradition which pays attention to context as the preeminent influence on learning. Shirley Brice Heath's classic socio-linguistic ethnographic study of language acquisition and use in two different communities in the US is another well known narrative which shows how language learning is integrally related to context and is produced over time through social interactions and reflection (Brice Heath, 1983). Whilst Brice Heath may acknowledge the kinds of symbolic power represented in *Jude*, for her, as with the scholars of situated learning, context is all.

Clearly, as can already be seen, the notion of learning, as used across these narratives is not a uniform or monolithic concept. Indeed, whether there is a meta-process of learning (as a singular process) as opposed to the kinds of learning (as plural processes) that takes place across different contexts is open to debate. In this essay it is already two-faced. Learning looks to describe processes for people and at the same time represents a set of values and a broader social function. This inherent duality will continue to bedevil discussion in generalised speculation about the future, and certainly its fundamental ambiguity underwrites my next story.

The next 'fable' comes from a prominent American tradition deriving from a mix of constructivist epistemology and utopian idealism. Seymour Papert's call to arms argues that if we compare a contemporary classroom and a hospital with those in existence a century earlier, the fundamental elements of a schoolroom are much the same as they were (both in terms of process and transactions as well as curriculum content) whereas, he argues, a modern hospital is virtually unrecognisable from its historic counterpart (Papert, 1993). This is a critique of learning theory as much as it is of schooling. The main response to this kind of challenge has been to proffer technological solutions to the perceived immutability of the classroom and indeed the wider role of schools. A recent report by the National Science Foundation offers this vision (NSF, 2008):

Imagine a high school student in the year 2015. She has grown up in a world where learning is as accessible through technologies at home as it is in the classroom, and digital content is as real to her as paper, lab equipment, or textbooks. At school, she and her classmates engage in creative problem-solving activities by manipulating simulations in a virtual laboratory or by downloading and analyzing visualizations of real-time data from remote sensors. Away from the classroom, she has seamless access to school materials and homework assignments using inexpensive mobile technologies. She continues to collaborate with her classmates in virtual environments that allow not only social interaction with each other but also rich connections with a wealth of supplementary content. Her teacher can track her progress over the course of a lesson plan and compare her performance across a lifelong "digital portfolio," making note of areas that need additional attention through personalized assignments and alerting parents to specific concerns. What makes this possible is cyberlearning, the use of networked computing and communications technologies to support learning. Cyberlearning has the potential to transform education throughout a lifetime, enabling

customized interaction with diverse learning materials on any topic - from anthropology to biochemistry to civil engineering to zoology. Learning does not stop with K-12 or higher education; cyberlearning supports continuous education at any age, space, beyond the classroom and throughout a lifetime (p1).

Here the learning contexts are material but assumed to be kind of semi-transparent, unlike the social contexts in Lave and Wenger or Brice Heath. The NSF vision takes up Papert's vision and offers a kind of distributed, networked institution. The same power relations represented by Jude's Oxford remain, but the question of symbolic power has been circumvented by offering a more mellow and accessible world. Learning is here is fun (not a value that came into *Jude*), not very social in an interpersonal sense although clearly relying on a range of affordances and contextual cues. It is active and interactive and takes place in a continuous present (again in contrast to notions of ossification implicit in the city of Oxford).

Whilst an extreme psychological version of learning may imagine a mind in isolation, it is true to say that most theories of mind underpinning ideas about learning, especially those drawing on forms of 'new learning' (Kalantzis and Cope, 2008) now conceptualise social context as part of the learning process. However, like the NSF example above, sometimes that context is assumed to be what I called 'semi-transparent'; that is, a neutral unobtrusive medium through which the learning can take place. On the other hand the theorists of situated learning suggest that meaning is made in context and that forms of behaviour, attitude, and indeed all the other affective dimensions of learning, are constructed by specific social circumstances. In other words, learning isn't just what happens in the head but is bound up with a host of other dispositions, attributes and orientations. Indeed current research is especially interested in how learning is bound up with deep questions of identity and identity formation (Lemke, 2008; Pollard and Filer, 1999). Indeed Wortham talks about how there is an approach to learning which is essentially ontological, in that it shows how learning is inseparable from what it mean 'to be' as a person and the identity-making process (Wortham, 2005, Chapter 3).

This more whole-person approach to learning raises hard questions about the role of context. Is this a new way of revisiting traditional concerns about who has access or how 'environment' affects learning? Or more conceptually, how does learning transfer occur if context is so influential? Does the contemporary approach to the situated nature of learning offer portability or fixedness? Much contemporary educational discourse focuses on notions of competence and skill rather learning as a way of drawing attention to performative, non-contextually bound capabilities but again this avoids ideas of abstract potentials that can be realised in different situations. In general, learning theory needs to remain unfettered as it skates between these two poles.

A final introductory observation needs to be made. All the discussion about context, place and site is premised on the use of spatial metaphors. This vocabulary derives from a recent tendency to add the spatial dimension to the historical and the social in what Soja calls a 'trialectic' understanding of social phenomena (Soja, 1996). The effect of this new kind of social geography has been influential in connecting educational analysis with socio-economic structures. This helps us understand learning at the micro level (individuals in their social contexts) with macro questions about broader and deeper context (national and global economy) in ways that aren't just about differences in scale, but suggest deep patterns of interconnectedness (Leander and Sheehy, 2004). I shall return to this issue in the final section.

In summary, I have used snapshots of educational moments/writing as a way of trying to disentangle the different ways in which context has been used as a way of offering insight into learning. I have suggested that:

- We need to reconcile approaches to learning which focus on its social function in concert with how it works at the level of individual process
- That there are contradictory notions of the 'material' and 'transparent' nature of context within common understandings of what learning is
- That context is social in the sense of the interpersonal and the affective as well as the semiotic and networked

- That learning cannot be divorced from identity (or identities) as an 'ultimate' context even though this raises questions about transfer of learning across contexts.

## **2. Formal/informal/non-formal: epistemologies and knowledge-economies**

This section describes some of the current thinking underpinning the idea that learning takes place in and across sites. In particular, I suggest that the notion of informal learning has gained greater currency in recent years as a way of describing some of the perceived changes in where and how people learn (Sefton-Green, 2008). It thus offers a way of conceptualising learning within and across different and/or new sites and learning contexts. This frame is, I would argue, an epistemological one in that it suggests different ways of knowing as much as it suggests that learning may be taking place in alternative and complementary time-spaces<sup>3</sup>. However, this approach also raises questions of political economy inasmuch as ideas of informal knowledge and other ways of knowing are bound up with the changing economic role of knowledge(s) in different domains.

Although there are no hard and fast definitions of what formal, informal and non-formal education might mean, and the terms are often used interchangeably, it is useful to distinguish between school systems (formal structures supported and developed by the State), learning taking place as determined by the learner (informally), and the organised but non-formal sites of education<sup>4</sup>. See also discussion in Sefton-Green, 2004; Bekerman et al, 2005.

Although these terms are not new they have been used with increasing frequency to describe the changing locations for learning and as such are central to the hypothesis behind this challenge. Yet, the interest in informal learning predates the kinds of structural re-organisation of education we are concerned with. Scribner and Cole started from the assumption that most research on learning derived from non-socio-cultural approaches looking at school-based systems of learning and argued that if we just accept the fact that the social organisation of learning differs from site to site, then learning occurring in the non-formal domain is crucially important (Scribner and Cole, 1973, p553).

This approach opened the door to a huge range of research of which language learning and literacy acquisition are the most prominent examples (Baynham, 2004). Implicitly, this work explored the complexity, the structured nature and the embedded social nature of informal learning, although learning language or literacy was the object of this study rather than the notion of informal learning in its own right. The more ethnographic and anthropological accounts of literacy and language acquisition also inscribed the study of informal learning as, in some ways, an adventure into the unknown.

Once it had become accepted that informal learning could be theorised in this way, that it offered a legitimate object for study, the key (and oft repeated question) becomes how we distinguish between formal and informal learning. Scribner and Cole focused on the social organisation of knowledge. In doing so, they also touch on the idea (followed up by later scholars) that debates about the nature of learning via this informal route is indistinguishable from the politics of education.

Because schools occupy such a central role in the organisation, transmission, and regulation of knowledge and accepted forms of pedagogy it is obvious that a discussion about informal learning becomes more than simply a disinterested account of socio-cultural (or even cognitive) processes. The critique of schooling as social reproduction,

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<sup>3</sup> The challenge of analysing and acknowledging the multiple timescales of human activity in respect of learning has also been recognised by, for example, Lemke (2000). This essay is itself spatially limited and does not allow me to discuss fully the role of time which, at one level, is part of any discussion of space. Certainly in Section 3 discussion of changing spaces is sometimes a question of time-shifting locations for learning and re-ordering places in learning narratives (where and when we study, take exams, and so on).

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.infed.org/biblio/b-nonfor.htm>

the analysis of the status of knowledge developed by Bernstein (1990) and the power of pedagogy developed by Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) are all examples of how discussion about the nature of formal learning becomes a discussion about power in society. In other words, socio-cultural discussion cannot separate claims for the impact and significance of school (and out-of-school) learning from notions of how what gets legitimated in, for example, classroom settings, and individuals are subjected to, identify with, and 'behave' according to its process: this affects the nature of the claims that can be, or are made for informal learning.

Using informal and non-formal education as a way of exploring the politics of education partly helps us deconstruct the relationship between schooling and learning, showing, as we shall see below, how assumptions about the organisation of the project of mass education underpin versions of how learning works. However, it also helps us rethink the different roles and power of knowledge(s). In the NSF future vision for learning quoted above, the new technologies are primarily imagined as a way of accessing the same kind of knowledge provided by traditional academic disciplines but at different times or places. There is now an established body of study which is interested in how new kinds of learning (experienced informally and non-formally) is in itself developing new kinds of knowledge-communities. Here, studies of blogging are allegedly changing the nature of participation in the body politic (Shirky, 2008; Palfrey and Gasser, 2008) or scholars of computer games show how swathes of games literacy and in-game knowledge are learnt online (Gee, 2004; Shaffer, 2005). Although there is debate about how far, how deep and how meaningful these new kinds of knowledge are, it remains a key tenet of the shift towards valuing informal and non-formal education that other kinds of authority, other types of knowledge and other kinds of scholarly apparatus have currency and value.<sup>5</sup>

There is now substantial literature about informal learning (eg Bekerman et al, 2005) and much of it does try to distinguish the unique and distinguishing characteristics of informal learning as a distinct mode; although it is also true that many writers do not, at the end of the day, generally hold onto extremely hard and fast distinctions between informal and formal learning, or between modes of informal learning and learning in general. In general, much of the recent study of informal learning derives from workplace studies and/or cultural anthropology and does not focus on young people. Taking these caveats into consideration, the literature on informal learning can be broken down along the following key axes (see Colley et al, (2003) for an extended and more detailed taxonomy):

1. Location. Where the learning takes place - how and if context is a determinant of processes
2. Processes. How the learning is organised, whether there are forms of accreditation and assessment: what kind of style or pedagogic relationship is used. How the learning is supported and whether it is collective, collaborative or individual
3. Purposes. Why the learning occurs, in whose interests?
4. Content. Whether the knowledge has disciplinary provenance, how it is applied theoretically and in practice.

In very general terms these elements underpin all attempts to characterise and describe formal and informal learning. The central role of location within this paradigm underpins the discussion in the following section which explores different spaces and the different dimensions of location.

### **3. Unbundling learning: homes, schools, communities, nation states and the global.**

This section draws on the notion of unbundling as described by urban geographers. Graham and Marvin explain the processes by which discrete services within the urban

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2008/oct/06/youtube.youngpeople>

environment (eg sewage, roads, gas, electricity, etc) all of which used to be delivered by a central urban authority have become increasingly unbundled as part of the process of privatisation and marketisation (Graham and Marvin, 2001). In some respects I suggest here that the idea of learning (as imagined by Jude, for example), which used to be understood as a unified and unitary process through the idea of schooling, is now fragmented and subject to a range of market pressures. This is not just the same thing as analysing the marketisation of schooling (see, for example, Kenway and Bullen (2001) and Ball (2008)) because we are interested in how the concept of learning (as opposed to just its practices) may have become unbundled as much through the idea of informal learning as through changing modes or locations of delivery. At the same time the idea of unbundling draws attention to geo-social contexts. Accordingly, the structure of this section begins locally (in the home) and then moves progressively outwards through schools, communities, regions, nation states and ultimately, via virtual technologies, to considering learning on a global scale.

In essence this section of the essay suggests that recent thinking about learning has investigated, and at times even constituted, this process of unbundling: and indeed argued that different delivery mechanisms now available in the home or virtually have contributed to an assault on schooling as the previous monopoly supplier of education. If this hypothesis is correct, whether and how the processes of unbundling can be further developed, and if so, whether this implies a further scaling across different levels (away from the narrow concerns with the individual in the home to wider ideas of the breakdown of schooling as a national project), will be key questions for the future of education. Here older humanist visions of de-schooling society (Illich, 1995) connect with neo-liberal visions of an expanding and fragmenting market as well as with cutting edge theorists of cognition and understanding.

Each part of this section contains a paragraph explicitly teasing out implications for future scenarios. The key principle I have applied is not how change will influence future models of education but more what will need to have changed in socio-economic terms to facilitate structural changes in education organisation and practice.

### **3.1 The role of the Home in Learning**

On one level the home has always been a key site for education research and it is not appropriate to reprise all of these interests here in great detail. Whether it is exploring the impact of social class and background on educational achievement through the provision of social or cultural capital, or studies of language acquisition, or indeed the roles that parents play in developing and supporting learning with their child, it is clear that the home is always going to be a differentiated key determinant on people's learning.

However in recent years these traditional concerns have taken on a new slant in two interrelated ways. First, the home is key site for the consumption and use of digital technologies, and from a range of perspectives, it thus enters into an educational field. Secondly, and of course in conjunction with this approach, the home has now become a key site for the marketisation of education and this too positions it within a larger socio-economic geography of learning.

Given that underpinning both of these concerns are long-standing issues relating to the role of social and/or cultural capital it is inconceivable that these issues of differential access, connectivity (social and technological) and participation will not play a key role in future models of education and learning.

The emerging and changing space of the 'digital bedroom' (Livingstone, 2002) is both a site for the consumption of edutainment media (Buckingham and Scanlon, 2002) and a new space for media culture. Here computer games and participation in online virtual communities<sup>6</sup> seem to be creating a host of new ways of learning, being and knowing that challenge the epistemological conventions of mass schooling (Gee, 2004; Shaffer,

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<sup>6</sup> Gee's (2004) ideas in respect of the significance of 'affinity spaces' in terms of participation are a particularly good example of this.

2005). These challenges are further developed by scholars analysing how the different ways of being young (as both child and youth) are changed by these new modes of behaviour (Buckingham, 2000): and especially analysing when these too come into conflict with what it means to be a traditional school student. Others suggest that this is re-negotiated in re-configured school/student relationships: see the collection by Knobel, Lankshear and Bigum, 2007.

At the same time as these cultural analyses of learning in the home have suggested important ruptures in educational relationships, there has been a flood of initiatives to turn the home into a new site for conventional education. Building on models of social capital, studies have shown how spending on educational opportunities via hardware and software is now an important part of how education has leaked beyond school boundaries and made the home a key site for complementary, and remedial intervention (Nixon, 1998). Of course this shift has obvious policy implications in terms of the equitable distribution of resources and challenging traditional ways in which education is imagined as a way of equalising opportunity.

Both the culturalist-ontological approach and the social/cultural capital analysis build on deeper concerns about how learning works and what difference education makes. These questions will remain irrespective of how deep critics of these developing trends maintain the level of change actually is.

### **3.3.1 Future Scenarios**

The home is going to continue to occupy a key place in the unequal distribution of social capital which determines educational success. Families will continue to seek educational advantage for their children. If the State finds it acceptable to change the idea of mass schooling as an equalisation/baseline experience then the home will become even more important as a site for complementary, supplementary and remedial education. Such opportunities will continue to be exploited by the private sector. Homes may even become a site for obtaining credentials but income disparities will set significant political challenges for cohesion and fairness.

At the same time attention to quality of learning in the home will continue to act as an educational alternative leading to a constant struggle with formal knowledge practices. These tensions will never become resolved with the formal curriculum because they remain necessarily positional markers of class differentiation: and until differentiation stops being a primary goal of the education system, the politics of maintaining unequal differences will continue to seek forms of legitimation.

## **3.2 Re-distributing the School**

The NSF vision described in Section 1 of learning science in a number of off-site locations and yet in a more 'authentic' set of learning relationships than those traditionally available in conventional schooling exemplifies our second key unbundled location. Whereas the home offers itself as an alternative (complement or remediation), ideas of opened-up schools working in a networked or distributed fashion is also a serious way of imagining different ideas of learning contexts and locations.

The central vision of networked schooling essentially unpicks a series of key ideas about the project of mass schooling. It is founded on the principle that the kinds of place-based resources (especially based on books) which defined the economics of schooling can now be more effectively and efficiently met by re-distributing the functions of schooling across other kinds of places and in other time frames as a way of 'networking' learning itself.

Intellectually, many of these ideas derive from attention to the metaphor of the network underpinning economic analyses in the 1990s (see Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007) and studies of workplace based learning which showed how attention to learning within organisations could work as effectively as any notion of command and control or hierarchy (Brown and Duguid, 2000). In one sense throwing the onus back onto the learner makes them the fixed constant moving through differing experiences and opportunities. This then creates challenges for communication, transparency, regulation,

accountability and power (amongst others) according to one attempt to theorise these new forms of social organisation emerging out of these concerns (McCarthy, Miller, and Skidmore, 2004). In Education in the UK, these concerns have influenced two recent policy initiatives: Personalisation (Leadbeater, 2004), and Building Schools for the Future (BSF).

With respect to 'Personalisation', Hargreaves has argued that a range of innovations can stem from framing education in a more personalised way, exploring both its effect on teachers creating learning communities, stakeholder interest in participation as well as increased opportunities for challenging, varied and appropriate learning customised for individuals. (Hargreaves, 2003) Much of this thinking has additionally informed work around BSF as very particular way of concretising theory. In their visions for future versions of schooling - built around new types of school - publications like *What If?* (Rudd et al, 2006) - draw on wider understanding of extended and community schools (see, for example, Craig, Huber and Lownsborough, 2004) within a policy framework inspired by the joined-up-ness' of Every Child Matters, to produce aspirational models of distributed learning.

Here an attention to principles behind educational experiments leads to more differentiated models of schools, with distinct social functions, as workplaces, community hubs and even as local markets. The institutional compromise which characterises how schools work in practice subject to the necessary normative power of standardisation cannot be found in such exercises. It is thus noticeable that the research literature describing 're-distributed' schools ' is not as empirical or as theoretically sophisticated as that referred to in the section above, as to an extent, the literature performs an advocacy rather than a descriptive function. Accounts of innovative practice are, to an extent un-tempered with even medium term evaluations of impact, and certainly there are no large scale, widely accepted evaluations of any such changes around for use as change-models.

Studies of innovative school re-organisation<sup>7</sup> are more cautious about examples in practice of the kind of visions outlined in the literature discussed here. This is not to say that re-distributed schools are not possible but that they require a significant change of emphasis across many dimensions, much more than just buildings or curriculum (as suggested by BSF) and that the English record of structural innovation is perhaps more patchy than some would wish. However, the principle of changing where, how and when students learn beyond conventional schooling is a fixed trope in futures thinking around the role of context in the educational imagination.

### **3.2.1 Future Scenarios**

In the immediate future (up to 10 years) it is plausible to imagine schools partially redistributing learning, unbundling curriculum and diversifying pedagogic strategies but this may remain the preserve of innovative practice unless resources are made available to make such an offer open to all. Such changes will place immense stress on developing an appropriate workforce, and there is no evidence that the UK is capable of investing in this at present. If the delivery of education becomes increasingly stratified, it is entirely conceivable that forms of accreditation and assessment will move into a highly controlled, regulated but not centrally delivered model of education.

### **3.3 The Learning Community and (City) Region**

Recent innovation studies have paid much attention to the role of the city region as a driver of economic growth (Athey et al, 2007) and have both implicitly and explicitly explored how such city regions work in relationship with and as part of local education providers (Gustavsen, Nyhan and Enns, 2007). Traditionally Higher Education has been researched as playing a lead role in driving productivity at regional level and supplying

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<sup>7</sup> see especially the work undertaken by Thomson, Hall and Jones:  
<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/education/projects/plt-creative-partnerships/index.php>

labour for local markets<sup>8</sup>. The European Union is especially focused on policy interventions at this scale. At the same time, learning has been explored at a community level, in 'units' larger than a school, but nevertheless explored as constitutive of, and in response to, the social construct of a local community. Studies like *Local Literacies* (Barton and Hamilton, 1998) or *Making Modern Lives* (McLeod and Yates, 2006), as well as the youth-centred work of Glynda Hull in San Francisco, have looked at learning and education as framed by routes and trajectories within the community. In the US the work of Luis Moll and colleagues on 'funds of knowledge', as a way of characterising ways of thinking, literacy events, language use and social practices in Mexican Latino communities (Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti, 2005) has been influential. Such theories and professional development programmes explore the cultural knowledges and practices of minority communities in collision with the 'mainstream'. They look to legitimate other ways of knowing and being for teachers and schools. Taken together this economic focus on the city region, and a social-anthropological attention to learning as a feature of community, suggests a meso level type of context.

Studies of learning at this level like *Schooling the Rustbelt Kids* (Thomson, 2003) offering a socio-economic history of the region in South Australia or even those studies drawing on a sociology of youth like the study of education-to-training routes in parts of London (Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000) often focus on the effects of schooling on life-chances: and so more properly use the second face of how learning is used in the this essay – looking at its role in society more generally, than as an 'intra-personal' process. I suggest that this vast literature field belongs in this essay because these studies and this approach draw attention to the immediate social context in which learning takes place. They explore what difference learning makes to the life-chances of learners and shows how aspirations, opportunities as well as academic processes are constructed by these local political and economic determinants.

The important issue of what Phil Cohen called 'really useful knowledge' (Cohen, 1990), that is the kind of tactical-learning that might make a difference to what you do or become, is best articulated in studies at this level. The literature points to real limits, constraints and serendipities in people's life courses. It also underscores the economic purpose of learning and how such determinants affect how learners understand the value of knowledge and learning-to-learn and add thus a depth to the kinds of approaches we have encountered so far. The more ethnographic research projects explore the formation of social identities at this level and this too offers an important corrective to any perspective that can't see beyond the close-up<sup>9</sup>. Any consideration of a generalised unbundled educational future has to acknowledge the reality of local labour markets and community knowledge as very real constraints on the impact of learning at this level. In particular simply paying attention to changes in technology or delivery process ignores this crucial determinant.

### 3.3.1 Future Scenarios

The key issues here are in what ways education focuses explicitly on its economic purpose in preparing for labour markets. The more this function predominates, the more local/regional needs will determine outcomes. Changing macro-political arrangements within England and the EU may assist in this process of regionalising the purpose of schooling: although this raises the prospect of an internationalised elite. At the same time increasing movement of peoples and the development of forms of cosmopolitan citizenship (Beck, 2006) may both homogenise and balkanize diversity of communities. These trajectories are opaque. The increase of large global corporations as dominant

<sup>8</sup> See the ongoing research project:

[http://www2.ioe.ac.uk/ioe/cms/get.asp?cid=18911and18911\\_0=19964](http://www2.ioe.ac.uk/ioe/cms/get.asp?cid=18911and18911_0=19964)

<sup>9</sup> Although it may seem counter-intuitive, studies of mobile technologies often offer insight at this level because, although mobile technologies appear to position individuals in global maps, studies actually show how immediate social context is a key part of mobile ICT use (Ito, Okabe and Matsuda, 2006).

employers in certain regions will focus attention on the need for schools to meet local supply needs.

### 3.4 Nation States, the Global, and the role of ICT in unbundling

At present, education is conceived of as a national project. Most systematic investment in education is at the level of the Nation State. However, a key dimension of neo-liberal globalisation is that previous boundaries belonging to the nation are now opened to multi-nationals and different kinds of international flexibility. At present the curriculum and accreditation/qualifications are the remit of the Nation State and the governance of education is considered a question of national policy. In an unbundled globalised world, these assumptions may not hold true.

Not only might issues of curriculum context be supra-national but qualifications and even the market value of accreditation may look very different as individuals feel free to purchase their education beyond their immediate locale. The emerging trends of Cisco and Microsoft industry standard qualifications point to a level of a marketised supra-national curriculum authority. This perspective is at the heart of popular studies of globalisation like *The World is Flat* (Friedman, 2006). Although more geared towards higher education than schools, studies exploring learning at supra-national levels are frequently motivated by questions of economic competitiveness, with the world economy and employment in transnational companies the object of interventions. However, with the exception of studies of the English language<sup>10</sup>, and possibly ongoing research into the use and take up of the International Baccalaureate, we tend to think of education being a national concern when clearly this isn't an entirely tenable proposition.

There would thus appear to be three dimensions to this analytic frame. The first, as outlined above, considers questions about governance, authority, and structural organisation; the second explores the ways in which learners can position themselves within the global flow as consumer-citizens beyond national boundaries; and the third investigates the growth of transnational forms of co-operation of which the open education (and open source movements) are the most evident. It is clear here that in analytic terms we are dealing with both questions of political authority and also the social effect of ICT, as clearly it is only through the use of such technologies that we might achieve the sort of unbundling that might enable this scenario.

There are now many formal and informal mechanisms by which learners position themselves in relation to the wider community beyond the immediate locale. In general this gives rise to two kinds of literature. The first explores curriculum projects that develop international links where learners' sense of self and their focus is taken beyond usual boundaries: see, for example, [www.chicam.org](http://www.chicam.org). The second explores learning in online and virtual communities, especially those constructed through game play, to examine how identity, co-operation, and simulation develop knowledge and capabilities: see for example the scoping of participatory culture in Henry Jenkins 'White Paper' (Jenkins et al, 2007) and the TLRP commentary on Education 2.0<sup>11</sup>. In some respects the ideas behind these kinds of research link with some of the aspirations of the culturalist approaches I outlined in Section 3.1 above, as together they all suggest ways in which the learner is positioned differently, in terms of their identity and their putative agency, than within more conventional learning frameworks. Of course, whether this trend continues and how it relates to the formal curriculum remain areas for debate and policy intervention.

Finally, we need to mention initiatives that are beginning to unbundle the conventional apparatus of national regulated education systems, including publishing and content-driven issues. John Willinsky has argued persuasively (and developed practical online tools) to develop structural interventions that reposition the peer-review journal industry (Willinsky, 2006), and the contributors to a volume on 'Open Education' (Iiyoshi and

<sup>10</sup> There is not space to discuss the role of English in this globalisation process (see Pennycook, 2006) and scholarship around Second Language teaching may be an important contribution to this level of debate, an issue we in the UK tend to be un-self-aware about.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.tlrp.org/pub/documents/TELcomm.pdf>

Kumar, 2008) suggest a host of ways where international collaboration is genuinely offering both free (or more accessible) cross-border opportunities for study, research and curriculum development – all suggesting changing forms of pedagogy. Indeed the thrust of much writing in this area is that the un-doing of time and place (part of the unbundling, as I have termed it) requires the recognition of different kinds of learners than is currently produced though national education systems, eg Green et al (2006).

### **3.4.1 Future Scenarios**

Unbundling the Nation State will lead to the growth of cosmopolitan elites who may well learn within a globalised assessment and accreditation framework. Some of the technologies underpinning these possibilities may well develop as a mixture of public good (open source/open content) and private initiatives. This trend will lead to an explicit two-tier education system. Jonathan Zittrain has shown how technological openness is engaged in a constant struggle with legal regulatory frameworks and the growth of 'walled' and 'tethered' appliances (Zittrain, 2008). ICT in Education is in the same place. The democratic, open and generative technologies which speak to individuals, support individualised learning trajectories and create communities of interest which offer an imperfect fit with State systems of control of assessment and stratification.

### **3.5 Summary**

The structure of this essay has perhaps rather artificially followed physical scale, moving from the home, through schools to communities, regions and then to the Nation State and ultimately the global. At each of these levels there is considerable interest in opening up, or unbundling as I have characterized it, the socio-economic limits of each context to offer learners different authority and agency over their learning. At the same time, I have suggested that this isn't a process of unfettered expansion because I have tried to weave questions of governance and marketisation into a study of pedagogy and learning, showing how regulatory issues constitute, shape and form the identities of learners and their learning.

Given the likely continuation of this unbundling process and the policies which will address the questions of equality bound up in such trajectories, my challenge is to ask what the political response to such possibilities will be. As always, the issue is to focus on what the purpose of schooling is and let the systems follow from such principles. Whilst the role of schools may change if political settlements alter the traditional role of the Nation State, opening up schools to a range of learning processes available also opens up education to the market. If that is acceptable to a new political dispensation then unbundling will continue apace: if not, then measures will need to be taken to regulate and equalise such processes.

## **4. Imagining Learning as a Spatial Project: the Socio-Cultural lens**

This fourth and final section of the essay tries to reflect theoretically on how our dominant paradigm of learning-socio-cultural frames - both constitutes and is constituted by the idea of space, contexts, and sites. I am suggesting that if we are trying to imagine Education and Learning in 2050, inevitably we are going to use the way we conceptualise learning processes now and there is a strong tradition in educational thinking which suggests that dominant ways of thinking about learning are themselves the product of a contemporary set of social and political arrangements rather than deriving from any deep ahistorical abstract processes. In other words, how we imagine learning is as much the result of the relationship of learning theory to practices as it could be about anything else.

If this is true then it does two things. First it asks us to reconsider the implicit values in how we think about contexts, location places and sites, in any review of their place in

learning. Secondly, it raises questions about we can think about the nexus of theory, practice and political arrangements that will define education in 2050.

Kieran Egan suggests that there are, in effect, a few 'old' models of education which get recycled and are anyway bound up with changing historical circumstances (Egan, 1997). Robin Alexander makes a similar point about fashionable cycles of educational theory (Alexander, 2001). The key point here is that the theories which each generation uses to explain its theory of mind, as Bruner would put it (Bruner, 1996), is not absolute. When applied to the range of discussion I have tried to cover here, we might argue that notions of informal and distributed learning are discursively produced by marketisation processes rather than just offering direct 'justifications' of changes in sites of learning<sup>12</sup>. We should also consider that descriptions of practices become unproblematically translated into prescriptions for change.

One interesting speculation for future-gazing might be to reflect on the ways in which older theories of learning are still present in current educational discourse. Egan talks about the core principles of socialisation and of 'entry into a conversation that began long time ago' (Egan, 1997, p14). More intriguingly might be a way of considering the kinds of 'neo-behaviourism', usually a relatively discredited explanation of learning, which offer a different way of understanding some of the learning identities observable across new and changing sites of education. Rather than analysing new kinds of learning behaviour (in, say, computer games, or across network play) in socio-cultural terms, where the role of context is so important, might such kinds of attitude, or approach, be as explicable due to forms of behaviourist theory? Might such learning simply be an adaptation to changing circumstances<sup>13</sup>.

It is not that I would necessarily advocate this interpretation, or even support it, but I do want to suggest that our current interest in questions of context, site, location may be as much a question of theoretical fashionableness as it is a way of shedding light on any truth about learning. If this is this case we have to be careful as we approach any idea of inferring a future for education because all we are really capable of doing is extrapolating contemporary theorisations of learning. And this, I am arguing, is simply a response to our contemporary politico-social settlement.

My final observation relates to space's corollary: time. Whilst I have focused above on the unbundling of place in response to shifts in the nature of capital resources required to support the project of mass education, it is equally true that shifts in place are also about shifts in time. Just as a central theme in Section 3 has been the unbundling of a national model of schooling by a series of more distributed and dispersed providers, so it now seems clear that *when* you learn is as much up for grabs as *where*. It is true that many scholars exploring the role of context have focused on time in their analysis, so questions of a/synchronicity in chat, 'just-in-time' knowledge, and so forth are equally conceptually important terms in contemporary educational discourse, as much as metaphors of location and place<sup>14</sup>.

One obvious implication here is that just as the theorisation of learning has become detached from simply the study of schooling towards more lifelong and life-wide processes, so the unbundling of learning from the resource-intensive capitalisation of mass schooling will mean that future education models will continue to spin out along the axes of time and place towards greater individualisation and niche experiences. Whether the structure of the State or even new and other structures of locale, region or community will begin to impose structure and homogeneity on this process of disintegration is a political challenge for the future. It may be as Sections 3.3 and 3.4

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<sup>12</sup>12 The term justification is taken from Boltanski and Chiapello (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007) and is used deliberately to explain how capitalism recuperates artistic and social critique.

<sup>13</sup>13 An idea for further study here would be to connect the scholarship of 'precarious labour' (eg Lloyd, 2005; Ross, 2003) which emphasises ways of behaving and being as the modality of working in the creative economy with the production of a certain kind of subjectivity produced by learning in digital-networked times.

<sup>14</sup>14 See for example <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/litspace/Synchrony/index.html>

argued, that this idea of greater and greater individualisation will not work in an era of greater competition and standardisation, or it may be that diversification is key. As always, then, the key question is: for whom? Which sections of society gain and which lose? But, as I argue in the Futures scenarios in Section 3 above, that is what policy is for.

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