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RESEARCH NOTES AND UPDATES:

Exploring lifelong learning in the everyday city

Abstract Although the idea of the learning city occupies a prominent place in the field of lifelong learning, it is still largely under-researched. The article draws on an ongoing study in Bristol involving multi-sited ethnography including participant observation, interviews and ethnographic encounters.

In this research note, we argue that using anthropological methods affords valuable insights into the relatively neglected aspects of urban learning within the international discourse surrounding Learning Cities. It can help to reveal the everyday practices through which the city affords learning and to explore how learners improvise and navigate the city.

Key words everyday; learning city; ethnography; improvisation

Introduction

In one of his stories, *On Exactitude of Science*, Jorge Luis Borges presents us with an image of a map, so exact that it requires the entirety of the territory that it covers. Accurate mapping of the learning experiences of cities would require a similar degree of startling precision, capturing how we learn across lives, in multiple spaces and situations.

This might be one of the reasons why empirical research on the Learning City (as it is conceptualised within the wider UNESCO-led international literature) is surprisingly limited. So far, studies are characterized by differing understandings of learning in the city (Carrillo et al 2014, Longworth 2006, Kearns 2012, McFarlane 2011).

This article begins to explore the opportunities that might be afforded by the use of ethnographic methods in considering the learning city. We begin with a brief summary of the definitions prevalent in lifelong learning literature. Drawing upon fieldnotes from a study in Bristol, we discuss two ethnographic encounters, focusing on the ways in which people in Bristol improvise to learn; and reflecting about the city as facilitator and barrier for this improvisation. This way, we suggest a move beyond the limited understanding of static learning resources.

The context of the Learning City

Since the 1970s we saw the development of the learning city idea that has gained prominence in the field of lifelong learning and international policy discourses (Elfert 2015, Hamilton and Jordan 2011, Han and Makino 2013, Scott 2015, Osborne, Kearns, and Yang 2013, Osbourne 2014, Watson and Wu 2015). Learning cities are generally understood as mobilizing resources for personal growth, social cohesion, prosperity and the growth of human potential (Longworth 1999, Juceviciene). For example, according to the recent UNESCO definition,

“Learning City is a city which effectively mobilizes its resources in every sector to

- promote inclusive learning from basic to higher education;
- revitalize learning in families and communities;
- facilitate learning for and in the workplace;
- extend the use of modern learning technologies;
- enhance quality and excellence in learning; and
- foster a culture of learning throughout life.

These definitions present us the learning city as an entity that needs to be built by intentional strategies for gathering resources. This conceptualisation, however, does not account for learning that happens in the city anyway, in the background of these strategies. After all, the city, as Colin Ward observed, can be understood as “in itself an environmental education, and can be used to provide one, whether we are thinking of learning through the city, learning about the city, learning to use the city, to control the city or to change the city” (Ward 1990:152)

Similarly, Scott (2015) has recently argued that much of the learning city literature overlooks everyday practices and actions of its residents (2015: 89). Drawing on these perspectives, this research note will explore one of the possible avenues in conducting lifelong learning research with the everyday learning city.

The research project

This paper builds on an ongoing twelve-month ethnographic study conducted in Bristol, UK combining participant observation, ethnographic encounters and interviews. The discussion draws on the experience of studying in two local community centres in East Bristol in the period between November 2016 and March 2017. As part of the research activities, we spent at least three afternoons a week in the centre’s café and attended

the centre's activities including a sewing class, an after-school group and day time play group, attended by about 15 parents with their little children. In addition, we conducted formal interviews with the community centre staff and volunteers and had extended conversations with the centre's users and residents of other parts of the city.

The article also draws on the wider context of fieldwork activities in Bristol, such as former users of the centre who moved out of the area and the repeated conversations about the area with residents of surrounding neighbourhood. We will start at the site as it was found on a cold and damp afternoon in late January 2017.

“Moving on” and navigating learning in a community centre

It is a Thursday afternoon in one of the Bristol's community centres. The open space café area is full of people. A young woman sits at the bar reading a local paper. On the sofa, a bearded man in his 60s is reading a book. Three south Asian women, who came to the café with a small girl, are having a conversation at the bar counter. A middle-aged English woman rotates the leaflet stand and picks up some brochures with events and classes taking place at the centre. A man, sipping tea, is helping another with limited English to fill in a form. A mother and her son are waiting for the tuition session, about to start in the room upstairs. The building on the opposite side of the café area is running a karate class for children – from the café we can see the shadows of boys and rehearsing their kicks. At 5.30pm several children come to the canter in larger numbers – joining the afterschool club.

The next morning, we visit the family centre, situated in the lower part of the building. It operates as a drop in space for parents and young children. Among the group of mothers, we meet Sonia with her little girl – a jovial young woman who speaks with enthusiasm about living in this part of Bristol. For her, the city is full of activities and learning spaces such as multiple drop ins, parks, playgrounds and a state-of-art science centre and museums. She enjoys the family centre as it offers a space with a range of activities that children can pick and choose from. Over the years, she has been using the community centre as a parent, service user, learner attending cooking classes and volunteer.

After the session, we go to the café and speak with one of the volunteers. Jenny is a young woman wearing a tracksuit top and a foxtail hat. Since her first visit to the family centre as a young mum, Jenny has been learning and volunteering in this space, in the café, with the brownies' group and other activities. In addition, she has been attending all parenting courses, first aid lessons and the food and nutrition classes.

For Maya, an East African woman, now living in a different part of the city, the community centre was key to becoming familiar with Bristol. As a newcomer, “every part of it had myself in it!” – She remembers with smile. The centre was a place where she could open up, be inspired and receive support. She has taken around twenty different courses over the years in that place, ranging from ESOL English, counselling skills, to food hygiene, and community interpreting. The centre was a starting point that equipped her for further explorations, developed her understanding about how the city works and enabled her to become familiar with its rhythms and structures.

A similar perspective was shared by one of the centre’s staff members. She saw it is a space where the residents are provided with opportunities to learn, activate and change. Urban scholars argue that city is made up with places, infrastructures, objects, and technologies that enable its residents to act, think, and feel (Thrift and Amin 2017: 17). The ethnographic vignettes and stories of Sonia, Jenny and Maya reveal the ways in which the centre constituted an environment facilitating learning encounters at different points of their trajectories. It was one of the many learning resources across the city that could be tapped into as they were navigating across the city and “moving on” across their learning lives (Biesta et al 2011, Facer and Manchester 2012, Lemke 2002).

Falling into learning

We meet Tom during a group walk to the centre of the city, organised by a mental health support group. This polished and slightly shy man in his late thirties has been volunteering in the group and has taken on a range of responsibilities from dealing with the group’s accounts to writing funding bids. Tom sees his experience of education as not very positive – due to his mental health, he never completed his studies. He feels that, although there is much learning being offered in the city, he is falling through the net:

“There are courses like English and Maths but not something that is not university and, at the same time, is a bit advanced”

For him, many formal and informal learning opportunities are quite repetitive – the activities seem to cover the basics. At the same time, he lacks confidence in joining a college course or trying apprenticeships – among the others, he is anxious about the age difference between him and other students.

In contrast, the walks have enabled a range of learning experiences and enabled him to rediscover new facets of life in Bristol, developing ways of engaging with people and the city. Firstly, they were an opportunity for safe discovery of the city. Secondly, they have given him an opportunity to learn to deal with own preconceptions about mental health and anxieties

associated with encounters with others. Lastly, the volunteering experience gave him a range of new skills that he had to master on an ad hoc basis. It encouraged him “to put things to use”. It was an environment facilitating improvisation:

“There is no great plan, we just fall into things”

In his context, the learning value of the walks and volunteering was intrinsically linked to dealing with the unexpected, and navigating the city for safe discovery. Tom was learning and becoming knowledgeable through the paths taken during the day-to-day activities (Ingold 2010).

For an everydayness of the learning city

Carr and Lynch (1968) argued that learning is instrumental to the entirety of urban life – it happens in everyday context, throughout the day, at different points of our lives, often when we have nothing to do. It is a by-product of living and experiencing the city and a key part of human development. This understanding of learning as an everyday and embodied/embedded practice seems to be lost in much of the top-down policy framings of the ‘Learning City’. It needs to be rediscovered. For Tom and other respondents in Bristol, the city was an environment enabling and hindering learning, directing the residents to certain paths, while preventing access to others. It is not possible to create an exhaustive representation of the learning city that could be equivalent to a Borgesian map. In the story, the vast map was rendered useless and left to ruin, scattered in the landscape.

Experienced adult educators will know that learning in the city is dynamic, complex and emerging. If we are to make recommendations for practitioners, however, it might simply be to explore the new ideas emerging from the fields of urban studies, geography and anthropology, and to pay attention to and value the importance of the encounter, the fluidity of the walk and the prosaic but rich everydayness of the learning city. By exploring the city in real time, capturing snapshots of its actuality, through a range of activities, spaces and materialities, we can move beyond the limited understanding of static learning resources and represent the learning city in its full vitality (Amin and Thrift 2002, 2017). Only then, we can develop accounts of the learning city that are true to the lived experiences, at the same time building empirically-founded models that could inform practice. An ethnographic insight into the multiple forms of direction, improvisation and navigation could be a starting point for such an empirically informed practice.

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