

A socio-cultural approach to mobile learning in the environment of at-risk social groups

ABSTRACT

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In my talk I explore what possibilities convergent (mobile) devices might offer at-risk social groups to expand possibilities for action in their everyday life worlds. In the socio-cultural approach I use, the starting point is that 'learning' is a central process in dealing with the 'everyday'. Every situation that demands the making of a decision implicates (aspects of) learning in the sense of the integration of new 'materials' into everyday practices. Situations in which 'routines' which had hitherto served to achieve desired goals now no longer do so – because elements of the environment have changed, or because the aims and expectations of an individual are changing – are instances where the need for specific learning becomes foregrounded.

In order to connect the demands of the life world with the actors / agents in that world I treat 'learning' as their transformation of 'information' into the 'tools' (knowledge, competences) needed to deal with demands / problems of their world. In that context 'learning' is an element of 'socialization', in which processes of expanding 'knowledge' and competence are in focus that can be systematically shaped – 'what ought to happen'; while 'socialization' describes a more observational and descriptive perspective of processes – 'what is going on', 'what is the case'.

The aim then is to make actors sensitive to and aware of those strategies of learning which they use as a matter of course in their everyday without recognizing them as such: especially for groups (and individuals) who, as a result of past experiences of institutionalized learning – in the school, in the main – have a highly distanced and negative disposition to any task named as 'learning'. It is possible that the scope of actions might be expanded for these groups – often positioned quite precariously in social terms – through sensitive use of such devices, based on a profound understanding both of the social conditions of such groups and the affordances of the devices.

In a follow-up study to a larger ethnographic project with groups of this kind, undertaken by me between 2001 – 2003, I had developed, leaning on Bourdieu, the concept of the 'information habitus' (Böck 2004, 2006), to describe the means whereby members of such groups – marginal to the 'information society' (as it was then called) – obtain the information they need to be successful in their everyday lives. That includes

the social and cultural practices which these actors develop and which have particular significance for their own sense of self, their self-image. This follow-up will, in particular, enable me to investigate whether and if so in what ways and to what extent dispositions of the information habitus have altered over the intervening seven years – especially in relation to the concept of ‘learning’ – and how it might now be possible to develop ‘links’ via mobile technologies to learning resources seen as relevant by these groups.

Possibilities for learning offered by mobile devices might, in this context, open various alternatives. Both contents and contexts might be fitted more to the individual social subject and their identity, contributing to the development of a different and taken for granted sense of self as competent meaning-makers, capable of engaging with relevant aspects of their social environment in their own right, shaping it in re-making and living their own identity.

References

Böck, Margit (2007): Reducing communicative inequalities: towards a “pedagogy for inclusion”. In Cammaerts, Bart/Carpentier, Nico (eds.): Reclaiming the media: communication rights and democratic media roles. Bristol: Intellect, 66-85.

Böck, Margit (2004): Life worlds and information habitus. In Visual Communication, 3(3) 281-293.

QUESTIONS:

Question 1a and 1b

a) Is it important – and if so, to what extent? – that those whom we call *learners* are aware that they *are* learning? For instance, when they engage in researching something with a mobile device and in the process of doing that produce *content*, maybe as an answer to a specific question.

b) To what extent can *knowledge* (‘knowing *that*’) and *competences* (‘knowing *how*’) which have been developed embedded in specific situations, be transferred to other situations and applied there, without further *work* (in the sense of *reflecting* on what actually went on, what actually happened)?

A further question for me is this: Is it likely that there will be effects on (results of) learning – however defined or measured / assessed – that the materials encountered by those regarded as *learners* in situations of mobile learning are regarded by them as *learning materials*.

Put as my **Question 2** it would be

What effect is their in terms of the *stance* of learners (their *attitude*, their *take*) to read about, say, a historical event in a traditional History text-book or look at a website prepared by an official institution – maybe with a mission to offer materials for ‘informal learning’ such as a museum; or watch a segment of a TV documentary or a fictionalized film version, etc.? In other words, what effect resides in, can be assumed to lie in the ‘status’ of the materials that ‘learners’ are engaging with?

The background to this question are the statements of the media psychologist Gavriel Salomon, who, at the beginning of the 1980ties said – with reference to children, TV and reading: “TV is easy, print is tough” (suggesting that children need to concentrate more when reading than when watching TV and, as a consequence take away more in terms of ‘content’); or similarly, the charge that contemporary text-books are no longer ‘real textbooks’ but ‘merely entertainment’.

So a **third question** might be:

What are the *qualities, features, characteristics* which learners expect from *learning materials* and from the *media for learning*, in order for them to take these and *learning* itself seriously? And in that context, what can be the meaning of ‘taking something seriously’?