

Learning at Not-School: A Review of Study, Theory, and Advocacy for Education in Non-Formal Settings

Julian Sefton-Green. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2013

Reviewed by Joanna Bennett (Giessen University, Germany)

Most of the comparative literature concerning extended education deals, primarily, with various elements of its settings, political and social relevance, and general organization. However, very few researchers focus on the forms of learning that take place in these settings. Julian Sefton-Green aims to rectify this. Though his review of the material is by no means comprehensive, a fact he readily concedes (thus calling it “a ‘curated’ thematic analysis”), Julian Sefton-Green’s report not only covers key literature from various vantage points, making clear the different perspectives (and in some cases agendas) that are usually assumed when discussing extended education, but also aims to bring them together for as full a consideration as possible of learning in extended education.

As the book title already suggests, rather than defining which settings learning will be examined in, the report keeps this area as open and inclusive as possible by contrasting it against learning in a formal school setting, to allow for both an international analysis as well as a look at the development over time. Though there seems to be a conventional understanding of what school is, and delivers, the international implementation of extended education differs so greatly from this understanding and has also changed in the last decades, from none at all to firmly institutionalised, that this very open approach becomes necessary.

The report is divided into three subject areas, first attempting to map out different dimensions of informal and non-formal learning and looking at how learning in, as Julian Sefton-Green calls it, not-school has been outlined in the domains of context, the learner and knowledge. This analysis takes into special consideration the changes in attitude towards the merits of not-school learning, from focusing on the sociocultural effects to observing individuals as opposed to society as a whole, as well as the advantages not-school learning can have for them. The second area of the report focuses more directly on specific reports on, and analyses of, learning in the literature of extended education research and takes a look at creative media production as a way of furthering culture and an understanding of the individual’s own identity within that culture. Furthermore, the report takes a look at how and why meta-learning has been an integral part of not-school learning as a means to acquire the social capital of being able to structure and organise learning through learning to learn, especially for those who this has been denied to due to social and economic

inequality. The third section deals with the quite traditional area of in-formal, as opposed to non-formal, learning that takes place in the home, as well as how the interests sparked in this setting are, and can further be, picked up, utilised, and extended in not-school scenarios.

The concluding chapter offers a summary, as well as a brief comparison, of the different theories on learning in not-school settings that the report has offered up and formulates research questions in the interest of further investigation of this area of extended education, based upon these observations. In this conclusion Julian Sefton-Green also includes two cautions, probably both for researchers and policy-makers. He advises against succumbing to the impression that not-school could compensate for formal schooling, as he believes that some of the burden of aspiration that is put on formal education cannot be put on the non-formal sector, either. He, further, urges researchers to focus less on the specifics of the sector and do more to understand learning in the context of the lives of individuals and communities. Though focusing mostly on the area of learning, Julian Sefton-Green's report also offers a very well-structured and useful introduction to all things not-school and the research field surrounding it, without being too detailed to allow a convenient international comparison.