Identifying and Understanding Learner Interest and Identity Across Settings

Summary

This article provides a foundational overview for how "cross-setting learning" can equitably engage all youth across formal and informal educational contexts. The paper offers: 1) a review of research; 2) descriptions of supports and challenges to cross-setting learning, including learner interest and identity; and 3) suggestions for research and assessments that capture learning for underrepresented youth.

Research Brief

In an effort to improve learning opportunities for all students, and especially those who have experienced educational marginalization, the authors argue for developing ideas and designing learning environments that build connections across students’ informal and formal learning experiences. This positioning reflects a developing strand of work in the learning sciences that moves the focus of study from individual students to students in social contexts.

The authors describe how programs can support cross-setting learning by understanding how youth shift from novice to expert roles in informal contexts involving adult-youth and peer-based relationships. For example, the authors cite Soep and Chavez’s (2010) examination of “collegial pedagogy” in which teens in the National Public Radio’s Youth Radio program engaged in organized classes, peer mentoring, and working with adult reporters/editors as paid interns. This partnership made radio expertise transparent while building new skills for youth. Another example includes Ma and Munter’s (2014) study of skateboard parks, describing how youth would try (or refuse) to tutor and learn tricks from each other while altering the built environment, highlighting the shifting roles of learners in relation to physical space. These and other project-based learning examples illustrate how positioning youth as creators or contributors to professional work (in

WHY IT MATTERS TO YOU

This article provides a foundational overview of current research, referencing specific program examples that illuminate how youth learn across settings. It can offer informal science educators new ways of understanding and assessing how youth learn over time through cross-setting practices and events. Youth learning can happen through adult-youth and peer-based relationships, in their growing interests as impacted by family and mentors, as they develop practice-linked identities, and when committing to long-term projects and goals. The paper provides a valuable resource of recent literature describing how youth’s diverse knowledge and experiences can be engaged as assets across formal and informal settings toward more equitable learning experiences for all.
the visual arts, musical apprenticeships, out-of-school science, etc.) can support youth’s development of identity as authors of their own learning. Focus on authorship can prepare youth to use what they learn for future opportunities, especially when meaningful connections are made to school learning.

Online environments self-organized by youth also provide valuable contexts for considering cross-setting learning. The authors describe how youth engage in meaningful literacy practices such as reading, discussing texts, and offering feedback on each other’s fan fiction in online fan-based affinity groups (Black, 2009). Youth also share learning resources with each other and develop ethical norms around crediting ownership or referencing original code and images in the online “Scratch community” (Kafai & Peppler, 2014). These as well as DIY “Maker” movement online spaces are beginning to offer interesting insights into peer-driven informal learning that can be harnessed in other educational spaces.

To develop cross-setting learning that builds on the above work in informal education, the authors explain the importance of focusing on a “culturally expansive” approach that engages local knowledge and practices (from playing board games, reading aloud to children, building projects together, cooking, etc.) as resources for new learning. Furthermore learning should be “interest-driven,” acknowledging the influence of family (parents and siblings), mentors, and peers as assets regardless of socioeconomic and cultural background. Another key consideration for supporting cross-setting learning involves “practice-linked identities” which explains how people develop identities through social interactions over time while participating in specific activities (for example, while participating on a sports or science lab team). The authors share ethnographic case studies describing how these identities can be supported or hindered through interactions with family, mentors, and in-school teachers. Such studies highlight that in order to successfully build on cross-setting learning, programs need to intentionally recognize youth as developing experts, provide social and material resources for youth’s continued engagement in specific learning domains, and provide appropriate support for developing youth’s interests while addressing contrasting values or expectations from different institutions.

Based on this review of research, the authors note that future work should focus on defining and building mentors’ roles, creating design-based research projects across formal and informal learning contexts, and finding new ways of assessing youth learning across time and space. The authors note that assessments should track more than academic skills, but also describe youth interest, identity, self-efficacy, and future plans. Documenting youth practices and the conditions that support their development in cross-setting learning contexts would be valuable, especially for understanding how youth develop their own goals and projects, find resources and build relationships that support their growing expertise, gain recognition for their growth, and find the confidence and commitment to continue growing over time.

RELATED RESOURCES

Mathematics as a cross-setting phenomenon
www.relatingresearchtopractice.org/article/118

Understanding how learners succeed and struggle across time, space, and social groups
www.relatingresearchtopractice.org/article/375

Identifying how people learn across space, time, and contexts
www.relatingresearchtopractice.org/article/379

Learning as a cultural process: Designing for equity in the learning sciences.
www.relatingresearchtopractice.org/article/340

SOURCE ARTICLE


LEARN MORE

Explore other related research briefs in our Connected Collection: Learning Across Settings

Funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF) under Grant DRL-1238253. Opinions expressed are not necessarily those of the Foundation.