

Learning to Survive “Home-Free”: Compulsory Learning and the Politics of Freight-Hopping Mobility

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Abstract: This project utilizes methods of grounded theory to explore and make sense of the learning and identity processes associated with two unaccompanied youths’ freight-hopping practices. The purpose of this poster is to advance the notion of compulsory learning to describe the process through which freight-hoppers recover or expand a sense of agency through deliberate shifts in identity, meaning making, participation, tool use, and problem solving that are themselves birthed in forced survival. I contextualize this argument by discussing the aims and dimensions of compulsory learning that frame the pragmatics of constructing agency.

Potential Significance

Compulsory learning is a way to understand *learning on the margins*. This poster argues for the utility of *compulsory learning* as a way to understand (1) how one’s marginal positionality within social, economic, and institutional structures may contribute to a range of objectives toward which learning occurs in an obligatory manner, and (2) how one’s response to such contextually-defined objectives must necessarily involve adaption, creativity, coordination, and resolve. Said differently, *compulsory learning* disrupts and re-specifies normative, self-directed understandings of “interest-driven learning,” and argues for a critical investigation into the ways contexts, structures, and environments may compel the interests which drive forms of learning.

Theoretical Framework

As many scholars have noted, locally-constituted cultural practices, characterized by an array of goal-directed activities, circumscribe learning and identity processes (Cole, 1996; Saxe, 1999; Wenger, 1998). In this vein, I will consider learning and identity processes as occurring within and in relation to the sociocultural mobility practice of freight-hopping (Nasir and Cooks, 2009; Greeno, 2006; Wenger, 1998). Additionally, I refer to a sense of agency as the extent to which one perceives the social environment as responsive to his or her deliberate actions toward some objective (Johnston, 2004; Connell, 1998).

Methodological Approach

Over the span of two months, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in which I immersed myself in the space-time rounds of two, African American teenagers—known affectionately to each other as Smiles and Bones—who engage themselves in the sociocultural practice of freight-hopping and its less organized but mutually constitutive aspects of street-life. Fieldwork took place within and in several instances across one mid-western city at various locations relevant to participants’ daily activities. In addition, I conducted a series of semi-structured interviews to elicit thoughts, comments, and reflections on participants’ forms of learning related to freight-hopping. Field notes and photographs were collected and subsequently analyzed for emergent themes. Audio recordings were selectively transcribed, and then axial coded and analyzed through constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Preliminary Findings

Situated on the margins of social, economic, and institutional life, and faced with direct threats to their physical and psycho-emotional well-being, Smiles and Bones feel themselves compelled to engage in complex, interrelated processes whereby they learn to recover, expand or otherwise maintain their own sense of agency as highly mobile subjects. I define this form learning as *compulsory learning*, which describes a learning experience in which one expects that (a) failure to learn will inevitably constrict or remove one’s sense of agency, or (b) fits of learning will recover, expand, or maintain one’s sense of agency. In this brief section, I will first introduce the aims of *compulsory learning* within the lives of Smiles and Bones, followed by a short discussion of the dimensions through which these aims are realized.

One way to consider the aims of *compulsory learning* are that they represent the tenuous though essential aspects of daily life that Smiles and Bones negotiate in order to recover or expand a sense of agency. I will discuss briefly, omitting illustrative quotes for the sake of space, the following aims: (a) physical safety, (b) heightened self-worth, (c) access to and appropriation of basic resources, and (d) the ability to realize ideals related to each of their overlapping identities. *Physical Safety:* Since Smiles and Bones feel compelled to engage in mobile practices that are themselves characterized by the imminent threat of real and perceived danger, participants pursue the necessary resources, skills, and dispositions to realize a measure of safety across mobile

practices. Their pursuit of such safety extends beyond high-risk freight-hopping practices to include traversals across and temporary dwellings in blighted and potentially dangerous urban spaces. *Heightened Sense of Worth*: Against mainstream perceptions and stereotypes that position Smiles and Bones, for instance, as homeless, amoral “scum of the earth,” and of their mobile practices as irresponsible, deviant, and oppositional, Smiles and Bones feel compelled to adopt activities, discourses, and mindsets to counteract these dominant narratives and recover and expand their own sense of worth. *Appropriation of Basic Resources*: Of precarious economic means and circumscribed by limited knowledge of the opportunities embedded within local communities, Smiles and Bones must engage themselves in daily quests to meet basic physiological demands. *The Realization of Ideals*: Premised on an overarching ideal of freedom, Smiles and Bones construct personal and social identities as freight-hoppers, musicians, urban campers, and street kids, and consequently feel pressed to gain the resources and skills necessary to meet ideals associated with each identity type.

Smiles and Bones pursue the ends of *compulsory learning* (i.e., physical safety, heightened sense of worth, access to and appropriation of basic resources, and the ability to realize ideals) through three interrelated dimensions: (a) discursive space, (b) event space, (c) bodily space. *Discursive Space*: Situated on the fringes of mainstream society, and aware not only of the negative stereotypes about themselves and of their social practices but also the dangers and limitations that characterize highly mobile street life, Smiles and Bones create for themselves *discursive spaces* from which they attempt to realize the various ends specific to their compulsory learning. *Event Space*: Each of the activities, or *event spaces*, in which participants engage have either an explicit or approximate structure, duration, and objective, while the events themselves also have various social implications. Consequently, Smiles and Bones realize the various ends of their *compulsory learning* through controlling, modifying, reframing, subverting, or participating more in line with the various events that constitute their daily rounds. *Bodily Space*: Bodily space refers to the lived experience of their mobile practices, which Smiles and Bones describe in varying degrees as strenuous, grueling, and oftentimes hazardous. As a result, Smiles and Bones realize various ends of their *compulsory learning* through modifying the lived experience associated with their *bodily space*.

Relevance to Conference Theme: *Learning and Becoming in Practice*

As pertains to this year’s conference theme, this project argues for the consideration of a subjective disposition as a mediating link between learning and becoming. As discussed, the crux of *compulsory learning* pertains to the recovery, expansion, or maintenance of one’s sense of agency. Put differently, *compulsory learning* occurs when one recognizes he or she has a prodigious amount of “skin in the game,” so to speak. There is much to loose, in other words, in the event one fails to learn. If we assume this sense of agency facilitates sustained, interest-driven learning related to social practice, and if we think of *becoming* as necessarily related to notions of personhood and self-identity, one can begin to see perhaps a less direct link between learning and becoming. This poster argues that a sense of agency may serve as a *conduit to learning* and a *premise to becoming* in practice. One can learn a skill, for instance, yet until one perceives an acquired skill to matter in relation to some desired identity construction, such learning may not necessitate a sense of becoming. For instance, both Smiles and Bones, who maintained relatively high GPAs throughout high school—based largely on what they considered to be their own “natural smarts”—never identified themselves as “scholars” or “school boys.” In fact, they chose to discontinue their school-based education since they perceived the accumulation of academic knowledge itself to be at odds with the life of a traveler, which was who they desired to become. Rather, “becoming in practice” may result from the recovery, expansion, or maintenance of agency, in other words, from *compulsory learning*. In short, *agency in practice* may presuppose *learning as becoming*.

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Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without the critical feedback and continuous support of the Space, Learning, and Mobility Lab, including Rogers Hall, Kevin Leander, Katie Taylor, Ty Hollett, Jennifer Khan, and Ben Shapiro. I am also grateful for Pratim Sengupta and Rich Lehrer’s invaluable insights and comments.