

# Theorizing Learning in the Context of Social Movements

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**Abstract:** Studying learning in social movements is important for Learning Sciences researchers because it can help us (a) understand how learning occurs at and affects multiple levels of historical, cultural, and social activities and (b) how marginalized communities participate in framing problems and their solutions. The four papers in this symposium present empirical research from diverse international movements, including the local foods movement in Colorado, youth organizing for educational equity in South Africa, school food reform in Spain, and nationalism in Libya and Italy. Each of the papers address how local actors exercise agency in relation to complex, dynamic, contested social movements. Implications discuss *how* social movements collectively organize just social futures and the role that learning scientists can play in lending analytic precision to these processes.

## General Introduction

Learning scientists, particularly those working from situated or sociocultural perspectives, have argued for several decades that research on learning must attend to the ways that learning environments are mediated by culture and history. Classic learning sciences texts, including Bransford, Brown, and Cocking (1999), and Sawyer (2006), include sections devoted to explaining how cultural practices outside of school influence learners' experiences in school and how classroom and school contexts shape opportunities to learn.

We worry, however, that research on learning too often foregrounds dynamic learning trajectories against a presumed stable or static context. We take the position, consistent with social practice theory, that just as individual learners may be changing and growing, so too are cultural practices. Such practices are challenging to study, however, because the pace at which they change is typically much slower than microgenetic or even ontogenetic change (Rogoff, 2003; Wortham, 2005). Despite the challenge, we need to figure out ways to study learning as a form of cultural or social organizing aimed at developing new social futures (Penuel & O'Connor, 2010). Social movements provide a particularly helpful example of this.

Social movements are valuable sites for investigating processes of learning and becoming because as part of them, groups of people are explicitly attempting to change and challenge the structures that shape their actions and those of their communities (Holland, Fox, & Daro, 2008). Studying social movements could be advantageous for Learning Sciences researchers because it can help us understand (a) how learning occurs at and affects multiple levels of historical, cultural, and social activities and (b) the greater inclusion of marginalized communities in framing problems and their solutions.

We frame our research within a social practices perspective that argues for the importance of studying the organizing processes involved in learning and social change (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998). A key assumption of this perspective is that researchers of learning should attend to the active and often contentious work of organizing people, things, and ideas to create access to valued social futures (Hall, Wieckert, & Wright, 2010; Nespore, 2004). Building on this perspective, Penuel and O'Connor (2010) have argued that scholars interested in learning should focus on activist projects, as these involve not only the purposeful organizing of new forms of practice and knowledge, but also of linkages between prior forms of practice and knowledge across settings. The "historically new forms of activity" that emerge from these projects often challenge those developed within and rewarded by dominant social groups, and expand opportunities for action, especially among non-dominant communities (Engeström, 1987; Gutierrez, 2008).

In this symposium, we bring together four research studies that examine the relationship between dynamic societal change and individual learning "with the goal of supporting new forms of learning":

- Jurow, Teeters, Shea, and Severance examine learning and social change in the local food justice movement in the western United States.

- Torralba and Guidali study examines the eating experiences of children in Spanish schools as forms of activism against a reductionist school food reform.
- Kirshner, Dutilly, and Griffin-EL investigate how an educational equity movement in South Africa coordinates local youth participation with national strategy.
- El Taraboulsi studies the structures that facilitate and impede the development of citizenship in the context of nation building in Libya.

In an increasingly interconnected world, our studies of learning and becoming must account for local-global interactions. Each project highlights the agency of people as they are mobilized by and create new forms of practice through social movements. Each site under study has a unique history, patterns of immigration, geographic organization, and economic development, which is critical to how each of the researchers conducted their analyses. The purpose of our symposium is to draw out common issues shaping learning and becoming as people engage in re-assembling scales of practice and their relations to each other. In his role as discussant, Rogers Hall (Vanderbilt University), will use his expertise in studying learning across multiple scales in the context of shifting cultural practices at work, in schools, and communities to provide critical commentary and raise implications for the learning sciences. Some of the questions that we hope our cross-context and cross-methodological studies raise include:

- In communities facing social upheaval and social injustices, how do people organize new ways of participating in civic society?
- What methodological tools and insights could learning scientists productively employ for examining learning across local and global contexts?
- What are some of the tensions for researchers studying activist projects?

## Expansive Learning in the Urban Food Justice Movement

A. Susan Jurow, Leah Teeters, Molly Shea, and Samuel Severance

This paper examines social processes of learning in the local food justice movement. Our project is situated within collective efforts of private, non-profit, and governmental organizations to transform how food is produced, distributed, and consumed in the western United States. Many of these organizations focus on increasing food access for the most vulnerable populations in the state where we conducted the research; some center on food itself as a core component of promoting community health, while others use food as a means of working for social justice. As we have found through our ethnographic and participatory research, this movement has provided a means for communities to resist, transform, and learn in the “tight circumstances” in which they live (McDermott, 2010).

Our findings come from a two-year, ongoing study of community organizing led by a non-profit organization working closely with residents in a largely Mexican immigrant community. The neighborhood has been designated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture as a *food desert* because there are a large number of people living in poverty with limited access to healthy foods (USDA, 2012). The non-profit has the dual aim of empowering residents and improving food access. It uses an approach that relies on *promotoras*, i.e., residents hired to facilitate links between the non-profit and the community. The promotora model originated as a Latin American public health strategy; it was developed to help institutions like hospitals capitalize on the shared cultural practices and language backgrounds between promotoras and residents to facilitate desired health goals (Elder, Ayala, Parra-Medina & Talavera, 2009). In the focal neighborhood, promotoras act as community connectors between the non-profit and the community. A central part of the promotoras’ work involves teaching residents to grow their own backyard gardens, which can provide them with fresh, organically grown food.

The backyard garden program has created new connections between people, practices, and values and has expanded possibilities for learning and action (Engeström & Sannino, 2010). Our first finding reveals that through their compassionate and sustained engagement with community members, promotoras have developed a critical perspective on the needs of residents, the inequities facing their community, and a sense of responsibility as emerging civic leaders. Our second finding documents how the promotoras’ changing sense of who they are becoming has affected their actions in the community. Their initial aim of growing gardens has grown to include a desire to challenge inequitable relations of power through reorganizing residents’ access to social, educational, and economic resources. In collaboration with the non-profit leadership and residents, promotoras are now deeply engaged in developing a community-owned food cooperative and a commercial and educational kitchen.

Our study underscores the need to develop ways of theorizing learning as it is situated in intricately tangled networks of practice. Promotora learning, for example, took shape in relation to historical patterns of immigration, the uneven development of educational and health resources in the city, and changing conceptions of food production and community. To create greater equity within and across these networks of practice, we need to examine efforts that aim not only to reveal their tensions, but also strive to transform them (Avis, 2007). Radical social movements like the local food justice movement provide a powerful avenue for studying social change and its implications for learning, becoming, and organizing a just and sustainable world.

## Examining Children's School Eating Practices as Processes of Learning to Envision Alternative Forms of Social Participation: Implications for School Food Reform

José Antonio Torralba and Barbara Guidalli

How do school children's and youth's eating practices and understandings of food constitute a form of activism that disrupts existing school food reforms and seeks to re-store social and cultural aspects of food and eating? Answering this question requires us to focus on the active participation of children in a process or practice that has attracted little or no attention from the educational research community (Weaver-Hightower, 2011) and in which children have been conceptualized as passive recipients of adults' designs. It also encourages an examination of learning, development, and becoming within complex social-cultural and politicized contexts (Poppendieck, 2010), where issues of becoming intersect with social and personal activism. Within the reductionist context of school food reform in Spain, often recognized as 'nutritionism' (Scrinis, 2002; Pollan, 2008), we document students' statements and actions that disrupt underlying assumptions of those reforms (namely understanding and producing food and eating experiences in terms of nutrient intakes) and seek to re-store key aspects of food and eating (e.g., sociability, pleasure, traditional meals) aligned with children's identities as cultural and social eaters (Haden, 2006).

In this paper, we show how children in Spanish schools envision themselves as school eaters and through that process offer alternative visions of the school foodscape and their positioning within it. We understand this process as a form of activism because it seeks to change, or at least create the underlying conditions for changing, the organizational structures and eating experiences of students in schools.

We employ the notion of *foodscape* (Mikkelsen, 2011; Johansson et al, 2009) to re-store analytically the social, economic, political and cultural elements to a practice - *eating* - and a setting - *the school lunchroom* - that have been examined in very restrictive manners (cognitively and socially). Working within this new perspective, we examine issues of learning to become a particular practitioner (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and elaborate a construct, "eater-in-context," to ground our emerging understanding of learning and becoming within the context of eating in schools. We think children's active roles in learning and becoming are also attempts to modify or change the context in which one is forging an identity, namely providing alternative images of the school foodscape. We treat documented eating practices and preferences as a form of activism because they are deployed and offered by students to modify or critique the existing conditions and to position themselves as a different type of eaters than that expected by the institution of school. Eating in a way that disrupts traditional Spanish meals or not eating certain foods because of their appearance, lack of ingredients, preparation, and/or presentation are all ways to become an activist and offer forms of resistance to and proposals for different eating experiences in the school foodscape. We examine these processes as a way to produce questions of learning and becoming in socioculturally and politically complex settings at the individual and collective levels. We employ two vignettes to do this.

At the individual level, we show how Iñigo, a second grader, employed the geography of the school lunchroom to suggest and obtain changes with whom he participated during eating. He joined a particular group and once there, learned to participate in the eating practices of that group to craft an identity as a third grade eater. His activism resides in the fact that he demonstrated how the organizational structures of the school lunchroom could be employed to advance his aims of becoming part of a practice (a third grade eater). At the collective level, we examined statements produced by children from different grade levels and schools in reference to school food and eating experiences. We use these statements and their contexts as evidence or representations of these children's envisioned identities as school eaters. We treat these visions as part of a child *activist* positioning that has been systematically ignored but that continues to impact and to some degree guide the initiatives of school food reform (e.g., school food waste, preferences, conditions, etc.). The changes that emerged out of this activism included a call for greater autonomy in the eating experiences of students at school, a call for more equitable forms of eating, and a call for meals that are prepared and offered in ways that better aligned with their social and cultural perceptions of food and eating. Based on these analyses, we conceptualize becoming a school eater as a way to:

- appropriate ways of eating that are deeply context-bound (eater-in-context), and thus unique to the school foodscape;
- compare elements of different foodscapes to articulate (sometimes in the form of criticism) an image of one's eating experiences inside the school foodscape; and,
- develop a personal notion of eating as a collective social activity.

The school lunchroom is a highly contentious and politicized place (Poppendieck, 2010), where notions of health, economics, childhood, parenthood, and education compete to craft the eating experiences of children. Examining learning and becoming in such a complex system (foodscape) from the perspective of the eater may represent a productive opportunity for re-examining the capacity and limitations of the bounded system

conceptualized by researchers from the social cultural historical activity theory perspective (Engeström, 1987). Because we conceptualize learning and development in the school foodscape as a form of activism (i.e., a way for children to engage in actual or prospective change), we are proposing that processes of learning within this context are interesting in that they may emerge in constant tension with a parallel activity system- that of the institution. How children in such a tension-dense context craft learning and identity is a question worth examining.

## **Every Generation Has Its Struggle**

Ben Kirshner, Erik Dutilly, and Nosakhere Griffin-EL

How do ordinary young people work together to change institutions or policies that affect their lives? Complex systems are notoriously hard to alter, especially for youth who lack voting rights and financial resources. Furthermore, the local scale at which youth may experience problems – such as lack of computers in their schools – is not the scale from which the problem originated (Kurtz, 2003). Current theories of civic learning are limited because they do not conceptualize the problem of agency at the proper scale. They tend to privilege classrooms rather than networks, discrete action projects rather than movements. In this sense they do not provide theoretical clarity to describe the kinds of coordination challenges facing organizations that aim to facilitate youth participation in social movements.

We address this shortcoming by drawing on work by Nespor (2008) and Zuckerman (2013) to conceptualize and study the social production of political agency in one youth organization, called here Learner Rights, located in South Africa. We examine how young people between the ages of 15 and 24 learn to participate in a complex, nation-wide social movement for educational equity. Claims are based on data collected during 12 months of ethnographic and archival research, including field notes from meetings with youth, interviews with youth leaders, organization documents, newspapers, and historical analyses.

Our findings focus on the ways that Learner Rights (LR) 1) situates its work in a historical narrative and 2) coordinates local scales of meaning with national scales of regulation.

With regard to historical narratives, today's critics of the African National Congress, South Africa's governing party, confront a dilemma. Criticizing the ANC, which is in power because of its recognized "struggle credentials," risks being painted as not in solidarity with the South African liberation project. Furthermore, young people today, known as the the born-free generation, have only known the post-apartheid state.

In this context, LR has developed a narrative that claims its legitimacy by linking the revolutionary struggles of the apartheid years to the present day movement. Several examples from our fieldwork demonstrate this effort to situate the work in a broader historical narrative, best exemplified in LR's slogan, "Every generation has its struggle." The creation and singing of songs are another example of linkages to "the struggle," because of the role of "struggle songs" in the anti-apartheid movement. Group singing at LR events is common; the songs include ones that attach new lyrics about contemporary issues to melodies from older struggle songs.

With regard to our second finding, people tend to experience injustices at a local level (scales of meaning); but often the solution to these injustices can only be found at a more geographically diffuse national set of policies (scales of regulation) (Kurtz, 2003). For example, the "scale of meaning" for most ELRE members is located in their school or township. But learners attending township schools can only get so far in targeting their school principal to address brick and mortar issues.

LR manages this scale dilemma by developing, coordinating, and exercising power at three different scales, all in the service of the same campaign. The first scale is local and seeks to build power in numbers by mobilizing students and their families around issues that affect them directly, such as poor sanitation in their schools. The second scale is legal: EE has an affiliated "law centre" that researches statutes and files legal briefs. The third scale is devoted to media communications and messaging.

In a time when ordinary people may feel that government is unaccountable or that the avenues for social change are too opaque, social movement organizations fill an important need. This paper shows how LR's effort to foster youth participation in radical social change involves coordination across various scales of history, meaning, and regulation.

## **Statehood in Purgatory: Regionalism, Nationhood and State-Building in Italy and Libya**

Sherine El Taraboulsi

Studies of civic development are almost uniformly set against a context of national stability or assumed statehood. Ongoing mobilization in North Africa and Europe, however, underscores the need for historically grounded theories of citizenship that account for the messy, dynamic, and conflict filled process of nation and

state building. This paper offers possible direction for such efforts by engaging in a comparative analysis of the struggle of nation and state building in two neighboring countries—Italy and Libya.

In his book, *A History of Modern Libya*, Vandewalle (2006) highlights an important point in Libya's relation to its colonizer; when Italy invaded Libya in 1911, it had only been "unified" for fifty years (24). Italy could not provide a model of statehood to which the Libyan people might have aspired to after liberation; it did not have much experience in state building itself so it had little to contribute to an already existing non-state. Moreover, Italy had suffered from extreme regionalism that compromised the development of a solid imaginary of the nation and placed state-building structures in a continuous flux; historical differences between the Northern regions and the Southern ones produced very complex and diversified understanding of nationhood. In nineteenth century Italy, Royal Prime Minister Massimo D'Azeglio of Sardinia-Piedmont described how the unification had made "Italy but not Italians" (p. 128, Amoretti, 2002). The nation as imagined was fragmented so it could not provide a model of that to the Libyan population, nor were the Libyans given a chance to organically develop structures for both statehood from within; continuous political and economic instabilities along with the absence of an indigenous capacity to produce those structures thwarted their development.

The process of "learning" and developing tools of state building was impeded, an imaginary of the nation was confused, and so the process of "becoming" a coherent nation and a consolidated state was not made possible. Both Italy and Libya struggle today because of incomplete state building and nation building processes. There is a need to develop frameworks of understanding of the transition from a non-state to statehood in terms of its implications for civic participation as well as building institutions that contribute to or thwart statehood.

The *role of institutions* in state building and the role of *cultural constructs* in nationalism are central. The core question is *if* it is possible to establish a state with a confused sense of nationhood. Which comes first? What kind of lessons learned can we obtain from other countries that can help inform our understanding of the crossroads between both? I propose to take state and nation building to their points of departure and explore in light of those examples how the path from a non-state to statehood was thwarted or made possible. Critical to my historical analysis is the role of institutions, formal and informal, in allowing or preventing that transition across the trajectory from unification or liberation to the present. Historical institutionalism will be used as an approach in the analysis with a revisiting of North's (2009) thesis on transitioning from one social order to another and his concept of an Open Access order. Special emphasis will be placed on the role of civil society and citizen mobilization in state building and establishing understandings of nationhood. The approach and methods that inform this research are qualitative and combine both history and social anthropology. Data sources include archives in Italy at the University of Bologna and exploring recordings of oral history at the Center for Libyan Studies in Tripoli. In depth interviews and focus group discussions will also be conducted with civil society leaders, activists and government officials to inform my analyses.

## Conclusion

The focus of this symposium is on understanding the nature of learning in social movements. To date, social movements have received relatively little attention from learning sciences researchers. We argue, however, that they provide a powerful perspective for examining transformative learning and the emergence of new cultural practices in shifting sociohistorical contexts. This holds great potential for learning sciences research, particularly efforts to design for greater equity for historically marginalized communities. Through comparison of four investigations into social movements situated in different parts of the world, we aim to stimulate discussion of the possibilities of social movement research for the learning sciences and educational practice.

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