

MacDoc Meeting Notes June 2011

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At our first meeting, held in San Francisco and hosted both at the Golden Gate Club in the Presidio and at the nearby Exploratorium, from Friday afternoon and dinner through Saturday lunch (June 10-11, 2011), we opened up discussion of our core topics very broadly for advice and input from invited participants.

[insert list of participants and institutions]

More detailed notes and the references to the literature made during the meeting are provided separately by Robert Lecusay.

A key issue is that of **the unit of assessment**. I believe the consensus of the group was that this unit is a system over time, which includes individual learners, but also other participants, mediating tools and semiotic media, and local conditions directly relevant to and supportive of the learning activities. It needs to be extended to wider contexts that make the setting of learning possible institutionally, but with decreasing detail as relevance to the specifics of learning trajectories decreases.

This was later applied to the question of meta-data or backstories for video records of learning activities. A key question, answers to which may vary by type of setting or type of activity, is:

How much and what kinds of information are relevant to identifying valued learning and the specific aspects of activity that support it in the video?

A suggestion for estimating the role of background information is to have a group view the video first without background, and then again with partial background, and a third time with much more complete background.

It was suggested that in any records of learning activity over time, some valued learning may be more readily visible, to more observers and with less detailed analysis or less experienced professional vision, while other instances may be less readily visible.

It was also agreed that different kinds of learning may become visible when records of learning activities are studied over longer vs. shorter time periods.

A key proposal was to identify and survey research and assessment in and across a variety of **types of settings**, including:

Learning in the home through everyday activities or activities not specified by the requirements of some other educational institution (example: doing and discussing mathematics during home remodeling)

After-school programs, where activities are not directly meant to serve school-based academic functions (example: playing an educational computer game and making innovative use of it for fun, with ancillary learning)

Community center programs, where activities are negotiated between learners and providers, and which may have specific learning objectives but changing approaches to the goal (example: telementoring and use of computer simulation of electric circuits, together with an onsite coach familiar with the student, but not responsible for the content)

Museum-based programs, where visitors can choose to manipulate hands-on materials in the context of questions and explanations of phenomena observed/produced (example: young visitors connecting a battery to various electric devices to see the results of completing a circuit, with a coach, and showing the results to a parent; a group of young visitors extracting insects from a bag to feed to a pet as part of a longer term project, and one overcoming a reluctance to touch the insects)

Online communities and Forums, where participants ask and answer questions on a specific area of competence or expertise and evaluate one another's answers or contributions, and where they may also engage in joint activity in a virtual space or mediated by tools and social interactions in that space (example: learning to build in Second Life; "theory-crafting" to identify technical characteristics of computer games by systematically playing many options within them; modding in World of Warcraft; raiding as joint play for a goal).

Team sports, both live action and "fantasy" or virtual-world mediated

Crafting communities, online and offline, such as Ravelry (knitting, etc.)

Cooking communities, online and offline.

Issues of Value and Significance

By what criteria do we decide that some learning is valuable?

It was recommended that the first criterion be that there is evidence of value for the participants, e.g. through the length of time they focus on a task or activity, their reluctance to leave or end the activity, displays of intense or positive affect during the activity, comments on the activity during and after, explicit elicited evaluations.

Beyond this there are additional criteria which may be applied, primarily: the judgment of expert educators or others, such as parents, regarding what is of value to the learners and/or to society; evidence of consequentiality of learning for other, conventional academic activities (e.g. increased interest, increased participation, more positive affect, more effective completion of tasks, ability to teach content and skills to others, ability to solve problems collaboratively, etc.)

Issues of Documentation

Video alone is often not sufficient documentation of learning activity because of the inferences that need to be made to identify valued learning. Ideally video should be supplemented by fieldnotes from participant observation or observant participation, interviews with participants, relevant histories of the setting and of the participants.

The unit of analysis for documentation should be activity in a setting over times long enough to show: origins of participation, evolution of the activity, learning in the activity, consequentiality of learning for some other activity.

An individual episode captured on video may be significant as part of such a longer trajectory of learning and development, and/or as an instance of a frequently repeated pattern of learning and activity across other cases in the same or similar settings.

Issues of Definition and Scope

“Informal learning” is at best a shorthand for a more complex combination of specific features which need to be identified. These features may in principle occur in both school and classroom-based learning and in other settings, but in different combination and to different degrees. Each setting and perhaps each kind of learning activity will tend to have a particular combination and degree of each feature.

Some of the features noted as relevant include:

Voluntary participation

Enjoyment of the learning activity for its own sake

Intense engagement with tasks

Flexibility in goals and re-purposing resources

Unpredictability of some significant learning outcomes

Improvisation and innovation within and concerning the activity

Commitment over time

Continuing voluntary participation despite setbacks

Relatively equitable power relations in negotiating goals and means

Various literatures may name activities or settings where these features are present, dominant, constitutive, or highly significant “interest-based learning” “free-choice learning” “nonformal learning” “learning in passion communities” etc. as well as making distinctions among these based on role relationships or types of institutional goals and constraints.

The scope of our review may need to be limited in order to be useful, given the breadth and diversity of settings in which learning with some or all of these features occurs.

It was suggested that we could focus on learning in which digital media play a significant role.

It was also proposed that we initially survey a number of different types of settings, such as those listed above, try to identify key features of learning, and then determine a limited set of such types or domains on which to focus in order to be able to say something about common features/problems and unique features/problems of documentation and assessment of learning.

It was suggested that we seek out samples of video and other documentation from a relatively wide range of such settings as part of our analysis.

Invited participants in the meeting agreed to send us references to relevant literature with which they were familiar.

Future Meetings

We also briefly discussed ideas for the second and third meetings. One possibility for the second meeting is to focus on the domain of digital media for non-school learning. For the third meeting we might invite researchers familiar with each of a number of different setting types or domains and attempt to identify similarities and differences in effective approaches to documenting and assessing learning.

It was also agreed that at least by the third meeting we should have a draft of key issues drawn from a review of the literature to distribute before the meeting and for which we would invite specific comments, additions, criticisms, etc.

An offer was made to host the next meeting at Northwestern University.