

Documenting Learning: Processes and Outcomes

Assessment in Fluid, Less Predictable Settings

In formal settings, outcomes are intended to be predictable, and designers of formal learning environments assume they know in advance which processes will produce the predicted outcomes, or not produce them.

In informal settings, and everywhere that learners engage with information-rich environments and interact in multiple, spontaneous activities with varying peers and mentors, many significant learning outcomes cannot be known in advance, and their relationships to prior activity processes are complex and problematic.

How do we effectively document learning when valued learning outcomes are significantly unpredictable and their precise grounding in prior activity is uncertain?

Challenges to Outcomes as the Unit of Assessment

While we customarily speak of “outcomes” as what we assess, we know that what we actually observe are learned practices that are always embedded in wider activities and often an inseparable part of them.

How do we assess on-going learning activities in which learned practices are embedded and through which they are demonstrated? How reliably can we say that a learned practice remains the same when it is part of very different activities?

Should we be as concerned with the personal and social value of learning activities and demonstrating activities as we are with the practices that are learned?

The Role of Feeling, Emotion, Affect

Fully visible in all learning activities, but largely unreferenced in analytical accounts of learning, are the emotions and feelings that immediately accompany learning.

In informal learning, there is often a significant element of play and playfulness. More serious stances and moments may mix or alternate with more playful ones.

Video records show us that learners' feelings are complex, but how do we move beyond documenting that something was felt, to documenting and analyzing its role in the actual learning activities?

Self-documenting Activity and Naturalistic Assessment

In what ways can records of social activity contain evidence of learning and of participants' own assessments of learning and competence, without the artificial insertion of specialized testing activities?

Are there effective strategies for incorporating or expanding "demonstration activities" within on-going naturalistic activity in ways that enhance the visibility of focal learning outcomes?

Examples and Discussions

What prior and in-progress work of your own, your students, and nearer and more distant colleagues would you recommend that:

1. Provides examples of the kinds of challenges for documenting learning in informal and media-rich settings noted above?
2. Offers partial solutions or promising approaches to meeting these challenges?
3. Formulates potentially useful conceptual models or methodological approaches to meeting these challenges?

We would also welcome references to research that has met with largely insurmountable difficulties in documenting learning in such settings.