

Chapter 1

Wildfire Activities: New Patterns of Mobility and Learning

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ABSTRACT

The article argues for a historical perspective on mobility and learning. In social production or peer production, mobility takes the shape of expansive swarming, sideways transitions and boundary-crossing. The notion of wildfire activities is proposed to point out that activities such as birding, skateboarding, and disaster relief of the Red Cross have characteristics similar to those of peer production but predate internet and take place mainly outside the sphere of digital virtuality. Wildfire activities pop up in unexpected locations at unexpected times and expand very rapidly. They become extinguished from time to time, yet they reappear and flare up again. Learning in wildfire activities is learning by swarming that crosses boundaries and ties knots between actors. It is also learning by building mycorrhizae communities by means of cognitive trails and social bonds that make the terrains knowable and livable. The mechanism of stigmergy is foundational in mycorrhizae communities.

INTRODUCTION

This article argues for a historical perspective on mobility and learning. In social production or peer production, mobility takes the shape of expansive swarming and multidirectional pulsation, with emphasis on sideways transitions and boundary-

crossing. I will introduce the notion of wildfire activities to point out that activities such as for example birding, skateboarding, and disaster relief of the Red Cross have important characteristics similar to those of peer production but predate internet and take place mainly outside the sphere of digital virtuality. I will discuss and use these three examples throughout the article. Few stud-

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ies have been published on these three activities, even though each one of them represents a rich opportunity for gaining insight into the future of mobility and learning (existing studies include Law & Lynch, 1988 on birding; Beal, 1995, Borden, 2001, and Bäckström, 2005 on skateboarding; Majchrzac, Jarvenpaa & Hollingshead, 2007, and Palen, Hiltz & Liu, 2007 on disaster relief).

I will first historicize the notion of mobility, then move to describe characteristics of wildfire activities. After that, I will discuss the changing nature of communities, focusing on what I call ‘mycorrhizae’-like features of communities that emerge within and around wildfire activities. I will then sketch a conceptual framework for more detailed analyses of wildfire activities, based on the notions of cognitive trails and encounters. Finally, I will present six theses which together form a working hypothesis for understanding the new potentials of learning inherent in wildfire activities.

RECONCEPTUALIZING MOBILITY

As educators, we tend to define top down the desirable patterns of mobility we want our mobile learners to engage in. The risk is that these patterns do not touch what is going on in the lives of the learners - and the undercurrents of history.

As Kris Gutierrez and her colleagues point out, in all educational processes, there is the official script of the educator on the one hand, and the largely invisible counter-scripts of the learners on the other hand (Gutierrez, Rymes & Larson, 1995, Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez & Tejeda, 1999). These scripts frequently collide. But when they engage in dialogue and hybridize, we get powerful ‘third spaces’ of learning.

Extending Gutierrez’s analysis, we might talk about official mobility scripts and counter-scripts of mobility. An official mobility script would perhaps prescribe fieldtrips to museums and

other educationally valuable sites as the routes of mobility to be fostered by means of technologies such as mobile phones and digital cameras. A counter-script might depict mobility as a terrain of potential skateboarding spots in the vicinity. The two scripts have obvious structural differences. The official script determines a fixed endpoint of the movement – for example, a museum. The route from the school to the museum itself is rather irrelevant; thus, it should be effective and straightforward transport. For the counter-script, there is no endpoint. The terrain opens up to all directions for exploration. While a good skating spot is a delight, the movement between spots is equally if not more important since new spots are discovered only by moving around, by wayfaring with open eyes. The official mobility script resembles a pre-planned straight line from point A to point B, whereas the counter-script resembles a tapestry of criss-crossing and winding lines which gain their shape as the action unfolds.

These two modes of movement correspond to Tim Ingold’s (2007) distinction between wayfaring and transport.

Wayfaring, I believe, is the most fundamental mode by which living beings, both human and non-human, inhabit the earth. By habitation, I do not mean taking one’s place in a world which has been prepared in advance for the populations that arrive to reside there. The inhabitant is rather one who participates from within in the very process of the world’s continual coming into being and who, in laying a trail of life, contributes to its weave and texture. These lines are typically winding and irregular, yet comprehensively entangled into a close-knit tissue. (...) They have no ultimate destination, no final point with which they are seeking to link up. (...)

From time to time in the course of history, however, imperial powers have sought to occupy the inhabited world, throwing a network of connections across what appears, in their eyes, to be not a tissue of trails but a blank surface. These

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