

# Chapter 3

## Informal Visual Networks<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter explores the characteristics of informal visual networks. The findings of this study offer insights into the informal cultural production and of today's youth and allows the author to formulate alternative approaches for formal art education practices. He found support for the conclusion that today's art teacher is part of a world in which visual knowledge and production can be learned in various communities of practice, which are empowered by technology and globalized networks. A formal curriculum that is open to these various communities of practice might be capable of keeping pace with the rise of participatory cultures while remaining meaningful to students. A teacher in such a curriculum is a tour guide at a lively junction where communities of practice of visual professionals and informal visual networks meet.*

### INTRODUCTION

For a long time, the field of learning psychology devoted relatively little attention to informal learning practices outside formal educational institutions. At the beginning of the twentieth century, a well-tried model like apprenticeship learning was regarded as an outdated concept that had lost touch with contemporary psychological and social theories. At that time, apprenticeship learning was often characterized as conservative and authoritarian and was aimed more at craftsmanship than at

the development of theoretical knowledge (Fuller & Unwin, 1998; Gulle & Young, 1998; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Parker, 2006).

At the end of the twentieth century, informal learning gained attention as a learning theory, as a part of a renewed interest in learning processes that take place in real-life contexts outside of school. Informal learning communities have been studied by researchers in the field of learning psychology to gain more knowledge on the social contexts that determine learning (Greeno, Collins, & Resnick, 1996; Hodkinson, Biesta, & James,

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2007; Vadeboncoeur, 2006). Researchers in the field of art and media education have focused on youth and subcultures within these informal communities of practice in order to discover possible gaps and connections between art and media lessons in school and the self-initiated work that young people produce outside of school (Green, 2008; Jenkins et al., 2006; Manifold, 2009; Wilson, 2003). Researchers in both of these fields acknowledge the value of spontaneous and informal learning trajectories as sources of inspiration for art education and other subjects in schools: “Adolescents and young adults learn more through their social interactions around favorite forms of visual culture than adults may realize” (Freedman, Heijnen, Kallio-Tavin, Kárpáti, & Papp, 2013, p. 132).

The goal of the study presented within this chapter was to obtain an understanding of the learning practices of young people who operate in visual production networks that form spontaneously outside the formal curriculum. The main sources used to discover these characteristics were studies by learning psychologists and researchers in media and arts education. The characteristics of informal visual networks that are thus defined are compared with characteristics of traditional formal art education.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Three Perspectives on Learning

The recent revaluation of informal learning fits in the broad tradition of educational psychology, as described by Greeno, Collins, and Resnick (1996), based upon variations in the different perspectives on knowing and learning from which educators, researchers, and psychologists explain and study the course of human learning. They distinguish between three general perspectives on knowing and learning: the *behaviorist*, *cognitivist*, and the *situative* perspective. All of these perspec-

tives consist of many different theories that have developed and intermingled in the history of educational psychology, although they did not develop equally or simultaneously.

The behaviorist perspective originated around the early twentieth century and has had a strong influence on the way school systems and classes have been organized up to the present time. This perspective can be typified as teacher oriented. It operates from the assumption that humans are conditioned to respond to stimuli and is less concerned with the motivation and mental processes of the learner. Instruction (stimulus) and the observable behavioral changes of the learner (response) are the focal points in the behaviorist perspective.

The cognitivist perspective, which focuses on the inner mental activities of the learner, became the dominant paradigm in educational theory in the 1970s. The cognitivist perspective puts a greater emphasis on the connections and cognitions formed in the mind of individual learners and studies forms and models of cognitive information processing. This perspective can be typified as learner oriented.

The situative perspective originated around the 1990s and is seen as a socially-oriented perspective on learning (Greeno et al., 1996). It focuses on the learning contexts in which groups of people interact. Theorists who operate from a situative perspective emphasize that learning is a social activity determined by the context in which learning takes place and the way in which groups of people share knowledge. Knowledge is not neutral but rather is situated in specific, real-world contexts in which it is learned and applied (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989).

The emergence of these three perspectives characterizes broad theoretical and methodical shifts in psychological and educational research: from teacher-centered to student-centered approaches; from individually-orientated towards socially-oriented notions; and from laboratory studies towards the study of real-life learning

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