



Making Sense of a Learning Space: How Freestyle Scooter-riders Learn in a Skatepark



Johnson, M. & Oates, T. (2016) Making Sense of a Learning Space: How Freestyle Scooter-riders Learn in a Skate Park. *Informal Learning Review*, 140, 17-21.

Making sense of a learning space: how Freestyle scooter-riders learn in a skatepark

Martin Johnson & Tim Oates

The origins of the study

- 1 serendipity
- 2 school anxiety and poor engagement, contrasting with high engagement outside schooling

Method

Both researchers highly engaged with learning in professional, school and sporting contexts

- 1 consents from participants and venue – aiming for 20+ responses from 4-hour interaction and observation
- 2 structured interview – 10-15 minutes, pre-tested questions
- 3 observation – agreed schedule, continuous updating of categories, shared during interview schedule
- 4 additional unexpected inputs from parents and carers
- 5 follow-up with centre manager, and on-request from subjects and carers

Assumptions and background

Poor linkage of high-quality research on schooling and professional learning

Mastery, distributed expertise, goal setting, learning process, learning environment

Concern regarding 'long tail of underachievement' in UK system – PISA, TIMSS

Issues of differential engagement in schooling re social and ethnic groups

Dissaffection and engagement research re 'learning identities'

Growing concern re adequacy of specific model of 'individualised learning' imposed in 1990s

Assumptions and background theory

Boreham Fischer & Samurcay – work process knowledge

Reuling– concept of Beruf



<https://www.nursingtimes.net/news/workforce/nice-called-for-minimum-nurse-ratios-in-halted-ae-guidance/7001737.article>

Assumptions and background theory – applied to context



High level goal setting: significant adjustment of skill and affective dimension (fear, concentration)

Requirements for goal setting, dedication/application, resilience regarding failure, social engagement

In a context of extreme physical hazard



Context

One of the largest indoor skating facilities in Europe

Mixed social background participation – checks already completed on social profile

Locality checked: school organisation and background researched

Saturday open session for micro scooters

Reading the environment – common spaces for induction, practice, mentoring, and audience

Social spaces – congregation on ‘flatland’, cues regarding entering shared spaces (‘dropping in’)

A skills ladder – ramps and boxes with a gradient of skill,

Preparation – goal formation using video – typically YouTube (sharing of attainment & good practice)

Context



Experience of research process

‘Appropriate clothing and ‘approach’ by researchers

‘Hang on a minute...’ – half-focussed on discussion, half-focussed on ‘what is ‘going down’
Constant ‘reading’ of the interchanges and activities in the learning environment

Full completion of interview schedules – with questions particularly focussed on school-park comparison

Very useful additional commentary with parents/carers – recorded and discussed by researchers

Findings

Highly permissive environment regarding novice performance – at all levels

Very rule-bound despite very low levels of policing – cueing and peer enforcement

Generous mixed-age ‘informal’ mentoring and coaching

Extended participation through videos before and after sessions

Findings

Almost all of the participants emphasised elements of difference in the nature of the learning objectives in the two environments - the physical, skills and activity focus of the activity in the skatepark, contrasted with the more cognitive focus of the school curriculum. Many riders expressed confusion as to why we asked the question regarding 'difference' - they wondered why we were asking a question about something which to them was obvious: '...of course it's different...school is school and this is scootering...'. However, our observation of activity, combined with key questions in the interview, yielded important insights into **elements of high formality** in the learning community and learning practice in the park.

Riders were strictly rule-bound, with a culture of high rule-compliance. Great respect was shown to those with high skill levels, and operated as models for less skilled, and frequently younger, riders. There was little presence of and action by facility managers. Rather, riders observed strict protocols about when to drop into a bowl or pit, where to stand whilst waiting, and observe safe practice. These data indicate that the skatepark is a site of pro-social behaviour, cohering with earlier studies (e.g. Bradley, 2010; Wood, Carter, & Martin, 2014).

Findings

The culture was focussed intently on ‘we are here to ride’, with respect being shown to those riders with high skill levels. Riders reported being persistent and committed, and this was corroborated by our observations. Riders were anxious to achieve higher skill levels, decomposed tricks in order to master them, sought and welcomed feedback from others. The mixed age and mixed ability groups were fluid in respect of younger riders asking questions (often tentatively and respectfully) and receiving unsolicited feedback.

Findings

Our observations clearly suggest that the skatepark is a complex, rule governed and self-created culture. The universal long term commitment shown by riders (even if they ultimately do not stay with the sport) suggested that in this context, they have assumed the characteristics of highly engaged learners.

Becoming aware of the enthusiasm which young people are showing for the activity, schools have become interested in attending, and engaging with the culture and activity in the park. Our research suggests that this should be approached with caution, and that the motives of educators need to be scrutinised.


A key conclusion and recommendation

If educators feel that engagement may help to 'bridge' the social the schooling domains of young people's lives, they must action caution over adversely affecting the very things which make the activity motivating and engaging for young people. These young people have devised and developed a distinctive learning culture, highly-rule bound, in which they engage with commitment and persistence. They gain pleasure and benefit (physical, emotional, cognitive and social) from the activity. The culture is not one which is monitored and regulated by adults in any intensive way. Mistakes could be made through assumptions that it is the activity and physical environment alone which is motivating and engaging. Simply bringing groups of young people into the park, but managing them through the power and social relations typical of the school, are unlikely to replicate and support the kind of learning relations which we observed.



Martin Johnson

Tim Oates CBE



Martin Johnson and Tim Oates CBE are researchers at Cambridge Assessment, a department of the University of Cambridge, and a not-for-profit organisation.

They can be contacted at johnson.m2@cambridgeassessment.org.uk