

EXPLORING THE IDEA OF LEARNING ECOLOGIES & ECOSYSTEMS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

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Educational Climate Change

When we talk about climate change in higher education we are talking about the gradual emergence of new understandings, practices and cultures that influence the way we think about its purposes and the means by which those purposes are achieved and delivered. Change wraps around and involves us in all aspects of everyday life. Regardless of whether the forces for change are social, technological, political or economic one thing is clear - its people and groups of people responding to the changes in their environment that actually bring about change in thinking, beliefs and practices. An essential part of this never ending change process is to imagine, develop, share, discuss and adapt ideas. In my talk I will explore the idea that learning is an ecological phenomenon and how the idea might be utilised in higher education teaching and learning practices.

The idea of learning ecologies

In nature an ecosystem comprises the complex set of relationships and interactions among the resources, habitats, and residents of an area for the purpose of living. Each organism within an ecosystem has its own unique ecology within the ecosystem through which it lives its daily life, so the whole ecosystem is made up of many individual ecologies competing or collaborating for resources and contributing to the system as a whole so that the whole system is maintained and sustained.

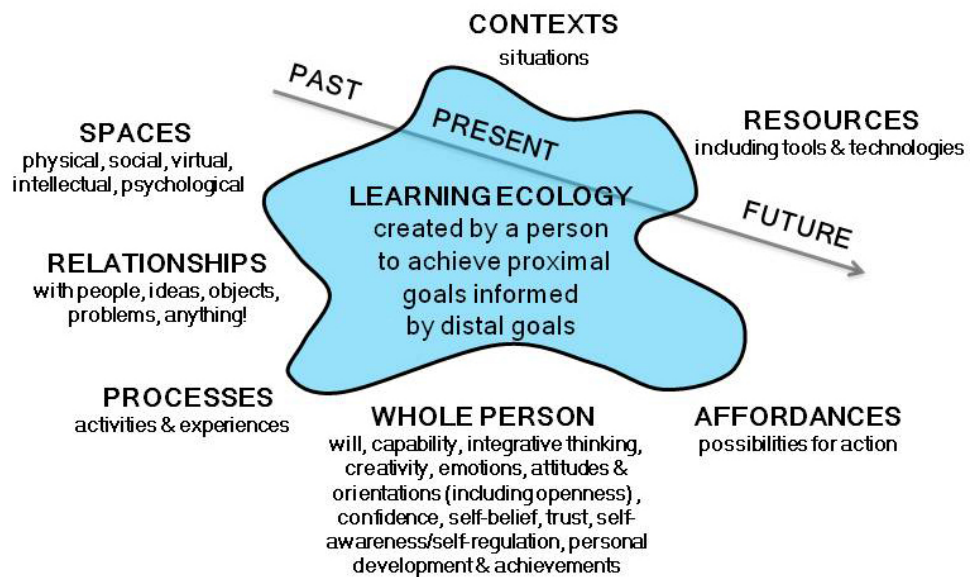
A similar conceptualisation can be applied to human ecological systems or ecosocial systems - the set of relationships and interactions among the people, resources, habitats, and other residents of an area for the purpose of living (Jackson 2016). While all ecosystems are complex adaptive systems that learn to live with, and when necessary adapt to, their environment, the making and meanings and sharing of understandings (learning) are a primary interest and purpose of human ecosocial systems together with their continuous development and improvement (Lemke 2000).

Every organism has an environment: the organism shapes its environment and the environment shapes the organism. So it helps to think of an indivisible totality of 'organism plus environment' - best seen as an ongoing process of growth and development (Ingold 2000). From an environmental perspective it does not make sense to talk about the environment in which we are learning without reference to ourselves as the organism that is perceiving and interacting with the environment we inhabit in order to learn.

Formalised education tends to treat learning as something separate from the rest of life. Applying the idea of ecology to learning, personal development and achievement is an attempt to view a person their purposes, ambitions, goals, interests, needs and circumstances, and the social and physical relationships with the world they inhabit, as inseparable and interdependent. The idea of ecology encourages us to think more holistically and more dynamically about the way we inhabit and relate to the world. It encourages us to think in a more holistic way about our life: how we connect up the moments in our lives to form experiences and achievements that mean something to us.

Growing out of the exploration of this idea is a belief that our ecologies for learning embrace all the physical and virtual places and spaces we inhabit in our everyday lives and the learning and the meaning we gain from the contexts and situations that constitute our lives. They are the product of both imagination and reason and they are enacted using all our capability and ingenuity. They are therefore one of our most important sites for our creativity and they enable us to develop ourselves personally and professionally in all aspects of our lives. If this belief is well founded then surely, our ability to create our own ecologies for learning and development must be one of the most important capabilities we need for sustaining ourselves, achieving our purposes and maintaining our sense of wellbeing in a complex, ever changing and often disruptive world. Yet to date, there has been little consideration of these ideas in the higher education curriculum or teaching and learning practices.

To promote discussion I have developed a model to explain what a learning ecology contains (Figure 1) and the purpose of my talk is to explore what these ideas might mean for educational practice.



Exploring Learning Ecologies <https://www.lulu.com/>

Figure 1 Components of a learning ecology (Jackson 2016)

Institutional Ecosystems

Ellis and Goodyear (2010) develop a compelling narrative for viewing the university as a large complex ecosystem involving the relationships and interactions of all the inhabitants - students, teachers, researchers, support and administrative staff, managers and leaders, and their connections with employers and society more generally, and the resources, physical spaces and virtual environments, processes and practices that are played out day to day. They used the term, 'ecology of learning' to represent the educational practices and learning activities that promote students' learning stating, 'we feel it best represents the nature of the phenomenon which has students at its centre, and includes all legitimate stakeholders including teachers, university service providers and university leaders.' (Ellis and Goodyear 2010:51). These perspectives on the university as a complex ecosystem located large complex societal ecosystems provide a useful foundation on which to develop and apply the concept of learning ecologies at the level of teachers and student learners.

Sources

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