

Lifewide Magazine Issue 15: December 2015

Learning Ecologies for Professional Development

Commissioning Editor's Introduction

Our learning, development and achievement constitute the most important ongoing project in our life. It is both continuous (lifelong), and rich and diverse in the multiplicity of everyday spaces we inhabit (lifewide). Whether we are employed, self-employed, unemployed or retired but still professionally active, work relevant or related activities constitute one of the most important domains for our development in order to sustain ourselves economically and to feel fulfilled.

Lifewide Education has been developing and applying the idea of learning ecologies over the last three years. In this issue of Lifewide Magazine we want to explore the proposition that when we have a significant learning and development need, we create an ecology for learning to fulfil our developmental need.

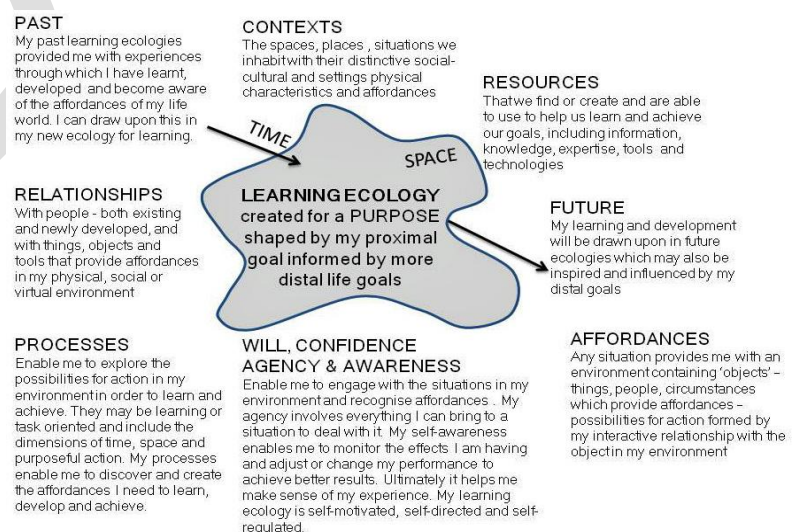
The idea of learning ecologies provides a holistic integrating framework within which to view ourselves, interacting with our environment and the learning, development and achievement, that emerges through our interactions.

An individual's self-created learning ecology grows from the circumstances (contexts) of their life and is established for a purpose that is directed to accomplishing proximal goals connected to more distal goals. It includes their processes, activities and practises, their relationships, networks, tools and technologies and it provides them with affordances, information, knowledge and other resources for learning, developing and achieving something that they value (Figure 1).

The ecology we create to develop something like a new educational course if you are a teacher, is the living vehicle for our creativity. The evolving ecology is itself an act of creation which can be defined using a slightly modified version of Rogers (1961) concept of creativity where the product we bring into existence is our ecology for learning. It is our self-determined and self-expressed process for achieving our goals, within which we create our new relational products

[including our own development] grown out of our individual uniqueness which has been shaped by our past histories and imaginings of a different and better future, and the materials, events, people and circumstances of our life.

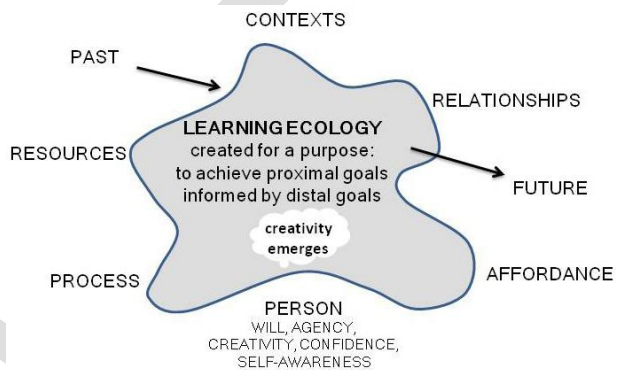
Figure 1 Components of individual's learning ecologies (Jackson 2015)



Our learning ecologies are the means by which we connect and integrate our past and current experiences and learning. They embrace all the physical and virtual places and spaces we inhabit and the learning and the meaning we gain from the contexts and situations that constitute our lives. Our learning ecologies are the product of both imagination and reason and they are the vehicle for our creative thoughts and actions. They are one of our most important sites for creativity and they enable us to develop ourselves personally and professionally in all aspects of our lives. Furthermore, our ecologies for learning may also impact on the learning ecologies of others.

Our ecologies for learning are revealed in the narratives we tell about our significant learning and development projects. For example, we might illustrate the idea of a personal learning ecology through the scenario of learning to drive a car (Figure 2) an important learning project for most young adults. The scenario involves the learner in a comprehensive and mainly informal way interacting with his environment for the purpose of learning.

Figure 2 Components of a learning ecology (Jackson 2015)



The process begins when the learner decides he wants to learn to drive (*motivation/will*) and take the test to demonstrate proficiency (*proximal goal*). The individual has created a need and must perceive the affordances available to him in his environment in order to meet his need. The individual, often with parental guidance and support, creates a new ecology (*process*) drawing on the affordances in his existing ecosocial system, to learn and develop himself in line with his objective. The ecosystem he creates includes *context, resources, relationships and an unfolding (emergent) process over a period of time* eg several months or longer.

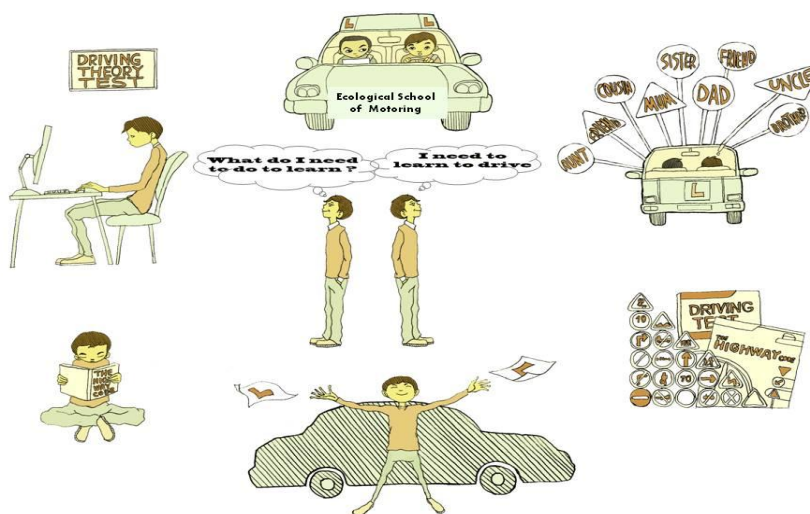


Figure 2 Personal learning ecology created in order to learn to drive a car and pass the driving test. Includes my context, affordances and process for learning to drive, the contexts in which I learn to drive, and a set of relationships and resources that enable me to learn.

Typically, the process will involve:

- several months of dedicated activity reading, practising, discussing, observing,
- access to a car so they can practise

- access to information about driving and the rules of the road - either as a book/booklet, DVD or on-line resources
- a range of driving instructors including a trained professional instructor and untrained family members and friends
- physical environment - safe areas for practising - like empty car parks and quiet roads - then public highways with various traffic conditions

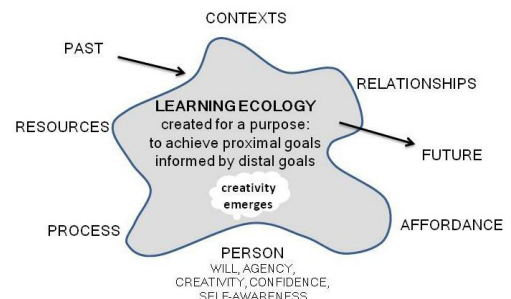
This scenario provides a good example of a learner appreciating the *affordances* they have to learn to drive in their particular *context* - their social, physical and virtual environment. They formulate a specific goals - to learn to drive and pass the test to become a qualified driver. Their self-determined learning *process* may well be aided by a professional instructor but the learner also draws on *resources* available for learning in their own environment - the knowledge and experience of people they know (*relationships*) - family and friends. As they practise driving they are immersing themselves in situations that are relevant to their learning and developing their own case examples of situations they encounter on different sorts of roads in different sorts of driving conditions. Experience is accumulated in a range of contexts - road, traffic, day time/night time and weather. As they participate in this process they can tap into the experiential knowledge (*resources*) of the people who accompany them on journeys as both drivers and passengers and their new awareness also encourages them to be more observant as a passenger so that they begin to think like a driver, reading and anticipating situations even when they are not driving. This ecology aimed at becoming a competent driver - may last several months and perhaps involve 50-100 hours of time and effort in which learning and its embodiment in their driving practise is the primary goal.

Through the process the learner learns and masters a body of procedural knowledge and embodies the practical knowledge and skill in the performance of driving and they have to demonstrate this to a defined standard in order to pass their test. Their learning and development has emerged from their interactions with their everyday environment and the circumstances of their life.

COMMISSIONING EDITOR'S INVITATION

This example of an ecology for learning, and personal development and achievement is hypothetical. In this Issue of Lifewide Magazine we want to consider learning ecologies developed by people as they seek to develop themselves for the roles they perform in their professional lives.

We invite you to share a story about a developmental process you have been involved in to develop yourself for an existing role or project in your work environment or to develop yourself for a new role. Your story should be between 500-1000 words and include a reflective analysis using this simple tool. In this way we hope to apply and continue to develop the idea of learning ecologies.



If you are willing to share a story please email Commissioning Editor Norman Jackson normanjackson@btinternet.com or Executive Editor Jenny Willis jjenny@blueyonder.co.uk