Embracing Informal Education

NEXT
46 The Arts at NJCU

47 Hairspray
47 Visual Arts Calendar

Faculty Research

Embracing Informal Education: A Challenge to Educators

By Christopher Shamburg, Ed.D.

Ford Motor company is developing electric bikes and an Uber-like ride sharing app— the company wants a voice in the future of transportation that goes beyond car manufacturing. Similarly, professional educators should similarly engage in the future of learning—informal education. Informal education is one of the largest growth fields in education. We need to see people who work professionally in the field of education engaging in this space—to improve their own practice and to have a say in the future of learning.

Informal education is learning that happens outside of the boundaries of schools—it is the area from Meetups to YouTube, from makerspaces to podcasts. This space is expanding, and formal educators have valuable contributions to make here. It's not just about better education in schools—it's about shaping the places people go to learn.

Look at the changing landscape of informal learning. In 2015, Lynda.com, a company that offers subscribers online training, was purchased by LinkedIn for 1.5 billion dollars. Khan Academy states that that they have delivered over 580 million lessons and that subscribers have completed over 3.8 billion exercises. There have been unprecedented investments in podcasting companies, companies such as Gimlet Media and Radiotopia, that are raising millions in capital and distributing dozens of diverse shows that bend the categories of education and entertainment.

HERE ARE SOME MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CURRENT STATE OF INFORMAL EDUCATION:

1 Peer-to-peer content. User-generated content, created with DIY media and accessible distribution networks are an important source of learning outside of schools—from kids who teach each other Minecraft hacks to tips on growing herb gardens. Expertise often comes from fellow enthusiasts with extra experience. Furthermore, many of the current major players in the market (e.g., Lynda.com and Khan Academy) began with these shoestring technologies.

2 Ethos-based—Often associated with online communities and affinity spaces, networks of campers, NPR listeners, gamers, and more all share interests, attitudes, and tastes that direct the topics and mediums of their learning.

3 Blurred with entertainment—Outside of schools people learn new ideas and skills through engaging interactions (like games) or compelling narratives (like well-constructed podcasts).

4 Technology enabled, physically situated—what do parkour and no-knead bread making have in common? Both are widely taught on the Internet, and are prototypical physical activities—moving and eating. Digital learning facilitates physical activities.

5 Just in Time—from getting a newborn to sleep to lighting the pilot light on your heater, learners will have access to detailed and credible sources when they need them.

6 Alternatives to formal degrees and accreditations-- How do you know a person knows what he or she claims to know? There is an increasing credibility and validity to grassroots accreditation systems of likes, reviews, recommendations, and view counts. Badging systems are a promising trend to help bridge this space as well.

For those who work in formal education, when you consider your own learning habits and examine trends in and out of schools, we can see that just as the music industry learned 15 years ago that it wasn't the record industry, the future of education—people learning new skills and content—isn't necessary a school experience. Professionals who have skills in teaching can and should have a voice in this new world as well as respectfully integrate, as opposed to simply co-opt, informal learning practices into formal education.

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Tombarola

Excerpt from the memoir in-progress "The Grace of Peripheral Vision"

By Edvige Giunta

Circa 1979. Apertures into the stone walls interrupt the rock's rough whiteness. These windows into the rock are tombs, the tombs of the Sicels, our distant ancestors, ancient people who inhabited Sicily long before the Greeks. We are aware of these graves, but we do not acknowledge them, do not point in their direction, do not say, "See? Look at that."

The bus trudges along. We sit next to each other. We sit quietly for the familiar two-and-a-half-hour bus ride through the arid Sicilian interior of hills and valleys. Occasionally, the tired yellow of desiccated vegetation is revived by a cluster of bushes interspersed with bald spots of parched soil. Here and there, a solitary tree. Skinny branches reach towards the sky.

Sonia's head rests heavy on my shoulder. She has fallen asleep. I lean against her, until I, too, succumb to sleep and our hair becomes one pillow of chestnut curls and sweat. Our bodies quiver and jolt as the bus pushes along the Catania-Gela road.

I open my eyes and spot, atop a distant hill to the right, the ruins of a twelfth-century castle the locals call Il Castelluccio. U casteddruzzu. Dear, small castle. When I was child, any time we drove by, my father would point toward the castle and say, "one of these days, I'll take you there for una scampagnata." But we never went on any excursion, any picnic at the ruins, and il Castelluccio waited, always ready to acknowledge with its impassible

NEXT
46 The Arts at NJCU

47 Hairspray
47 Visual Arts Calendar

47 NJCU Faculty Art Exhibitionr
48 Gothic Knights Athletics

presence every return, every departure, to note who had left and never come back.

I shift my stiff shoulder and gently shake her.

"We are here."

Siamo arrivati.

The bus finds renewed energy and accelerates as our destination becomes visible. The trees lining the straight road and, in the distance, the factory's ominous gray towers with their thick, dark smoke snaking up and spreading above and across the town, alert the sleepy passengers that we are almost there, Gela, the place with which Sonia and I maintain ties, mine deeper, perhaps more complicated than hers.

We are young women. She is eighteen. I am barely twenty. Gela is the town each of us has left—she a few years before I did. We left to study—I in college, she in art school. We return to Gela on occasional weekend visits and for the big holidays—Christmas, Easter, the Feast of the Dead in November. We have barely arrived that we are anxious to leave again. Gela feels tight and itchy, an old dress that no longer fits but we are obliged to wear.

Gela is the town where I spent the first eighteen years of my life. Here I first saw Sonia, from a distance. She was a girl of eleven or twelve I occasionally saw when I went to visit Margherita, who was the inseparable companion of the initiation rites of my adolescence, with its eruptions of desire, its urgency for life, its secrets, first kisses, first dances, and the pungent taste of disappointments and betrayals to be remembered for years. Decades later, somewhere inside me I would carry the feeling of being a Sicilian girl, that feeling intact amidst the layers of my middle-aged self, by then a hybrid of Italy and America. Years after that bus ride, years after Sonia can no longer return to Gela, I will return here, again and again, burdened with reluctant yet obstinate love.

Gela is the kind of town where the past encroaches upon the present, its traces revealing themselves at odd sites, broken, incomplete, haunting. They greet the stunned visitor. Looking at the gray towers of the modern cathedral, the oil industry that rises a few miles off the western edge of the town, you only need to shift the gaze east to face a memento of our ancient past, a lone Doric column still standing in the Park of Remembrances. The column survives long after all the other columns of the temple of Athena have vanished from this site on the northern tip of the town that was once a famous Greek colony.

The Gelesi insist on reminiscing about the town's past as if to counteract, perhaps excuse, what has become of the Gela where Aeschylus died and where he is buried, although his grave was never found.

"Immanisque Gela," the vast Gela of Virgil, named after the river. Gela of the large fields. Oh yes, we can tell the story of our town citing ancient verses, dates, names, glossing over the rest, as if the beauty and glory of twenty-six-hundred years ago could cancel today's ugliness, as if the past could make amends for the present. Memory, seductive, deceptive memory pulls you away from the dénouement you want to rewrite, from that final scene you know you have unwittingly orchestrated, from the loose ends that tighten around your throat.

Go back in time. Go back as far as you can. Go back to the time before you met Sonia. Go back to the place where you both lived, the streets you roamed.

Go.

And so I return to this place I once eagerly left. On the streets of the town of my birth, I feel less lost, less marooned.

Sonia and I share Gela long before we share anything else. Gela, where our mothers were born. Gela, where we befriend girls who will know each of us, but not us together, not until she's gone.

Gela, where we each fall in love for the first time with boys we would remember as our first loves. Gela, where we first learn about feminism. Gela is where we learn each other's names.

But our first memories together, the memories of a nascent friendship, the kind of female friendship that wavers between lingering adolescence and emerging womanhood—those will not happen in Gela. We will need to leave this town of otherwise shared origins to begin. Still, give me the Gela memories. I will mush them up, punch them into shape with the others, the future memories, the ones I invent, the ones I crave, and those that visit me in dreams that leave me now sated-, now hollow.

I was tethering on the brim of adolescence when Sonia appeared on the streets of Gela. She was part of the landscape of my Gela of that time. But she was not prominent. She was peripheral, even inconsequential, and might have remained so if it weren't for another encounter in the years to come, for what would happen, for what I would choose to do (or not to do), even as my actions at the time felt propelled by an unconscious motor, with no awareness or intention, no sense of consequences, of the impossibility of changing the past, of rewinding to that precise moment when you choose not to make a phone call, or write a letter, or get off a train to visit your beloved girlfriend on her deathbed.

This is the story.

But for now, allow me to return not to the twenty-eight-year old woman who did not get off a train to go and see her dying girlfriend in Bologna one more time, not to the twenty-year-old traveling on a bus back to Gela with that girlfriend, but to that most naïve and hungry-for-life twelve- or thirteen-year-old who accidentally noticed, again and again, a foreign-looking girl on the streets of her town. It would be a few years after that moment, which I now think of as a moment of origins, even if no meeting between me and Sonia actually occurred (did it?)—it would be a few years before I would come to know and love this girl who had played no role on the stage of my magnificent (I think now) early adolescence. I would meet her and love her in another place, a city-- Catania. And there is a story there to be told, too, memories to be gathered, whatever is left of them. Still, in the beginning it was Gela, and to Gela I return to retrace the steps, to exhume the past and sort through the remnants until I can place my memories of Sonia firmly in the town where people are still looking for the lost grave of Aeschylus. Inside my memories of Gela are memories of a time when Sonia barely existed in my life. And yet, there she is, there I find her, on the familiar streets of my hometown, embedded in its stories, its myths, its secrets, its sorrows.

As I begin, I lack the dignity of the archeologist, conscious of the importance and righteousness of her task. I am a visitor in a museum who, having stumbled along for hours with no clear purpose, must prolong her visit after closing hours, circling the now darkened rooms, looking to find a rare, precious artwork. But I am not even a visitor. I haven't paid any entrance ticket. I am a trespasser, an interloper. I am a tombarola.

Tombaroli are familiar figures of the Sicilian world of my youth. They still exist today. Typically, they're men. A hybrid of grave digger and self-taught archeologist, a tombarolo searches for ancient graves from Greek and pre-Greek times so as to dig out artifacts that were buried with the dead and sell them to tourists, foreigners for the most part. They are real connoisseurs, the tombaroli, but not by virtue of university degrees. These men can instantly date a Greek amphora or a bronze utensil or statuette, and explain its origins and function in the thick dialect of our island. They hold the archeological find in rough, calloused hands and delicately wipe off millennial dust. The dirt from the tombs nestles inside their nails, in the cracks of their tough skin.

Sometimes they keep some of the artifacts for themselves. At others, they give them as gifts, with nonchalance, as if they were giving away a worn but sturdy pot. Priceless items that you would otherwise see at the Metropolitan or the British Museum don modest homes, keeping company with trinkets in imitation crystal and fake china from Gela's Tuesday morning's mercato.

Tombaroli commingle with the dead without asking for permission. Their work is haphazard, risky, clandestine.

Tombaroli. I struggle to translate the word. Grave robbers doesn't sound right.

Tomb raiders? Grave diggers? There's poetry and love in the name.

Tombaroli. The word rolls off the tongue. Tom-ba-ro-la. Grave lover. NJCU

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