Full Circle Learning: Making Personalized, Self-Directed, and Community-Based Educational Practices Visible Through Educational Ecosystems

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Abstract

This paper presents an exploratory approach to reconstructing and visualizing individual *Educational Ecosystems* based on qualitative document analysis. The empirical data consist of *Full Circle Learning* (FCL) records produced by students enrolled in the Off-Campus Program of Clonlara School, an accredited private K–12 school in the United States. These records document self-directed educational projects throughout their entire development and provide detailed insights into learning processes that unfold beyond curriculum-based educational settings. Using Grounded Theory Methodology, individual *Educational Ecosystems* are reconstructed and visualized as infographics. The resulting representations reveal the spatial, social, material, and digital dimensions of self-directed educational processes, as well as the roles, practices, relationships, and teleoaffective structures that shape them. As an initial exploratory contribution to an ongoing multi-year research project, the study demonstrates how qualitative learning documentation can be used to make complex educational processes visible. The findings contribute to a broader understanding of education beyond institutional and curricular frameworks and provide a methodological approach that may support the scientific description, societal recognition, and educational legitimacy of self-directed educational processes.

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Introduction

Over the past decades, the conditions under which people learn have changed fundamentally. Alongside curriculum-based educational institutions, learners today have access to a wide range of opportunities to acquire knowledge, skills, and competencies through self-directed learning. Digital learning platforms, tutorials, language-learning applications, online communities, and freely accessible knowledge resources enable educational processes that take place independently of formal curricula and institutional educational pathways. Learning increasingly occurs across diverse social, spatial, and digital contexts and is therefore far less confined to educational institutions than it was only a few decades ago.

Against this background, educational research has increasingly embraced broader conceptions of learning. Rather than viewing education exclusively as an institutional process, contemporary perspectives understand learning as the result of a complex interplay of individual, social, spatial, and material conditions. An important theoretical contribution to this perspective is Norman Jackson's concept of *Learning Ecologies* (Jackson, 2019). Jackson conceptualizes learning as a dynamic process emerging from the interaction of people, places, relationships, resources, practices, and technologies. His approach shifts attention away from learning outcomes alone and instead emphasizes the conditions under which learning emerges and the ways in which different contexts shape educational processes.

Building on this perspective, the present study further develops the concept for the analysis of individual educational processes. The concept of *Educational Ecosystems* serves as an analytical framework for reconstructing self-directed learning as a relational network of people, places, artefacts, practices, and digital environments. Accordingly, the focus lies not solely on learning outcomes or competencies but on the relationships among the elements that constitute an individual educational process.

There is growing recognition that competencies developed outside formal educational settings often remain difficult to make visible and are therefore only partially acknowledged or connected to existing educational and societal structures. Although people develop extensive knowledge, skills, and expertise in a wide variety of contexts, appropriate methods for systematically describing and understanding these learning processes are still largely lacking. Therefore, a substantial part of contemporary educational reality remains invisible. At the same time, valuable knowledge, experiences, and competencies may not be fully integrated into social learning, innovation, and development processes. Making such learning processes visible is therefore not only a prerequisite for scientific analysis but also for recognizing and making better use of the potential represented by diverse educational biographies.

The question of how competencies acquired outside formal educational institutions can be made visible and recognized has also become an important issue in educational policy. Within the Erasmus+ programm, for example, the European Commission promotes the documentation and recognition of non-formal and informal learning through instruments such as the *Youthpass*. Such initiatives primarily focus on documenting and validating the outcomes of learning processes. The present study, however, addresses a preceding question: How can the learning processes themselves be reconstructed and made visible from which these competencies emerge? From the perspective of *Educational Ecosystems*, the primary focus therefore shifts from competencies themselves to the social, spatial, material, and digital conditions, as well as the practices and relationships through which learning beyond institutional and curricular structures becomes possible. Making these complex educational

processes visible creates opportunities not only for their scientific investigation but also for increasing their societal relevance and recognition.

The present paper addresses these questions through a qualitative document analysis of the *Full Circle Learning Documents* (FCLs) produced within the Clonlara School. Using an illustrative case study, it demonstrates how an individual *Educational Ecosystem* can be reconstructed and visualized from these learning records. The visualization is not understood as the endpoint of the analysis but rather as a methodological approach for making complex self-directed educational processes visible. Such visualizations may contribute to the scientific description and long-term societal recognition of self-directed educational processes.

Research Context

The empirical basis of this study consists of the *Full Circle Learning* (FCLs) documents produced by high school students participating in the internationally operating Off-Campus Program of the Clonlara School. Founded in 1967, Clonlara School is an accredited K–12 institution headquartered in Ann Arbor, Michigan (USA), and currently serves approximately 2300 learners worldwide. Within its Off-Campus Program, students design and pursue individualized educational pathways based on their own interests, questions, and learning goals. The *Full Circle Learning* approach enables these self-directed educational activities to be systematically documented and formally recognized within the school's educational framework. The resulting learning records accompany research and educational projects throughout their entire development and therefore provide an exceptionally rich source of qualitative data for reconstructing individual educational processes.

Data and Methodology

The *Full Circle Learning* framework structures each project into ten consecutive steps that guide the entire inquiry and learning process without prescribing either the content, the learning pathway, or the methods to be employed. Rather, it provides a flexible framework within which learners independently plan, conduct, document, and reflect upon their educational activities.

The first phase focuses on project planning. Learners begin by selecting a *Topic* that emerges from their own interests, questions, or goals. This phase also includes a *Pre-Search*, an exploratory stage during which learners investigate different possibilities and gradually narrow their focus. For example, a learner might initially compare different sports before deciding to undertake a project on surfing. This is followed by the *Research* stage, during which learners gather the specific information, materials, and resources required for their chosen project. Based on this preparation, they develop a *Proposal* describing their intended project and identify a mentor who will accompany and support them throughout the learning process.

The second phase consists of a single step: *Fieldwork*. During this stage, learners carry out the activities they have planned. Because both the topics and the methods are determined entirely by the learners themselves, educational activities may take place across a wide range of social, spatial, and material contexts. It is precisely this openness that makes the documents particularly valuable for the present study.

The third phase focuses on reflection. Learners compile a *Portfolio* documenting their work, record any *Presentations* or public sharing of their results, write a concise *Summary* of the project, and conclude with a reflective evaluation of both the learning process and its outcomes.

In addition, the mentor selected by the learner provides an independent *Reflection* on the project.

Figure 1
The Ten Steps of Full Circle Learning Framework (Clonlara School)

Taken together, the ten steps document far more than completed projects. They make the entire developmental process of self-directed education transparent and provide detailed insights into the conditions, practices, relationships, and contexts in which educational processes emerge beyond curriculum-driven learning. It is precisely this process-oriented nature of the documents that makes them a particularly valuable source of data for reconstructing individual *Educational Ecosystems.*

Methodologically, this study is based on qualitative document analysis. The FCL documents were not produced for research purposes but are created as part of the regular educational documentation within the Clonlara School Off-Campus Program. As naturally occurring educational records, they provide an authentic account of self-directed educational processes. The analysis follows the principles of *Grounded Theory Methodology* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and is guided by the procedures of open, axial, and selective coding. The present paper reports the findings of an initial exploratory case study conducted within a multi-year research project.

Reconstructing an Individual Educational Ecosystem: The Case of Cleo

Following the description of the data source, an exemplary reconstruction of an individual *Educational Ecosystem* was undertaken. For this purpose, three *Full Circle Learning Records* produced by one student (pseudonym: Cleo) were analyzed. The selected learning projects (*Japanese*, *Physical Fitness*, and *Music)* provide insights into self-directed educational activities across different subject areas and illustrate the diversity of contexts in which self-directed learning can unfold.

The analysis began with a descriptive reconstruction of the elements involved in Cleo's educational processes. These included the places where learning occurred, the people involved, the materials and media used, and the recurring practices and activities documented in the learning records. These elements were subsequently integrated into an infographic representing her individual *Educational Ecosystem*.

The analysis demonstrates that Cleo's educational processes are not confined to a single learning environment. Instead, they unfold across a network of diverse physical, social, and digital spaces. The physical learning environments include the family home, a church as a site of musical practice, a homeschool co-op, and various public spaces. These are complemented by digital learning environments, including video platforms, online learning resources, and other digital tools that support research, practice, and the further development of knowledge and skills.

The range of people involved in the learning process is equally diverse. Family members, mentors, members of the homeschool community, and digital sources of knowledge all contribute to Cleo's educational experiences in different ways. The analysis demonstrates that learning does not occur in isolation but emerges through the interaction of places, people, artefacts, practices, and social relationships.

The resulting visualization (Figure 2) makes these relationships visible. Rather than providing a complete representation of the educational process, it serves as an analytical tool for illustrating the complexity of self-directed educational processes. Its scientific value lies not merely in documenting learning environments or the people involved, but in reconstructing the relationships among the various elements. It is these relational connections that transform a collection of individual places, people, resources, and activities into an *Educational Ecosystem.* Consequently, the visualization illustrates not only where learning takes place but also how different contexts, people, materials, and practices interact to give rise to complex educational processes.

Figure 2

Reconstruction of Cleo's Educational Ecosystem (Japanese, Physical Fitness, and Music)

Beyond illustrating the structural elements of the ecosystem, the visualization also provides insight into the dynamics of the educational processes. This becomes particularly evident in the reconstructed *bundles of practices*, understood in terms of Schatzki's practice theory (Schatzki, 2002). These bundles reveal how different activities, roles, and forms of action are intertwined within a single educational process.

Interpreting the Educational Ecosystem

The *Music* bundle of practices illustrates that Cleo assumes multiple roles throughout her educational process. She receives music instruction while simultaneously sharing her knowledge with others, performs publicly in concerts, and undertakes organizational activities such as creating playlists and organizing her sheet music. Musical learning therefore extends far beyond the acquisition of instrumental skills. It integrates learning, teaching, performing, and organizing into a coherent bundle of practices in which different competencies complement and reinforce one another.

A similar inter-weaving of practices can be observed in other projects. In *Japanese*, Cleo combines self-directed digital learning with social interaction by using the Duolingo app and participating regularly in online conversations with a learning partner. In *Physical Fitness*, individual sporting activities are complemented by communal practices. The homeschool co-op functions not only as a learning environment but also provides opportunities for competitions and shared athletic experiences. Consequently, the *Educational Ecosystem* does not consist of isolated educational activities but of a network of interconnected bundles of practices.

Following Schatzki (2002), these bundles of practices are held together by teleoaffective structures. The learning records reveal a range of affective orientations that give direction and meaning to the educational processes. These include curiosity, intrinsic motivation, the joy of discovery, the desire to present one's achievements publicly and share them with others, and—particularly within the *Physical Fitness* project—a strong competitive spirit. Rather than representing merely individual characteristics of the learner, these orientations emerge through the interaction of the social, spatial, and material conditions that constitute the respective *Educational Ecosystem*.

Digital environments play a particularly significant role within this ecosystem. Rather than constituting a separate component, they permeate almost all educational activities. Digital media support research, communication, practice, collaboration with other learners, documentation, and the organization of learning processes. In doing so, they connect different places, people, and practices, functioning as an integrative element that links the various components of the *Educational Ecosystem*.

The visualization therefore serves not merely to illustrate an individual case but represents a methodological approach for reconstructing and analyzing complex self-directed educational processes. It provides a systematic means of describing *Educational Ecosystems* and of making visible forms of education that develop beyond curriculum-based educational settings and have therefore remained largely invisible within educational research and broader societal discussions.

Conclusion

The analysis of the *Full Circle Learning Documents* and their visual reconstruction as *Educational Ecosystems* make it possible to reveal the complexity and interconnectedness of self-directed educational processes that unfold beyond school-based and curriculum-driven learning structures.

The visualization is not intended as an endpoint but rather as an initial methodological step toward reconstructing such educational processes. A deeper understanding of their spatial, social, material, and digital interrelationships may contribute to the development of further approaches that enable the knowledge, skills, and competencies emerging from these educational processes to be described more effectively, made more visible, and, in the long term, become more readily connected to both society and educational research.

The present case study should be understood as the first exploratory component of a long-term research project.

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