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Informal Education, Childhood and Youth: Geographies, Histories, Practices

KRAFTL, P. and MILLS, S. (Eds.), 2014;

London: Palgrave Macmillan;

295pp., hardback £68.00

ISBN 978-1-137-02772-6

A new book to read and review! For an avid collector, with an ever-increasing library reflecting a diverse and eclectic taste in literary works, opening the cover and savouring the smell of a freshly printed book is an exciting moment. With this book it is a moment worth savouring: the cover is beautifully designed with two photos that capture the historical evolution of informal education. Venturing further in the reader discovers an interesting collection of enticingly titled chapters that aim to investigate the ‘...learning practices that emphasise dialogue and learning through everyday life’ (quote from the book cover). This innovative book has a clear focus on informal educational practices, explored through a number of examples from both historical and geographical contexts.

The editors are well-known and highly respected for their research and teaching in Human Geography, with extensive publication records and regular contributions at conferences and seminars. Their expertise is reflected within the variety of topics covered in the book, grouped around key themes, with contributing authors drawn from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, providing insightful, thought-provoking chapters that encourage the reader to explore further. It is a book of particular relevance to the sub-discipline of children’s geographies, which is recognised as a place for ‘...diverse, challenging, exciting, creative, and interdisciplinary work’ (Kraftl, Horton & Tucker, 2014, no page), exemplified by this book. As a professionally qualified environmental youth worker, after reading the introduction I was tempted to dive straight into the first part, *Nature Spaces*, and then to skip ahead to part three, *Youth Work Spaces*. This is a book that allows for that, it does not have to be read in sequence. However it would be a mistake to ignore the critical discussions that form part two, with their focus on negotiating *In/formal Education Spaces*.

So, back to the beginning, the introduction effectively summarises the central aim of the collection which is to ‘...to examine the geographies of informal education through both

contemporary and historical examples' (p.2). In doing this, the editors take care to define and explain key geographical terms and theoretical concepts, enabling the reader to engage critically in the debates explored within the subsequent thematically grouped chapters. This is much needed as some of the language may be difficult for a non-geographer (such as me) to grapple with. The individual chapters provide a detailed, critical analysis, utilising empirical case studies to illustrate and illuminate their arguments. Acknowledging my personal biases, of special interest were chapter 9: *Learning How to Behave in School* and chapter 10: *Education, Technology and the Disruptive Innovations Challenging the Formal/Informal Education Divide*. This highlights the appeal of this book: there is something for everyone with an interest in informal education to linger over. From my perspective, the centralisation of the voices and perspectives of young people was particularly apparent in chapter 10, and provided an effective counter-point to the more academic voices of the authors.

The informative style is a particular strength of this book and is a reflection of the editors' vast pedagogical experience: reading this book provides a true learning experience. Each critical debate is contextualised within the literature, effectively referencing key figures from each field, providing directions for further exploratory learning. For this particular reader, it was a pleasure to read work from authors who played a role within my own training and development; at times it felt like an encounter with old friends and mentors.

It was challenging to identify how this book could be improved as it so meticulously and scrupulously addresses and meets its aims, which were both espoused on the cover, and thoroughly defined and discussed in the introduction. Conversely, and perhaps contentiously, this is perhaps its main weakness: in places the overtly academic language may deter practitioners, enticed by the use of 'practices' within the title, who are seeking ways to inform their practice. However this is only in parts, and as the editors admit, writing as academics they do '...not seek to determine the practical implications of this book' (p286). Therefore, aside from this relatively minor concern, this is a book likely to appeal to a wide range of audiences, including academics and professionals. Overall it is a stylishly written, scholarly book that engages and informs in the manner of effective teachers:

'...with passion, with courage, with craft, and with style' (Sword, 2012: 11). It maintains a clear focus on the contemporary academic debates regarding informal education, exploring this from the perspective of geography, history and practice, with each perspective effectively located within the relevant body of literature. The chapters are intended to 'offer starting points' (p289), suggesting ways to continue to explore in/formal education through the wider literature. Whilst the focus of the first three parts lies predominantly within the UK, this includes chapters on Girl Guiding, Scouting and Woodcraft folk, likely to be of international appeal. Part four ventures further afield as the chapters explore more global perspectives across diverse geographical contexts (Spain, Australia and USA), thus further widening the potential audience. As an 'honorary geographer', I thoroughly enjoyed reading the book, and have happily found a place for it to nestle in my bookcase, providing a useful reference source for both my teaching, and my research. I also have a long list of new concepts to follow-up on!

(877 words)

References

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