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Are all Contexts Learning Contexts? Rethinking the Relationship between Learning and Context in Adult Learning Theory

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Abstract: We explore the “question of context” as a discursive practice in adult learning literature to reveal how the act of identifying learning contexts within complementary (and at times confusing) discourses of adult learning affects our means to understand and organize learning. We specifically focus on the way cognitive and situated conceptualizations of learning are utilized, challenged, and reconfigured in social and in/nonformal learning discourses to give meaning to the relationship between context and learning. We conclude with implications for rethinking the “static” understanding of context in adult education research and practice to expand our contemporary views of learning-in-context.

Making the Case for Exploring the Question of Context

The relationship between learning and context is a familiar yet challenging area of inquiry for educators. Debates about what constitutes a learning context are prevalent in the adult education and lifelong learning literature. These debates are largely bound by conceptual resources promoted by dualist views of learning whereby learning is either seen as an individual or social practice (Hodkinson, Biesta, & James, 2008). This social/individual division materializes in several different areas of education literature rooted in both modern and postmodern thought. Coming from the so-called “social” side of the coin is the argument that adults dynamically (not statically) learn in/with/from socially and culturally structured relations of power (Niewolny & Wilson, 2009b). Here learning is something we actively experience in our everyday lives. Learning is embedded in relationships among language, social objects, and cultural activity, in turn, explicitly contributing to the formation of learning cultures (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2003; Peim & Hodkinson, 2007; Su, 2011). Such a relational view of learning considerably differs from the dominant “individual” position fueled by psychological theories that understand learning as something that occurs “inside” the mind of the individual. This view of learning is thus depicted by individuals acquiring knowledge and skills to be transferred across time and space for various practical applications typically structured by formalized teaching and learning environments (Lave, 1998).

For Edwards (2009, 2006), the emergence of lifelong learning discourse has keenly brought these questions of context and learning to the forefront. He and others (see Biesta, 2009) argue that lifelong learning helps us to see how learning is relational and expressed through complex interactions of activity or situated practice across the lifespan, thus moving us beyond the prevailing view of context as container: “Once we look beyond the context of conventional situations for education and training, such as schools, colleges and universities, allowing learning contexts to be extended into the dimensions of relationships between people, artefacts and

variously defined others mediated through a range of social, organizational and technological factors, then the limits of much conventional pedagogy comes in to sharp focus” (Edwards, 2009, p. 3).

Despite conceptual advancements in the realm of lifelong learning, many questions about the relationship between learning and context remain. For example, if we think of learning as taking place across the lifespan dialectically embedded within a complexity of situations, activities, and practices, what actually makes a context a learning context? Put another way, we might ask: are *all* contexts learning contexts? If so, how does this radical notion influence adult educational practice? For example, what educational experiences or actions would receive the most attention and resource if educators continue to define learning contexts as one way or another? And from a theoretical perspective, how do we continue to break away from what Edwards (2009) refers to as the static, container-like view of context and learning that has historically excluded us from adequately addressing the complexities of learning-in-context?

Building on earlier adult learning insights (Niewolny & Wilson, 2009a; 2009b; 2009c) we begin addressing these crucial questions by giving specific focus to two adult learning discourses that often frame the discussion about the “social” and “individual” contexts of learning. Niewolny and Wilson (2009b, 2009c) specifically argue that social learning and its partner discourse, in/non-formal learning, have received increasing attention for helping educators to understand the complex relationship among learning, knowing, and context from both social and cognitive perspectives. We also argue that these camps have emerged as discursive strategy employed by educators to take into account the social domain of learning, which variably manifests as an alternative position to the established promotion of individualism in educational theory and practice. Our work with these specific discourses is on-going. In what follows, we seek to address the question of context as a discursive practice to reveal how the act of identifying learning contexts within these complementary (and sometimes confusing) discourses affects our means to understand and organize learning. We specifically focus on the way cognitive and situated or activity conceptualizations of learning are utilized, challenged, and sometimes reconfigured to give new meaning to the relationship between context and learning. We conclude with implications for rethinking the “static” understanding of context as container in adult education research and practice.

Discourse Analysis as Literature Review Methodology

Review papers often vary in analytical approach. Although we are limited in space, we attempt to make our methodological lens explicit. The methodology that guides our examination is rooted in critical discourse analysis (CDA). Although several forms of CDA exist, it is frequently expressed as a form of discourse analysis influenced by the techniques of social linguistics and theoretical insights of (post)structuralist theory. CDA aims to reveal larger formations of discourse and power in everyday educational settings (Fairclough, 2003). Our approach to CDA draws upon the scholarship of Fairclough (1992) and Foucault (1972). A key assumption of CDA is that discourses and social practices are linked together and to wider social structures by taking into account the heterogeneous and historicized nature of discourse (Foucault, 1972), and the textual, discursive practice, and social practice dimensions of discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992).

Building upon earlier analyses (Niewolny & Wilson, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c), this literature review includes empirical and conceptual writings in the areas of adult learning and education: “informal learning,” “lifelong learning,” “non-formal learning,” “situated learning,”

“sociocultural learning,” and “social leaning.” For this paper, we examined the literature for the ways in which meanings of “context” manifest within the larger discourse of social and in/non-formal learning. We argue that this approach not only emphasizes the kinds of investigations that have focused on “context” but makes sense of the way meanings manifest despite the visible diversity of what has been said about the relationship between learning and context.

Social/individual Meanings of Learning and Context.

By exploring the question of what is a learning context from a discursive position, we reveal the ways in which two current discourses of adult learning address the social/individual views of learning and context. Scholars have been involved in these discussions “on the question of context” for some time, although not focusing entirely on social and in/non-formal learning perspectives (Chaiklin & Lave, 1993; Edwards, 2006; Edwards, Biesta, & Thorpe, 2009; Eraut, 2000; Lave, 1988). Drawing upon these and other sources (e.g., Holland & Lave, 2001; Sawchuk, 2003; Usher, Byrant, & Johnston, 1997), we argue that cognitive and situated or activity theories of learning—embedded within both discourses—handle complex questions of context very differently, which has serious implications for how we conceptualize and organize educational practice. This is perhaps most evident in recent writing about sociocultural leaning. Adult education scholarship rooted in sociocultural learning traditions handle context-based understandings of individuals learning from either the perspective of the individual or the location where learning takes place (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2003). That is to say, many adult educators either acknowledge that individuals are significant or acknowledge the wider significance of the social situation that learning occurs. It seems but few educators on either the cognitive and situated side of conversation have successfully managed to focus equally on both (Hodkinson, Biesta, & James, 2008). Rather, most research tends to overstate notions of individuals learning in different social contexts while variably referring to social and cultural positions and conditions i.e., race, class, gender)—as distinct variables—that constitute learning (Niewolny & Wilson, 2009a).

In recent years, we see a movement to reconceptualize these social/individual meanings of learning and context within the larger conversation of lifelong learning (Edwards, Gallacher & Whittaker, 2006; Edwards, Biesta, & Thorpe, 2009; Sutherland & Crowther, 2006). Learning here takes on several meanings to explore the value of learning in such spaces as the workplace (e.g., Beckett & Hager; Billet, 2002; Fenwick, 2008), university (e.g., Tett, 2004; Zukas, & Malcolm, 2007), community (e.g., Purcell, 2006), e-communities (Lea & Nicoll, 2002), social movements (e.g., Crowther, 2006; Holst, 2002), and texts and literacy (Appleby & Hamilton, 2006). Edwards (2009) suggests that these areas of learning can be paired with a wide range of conceptual notions (i.e., situated learning, activity theory, actor-network theory, complexity theory) and realms of inquiry (i.e., informal and non-formal learning, social forms of learning, community-based learning). It is not our intention to account for all of these possibilities. Edwards (2009) and others have done so more comprehensively. Instead, we draw specifically upon social and in/non-formal learning to emphasize—in order to elucidate—the various meanings of learning contexts.

We report on two key strategies that give meaning to learning and context under the purview of social and in/non-formal learning. First, we identify a wide-spread debate between collective (e.g., social) and individualized meanings of learning contexts. This social/individual debate is present in both in/non-formal learning and social learning discourses (see Edwards, Gallacher & Whittaker, 2006). Although the “container” view of context is perhaps well

established, we further found an emerging practice of framing the meaning of context through these complex relationships of activity, culture, and artifacts drawing largely from situated cognition and cultural-historical activity theory (see Niewolny & Wilson, 2009a). Here the “social side” of the debate takes lead. Recent efforts in adult and lifelong learning literature variously reveal how societal and cultural conditions, structures, experience, activity, and practices constitute human systems of learning and knowing (e.g., Appleby & Hamilton, 2006; Barton & Tusting, 2005; Sawchuk, Duarte, & Elhammoumi, 2006). This growing argument appears to operate as a rejoinder to the behaviorist response of understanding how people learn from each other in social settings (see Bandura, 1977). These social domain perspectives reflect models of learning that emphasize both “micro” and “macro” elements as analytical focal points (e.g., Billet, 2002; Zukas, & Malcolm, 2007). In other words, scholars who emphasize this social domain explicitly draw upon situated, network, or activity perspectives to illustrate how learning and cognition are culturally-constituted through tool-mediated activity. This relational or mediated concept of context clearly contrasts the normative and problematic “container-like” conceptualizations that are rooted in the individualism of behaviorist and cognitive psychology (Edwards, 2006). This recursive or relational account of learning with/in context(s) is also central to taking fuller advantage of the politicized understandings of learning-in-practice as it is addressed in Vygotskian cultural history activity frameworks and Lavian situated cognition (Niewolny & Wilson, 2009a).

Second, we locate a growing, critical response to the social/individual binary that explicitly and implicitly frames the meaning of learning-in-context (e.g., Biesta, 2009; Edwards, 2009; Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2003; Peim & Hodkinson, 2007; Su, 2011). Debates about this dualism are plentiful and thus powerful in ability to formalize inter-relations between situated and cognitive learning frameworks (Hodkinson, Biesta, & James, 2008). Here the focus is on breaking down the intended and unintended boundaries that often slip into the discourses of in/non-formal and social learning where the social side of the debate is more relatively depicted. For example, Hodkinson, Biesta, and James (2008) argue for replacing the dualist views of learning as either individual or social by combining major elements of participatory (or situated) views of learning with elements of Deweyan pragmatism. According to Biesta (2009), Dewey’s transactional framework of learning helps us to see how learning is an active—not fixed—experience: “...we do not learn about a static world disconnected from our actions; all of our learning is about the relationships between our actions and their consequences” (p. 71). The practical point here would be for educators to better organize educational activity and experience by better understanding a theory of learning that allows us to see both the individual and social dimensions of learning; in turn, we might expand our understanding of the way social order and agential activity in/form learning.

Implications for Theory/Practice

In this paper, we have briefly examined the social/individual divide as it is applied to the understanding of learning and context. We not only address an emerging and influential body of writing about social and in/non-formal learning in adult education and lifelong learning literature, we grapple with the discursive dimensions that help constitute the meanings of context in learning scholarship. First, we make the case for exploring the relationship between learning and context as a discursive construction of theory and practice to better understand this phenomenon, and understand its significance for organizing and developing adult education. Second, we illustrate two strategies that help us better understand the case. Here we illustrate

how the social domain of learning emphasizes a relational account of learning with/in context(s). Scholars who purport a situated or activity perspective generally illustrate how learning and cognition are culturally-constituted through tool-mediated activity and socially-structured relations of power (Niewolny & Wilson, 2009a). This relational or mediated concept of context clearly contrasts the normative and problematic “container-like” conceptualizations that are rooted in the individualism of behaviorist and cognitive psychology (Edwards, 2006). Second, we draw upon recent work in lifelong learning that explicitly aims to break down the boundaries that frame the discourses of in/non-formal and social learning where the social or individual side of the debate is emphasized over the other. Here the meaning of context is best understood as an active process of learning-in context, thus giving attention to the complex ways adults learn embedded in and distributed across relationships and practices.

This discursive act of identification, we argue, helps us as adult educators to more carefully and purposefully take into account for the expansive ways in which we experience learning. Our ongoing research in the discourse of adult learning aims to provide hopeful space for inquiry about our chosen units of analysis in the design and practice of learning and teaching. The point in this paper is thus to provide a modest conceptual basis for addressing our assumptions about learning and context and their implications for pedagogy across the lifespan. It is the process of exploring these issues that perhaps leads to change in our practice that more readily emphasizes the margins.

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