Cultures of Teaching

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Abstract: *This paper explores some of the hidden regularities of classroom practices in adult education and examines possible explanations towards developing a clearer understanding of the social practice of teaching.*

Discussions of teaching in adult education often downplay the influence of situational, political, and social contexts even though these factors can strongly influence both teachers and their practices. Yet teachers' approaches and strategies are not established alone but built up and defined through regular interaction with others (Hargreaves, 1995). In other words, teaching is a socially-embedded practice. Unlike the multiple descriptions of teaching which conceptualize it as though teachers have complete and undisputed control and autonomy, daily classroom practices and behaviours, when looked at over time, are strikingly repetitive and limited in ways teachers do not always choose. It is these repeated classroom patterns that are here referred to as "cultures." Defining culture in this way thus includes not only teachers' and students' material experiences but also the societal influences that help shape them. This paper examines some aspects of the cultures of teaching towards developing a clearer understanding of teaching as a social practice (Darder, 1991; Feiman-Nemser & Floden, 1986; Pratt & Nesbit, in press).

Analytic Framework

Linking the minutiae of teaching situations and activities with larger social processes and structures is necessary for a broad understanding of teaching. Studying what happens in classrooms from a "cultures" perspective allows educators to discern the social character of teaching and the relationships between educational sites and society at large. It can also highlight certain cultural and political issues such as the supposed impartiality of curricula or how different forms of education might embody struggles over ways that authority, knowledge, and regulation are legitimated and transmitted. Situating teaching within larger social structures and processes is, of course, complex. It is crucial to be aware, first, of how teachers' ideas and beliefs are themselves shaped over time. As Feiman-Nemser and Floden claim "teaching cultures are embodied in the work-related beliefs and knowledge that teachers share—beliefs about appropriate ways of acting on the job and rewarding aspects of teaching, and knowledge that enables teachers to do their work" (1986, p. 508). Whether or not teachers overtly identify a particular belief about the nature of that which they teach, they must hold preferences, beliefs and values with respect to what to teach and how to teach it. Clearly, these ideas and beliefs are part of what manifests in classroom regularities. However, teachers do not always act autonomously, and their teaching is substantially circumscribed by social conditions. As such, analyses of the cultures of teaching must embed teaching practices and settings within these wider structural influences. Engeström (1998) suggests that between the formal structure of educational systems and the content and methods of teaching lies a middle level of relatively inconspicuous, recurrent, and taken-for-granted aspects of classroom life. Here lie a whole raft of issues: the patterning and punctuation of time, the bounding and use of the physical space, patterns of discipline and control, grading and testing practices, uses of textbooks, connection to the outside world, and interactions between teachers.

One approach – frame factor theory – explains how teaching processes are developed, enabled, and constrained by certain frames, themselves the product of larger social structures (Lundgren, 1981; Torper, 1994). Because any society, and the educational system it promotes, are inextricably linked, the political, economic, and social structures of society have effects on educational processes and can be regarded as frames. A frame can be "anything that limits the teaching process and is . . .outside the control of the teacher" (Lundgren, 1981, p. 36). Because frame factor theory seeks to explore how regularities are reproduced both educationally and

socially, it is useful for studying the social relations of educational processes in terms of both structure and agency (Torper, 1994). For example, it suggests that social structures do not directly cause classroom interactions but act more as influences through mediating variables, even to the level of the minutiae of teaching situations and activities.

To understand how such "frames" operate resulting in such distinct cultures, it will be useful here to turn to three earlier empirical studies (Dawson & Nesbit, 1999; Nesbit, 1993, 1996) which provided in-depth descriptions of common teaching situations, episodes, and behaviors, and the meanings that these had for participants. In each of these studies, researchers had observed the teaching in several classes over a lengthy period (at least one, and often two, semesters) and collected data in such a way as to portray teaching processes in dynamic rather than static terms. This data has now been re-examined to identify common patterns of behaviour and ways that the persistence and repetition of these patterns might be linked to wider supra-classroom structures and processes.

Three Settings

The data comes from studies of teaching in three separate Adult Basic Education (ABE) settings: an urban community college math program, a rural community-based adult education program, and a workplace-based literacy program. The three programs covered broadly similar curricular content and each involved some collaboration with their local community college systems.

College Math Program

The first study concerns a Canadian urban community college providing a broad variety of ABE courses for adults. The college offered a range of semester-length introductory mathematics courses for adults during both daytime and evening, corresponding broadly to grade levels 9 - 12. The study focused on the three sections of their most basic course which offered "a review of basic math skills and introductory algebra and geometry." It was deliberately designed to reflect a balance between the formal and practical mathematical needs of adult learners, especially those who have "never studied academic mathematics before or . . . lack a strong foundation in basic skills." Each course section consisted of two 2-hour sessions a week – 30 sessions in all – and was taught by a different instructor. Each section recruited about 15 students.

Here the teaching followed what might be regarded as a "traditional schooling" approach: the desks were set out in rows all facing the teacher's desk; the teachers either read directly from the textbook or worked out problems on the chalkboard. Teaching appeared to be based upon the textbook's model of show–drill–test. Without exception, each class was structured into the same pattern: the first 30-45 minutes on difficulties from the previous homework, 10-20 minutes presentation of new material, and then 45-70 minutes of in-class exercises (to be completed for homework).The dominant pattern of discourse was invariably that the teacher asked questions to which the students responded; students were discouraged from talking to each other. Decisions about classroom activities were made, almost without exception, by the teachers; the learners' influence was minimal. Teachers made all the choices about course planning, the pattern and pacing of classroom activities, homework, and assessment with little consideration for the needs and interests of their learners. The overall goal for most teachers was to "cover the assigned material" without losing too many students along the way. "There's a lot of pressure here to get through the material," agreed another teacher, "You can't always do what might be best for the student." Further, the range of choices that teachers could make was limited. Most of the decisions about the structure and content of each course were already made before the course began. The overall curriculum followed provincial standards; within them, the form and content of each course and individual lessons replicated the structure and content of the textbook: a cyclic pattern of presentation, practice, and assessment.

Community-based Program

The second setting was an adult education program in a sawmill town in rural British Columbia. Based in a specially-designed training centre, the program was a joint initiative between several local employers and provincial government bodies. Local forestry employers were interested in developing "foundational educational skills" courses for their employees and saw the program as an efficient way to deliver this content. Courses in the program fell into 3 distinct categories: computer skills training, academic upgrading, and career exploration. Within each category were a structured variety of courses

that covered such topics as learning different word processing and data management computer programs, using the Internet, writing skills, GED preparation, personal development workshops, and group research projects. In general, these courses were free to all students (and their families) who worked in the forest industry. Non-forestry workers paid a small instructional fee, although this also entitled them to use the Centre at any other time. Courses were offered in a flexible format that was designed to both accommodate the needs of working adults and ensure that the Centre was available for use as much as possible during its opening hours. For example, each course was offered at several different days and times each week to accommodate those students who worked shifts or who had other commitments. Each of the courses ran in 7-week modules, reflecting the program's concern to meet students' needs. Temporary work in the area is seasonal and hence a 7-week course allows students to better plan their education around their patterns of work in a way that more traditional semester-length college courses could not.

The courses and each lesson were relatively unstructured and tended to consist of a short period (10-15 minutes) of presentation of new material followed by up to an hour of individual and group project work designed by the instructor and students together. Students could then, if they so wished, continue their work in the adjoining computer lab. "This is great," said one student. "I can come here when I want and stay as long as I like." Because the program tried to accommodate the demands of learners' seasonal work, instructors were loathe to plan too rigidly or too far in advance. "I like to start each lesson with the students reviewing what we did last time," said one instructor. "That way I can check they've got a clear grasp before we move on…sometimes we just go back over the same material all over again." All four instructors observed followed this approach, claiming that it indicated, as one put it, "a commitment to 'student-centred' rather than 'subject-centred' learning." Another suggested that, "What's most important is having respect and appreciation for the students. You can know all you want about Math or English, but if you don't have some understanding of what they mean and where you are you'll never do anything. You need to be able to relate what you're learning with your own life."

Workplace Literacy Program

The third setting was a joint program between a major international union and a local college in the San Francisco Bay Area. The program offered on-the-job literacy and basic skills classes to health care workers at three local hospitals. The ten courses offered focused on the skills identified by workers as necessary for improved job performance and career mobility within the healthcare field. The program deliberately sought to base its curriculum around the needs of workers and their unions rather than the needs of employers or institutions. It supported this curriculum with a comprehensive framework of educational, counseling, and other social support services. Each class used a team-teaching approach involving an instructor, an educational counselor, and a "learning advocate" (drawn from a pool of trusted peers who acted as resources for work and community-related needs and interests). This team worked collaboratively towards several goals: to combine skills and knowledge which drew upon existing networks of support within the union and the workplaces, to overcome barriers to participation and learning, to create a cooperative "worker-centered" learning environment, and to keep the instructional material relevant to the students and their community and work settings. Through collaboration with prospective learners and other teaching teams, each team determined the skills and content needed for each class and integrated them with the specific needs of the learners and their workplaces to develop a series of 4-week "modules." By developing interpretive understandings of the values and uses of literacy in specific learner's lives, the teams were able to customize teaching units and materials to reflect input from a variety of perspectives. The "content" of the courses often seemed to be generated out of learner's immediate daily experiences and teaching involved repeated whole-group discussions interspersed with more individual and small-group work.

Discussion

These three studies identified examples of teaching quite distinct from each other, but characterized by patterns of behaviours and interactions that showed remarkable persistence over time. As such their "cultures" can provide a basis for examining the influence of frame factors. The first factor is well known to adult educators: the institutional provision

and ordering of space and time. In the math program, such provision was established amid a plethora of other college offerings: the class was tightly scheduled, the course dates were set at least a year in advance, the classrooms were never used for any other subjects, and in some cases, the seating itself was fixed. All of these subtly underscored notions of inflexibility, subject-centeredness, and acontextuality. In the community-based program, a very different institutional pattern prevailed: the Centre was a purpose built and dedicated space, available for a range of other courses and more general meetings, and time boundaries were flexible and highly student-oriented. This "allowed" the teaching itself to be more fluid; teachers felt comfortable to abandon any preconceived plans if a new topic provided more fruitful opportunities for exploration. In the literacy program, the institutional provision blended with the workplace itself. In spatial, rhythmic, and sensory domains, the teaching was linked directly to the workplace and its practices and classroom activities focused on developing greater union and workplace affiliations. Even the length of the courses– 4 weeks– reflected the organisational structure of workplace shift patterns. Clearly, the constraints on teaching locations and the time available comprise key pedagogical factors yet were substantially outside the control of the teachers.

A second frame factor concerns broad suppositions about how knowledge is to be assessed and demonstrated. In the math class, for example, knowledge was seen as abstract, tightly defined, decontextualized, and primarily to be performed individually and assessed on specially designed tests. Little in the classroom activities, the teaching norms, or the social interactions were allowed to deviate from these goals. Although the teachers claimed that they sought to develop "understanding," in practice, this meant nothing more than the ability to reproduce textbook definitions and single rule procedures outside of any contextual application. When asked why this might be so, teachers invariably cited the pressure of having to cover a large number of topics so sufficient students could "pass the test"– the main criterion by which the institution considered the courses successful. By contrast the community-based teachers claimed that appropriate application of knowledge was not externally measured, but rather manifested through "the students' need to relate learning with [their] own experiences . . .[and] the demands of local industry." Hence, classroom activities were structured to support such an approach: jointly-designed project and portfolio activities that were home, community, and work-related; regular emphases on personal and educational development, and an open approach to assessment that allowed learners to develop their own criteria for success. The literacy classes offered a third version: application of knowledge was seen as directly linked to "skills identified by workers as necessary for improved job performance and career mobility." Further, the manner in which this knowledge was to be both generated and applied was saturated with peer-based and service connotations. Knowledge was seen as collective, interactive, and inherently socially-produced. Again, in all cases, the "application of knowledge" was conceived as beyond teacher control.

A third frame factor, related to the previous two, relates to dominant conceptions of the subject content. In the math program, content was seen to be external, codified in textbooks, and best sought through the direction of experts. Teaching here was akin to inculcation: students were required to engage in repetitious activities to practice set facts and procedures until they could adequately demonstrate their abilities. In addition, the mathematical problems that students were asked to solve were often repetitious and largely irrelevant to their daily lives. Mathematical knowledge was transmitted through either the textbook or the teachers' explanations and was never regarded as a subject to be created or investigated. In the community-based program, content was seen to be amorphously internal: "you can learn all you want about math or English, but if you don't have some understanding of what they mean and where you are, you'll never do anything." Content here was inherently assessed as that which led to personal development and action. In the workplace literacy site, content was seen to arise from work and union-related issues and gaps which might or might not have links to more formal subjects such as "English" or "Math." So, whether teachers positioned themselves more as "experts" or "facilitators," these dominant notions of the content to be learned were, once again, beyond teacher control.

Conclusion

This research has shown how considering "cultures" of teaching might lead to a clearer under-

standing of teaching as a social practice. By shedding light on the way teaching is affected by factors which circumscribe teachers' autonomy, this work foregrounds the crucial role social structures play in shaping teachers' opinions, values, practices, and knowledge. More precisely, it suggests that social forces beyond teachers control also contribute to persistent and repetitive classroom practices—the "cultures" of teaching. These are not individually chosen but arise through tradition, from the "beliefs, values, habits, and assumed ways of doing things among communities of teachers who have had to deal with similar demands and constraints" (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 165). Reconsidering these traditional classroom patterns also draws attention to the presence of alternative sites or practices, themselves shaped and informed by different approaches and ideologies

Exploring the cultures of teaching can be a powerful force for professional development. Teaching can only be truly understood by referring to the framework of thought in which practitioners make sense of what they're doing. Teachers cannot "practice" without some knowledge of the situation in which they are operating and some idea of what needs to be done (Carr and Kemmis, 1986). Thus using the cultures of teaching as a focus for reflection can lead teachers to reassess the reasons for their own teaching decisions and can help them give meaning, support, and identity to themselves and their work. Finally, by focusing on a "cultures" approach, teachers can explore other aspects such as classroom discursive patterns and social interactions, the negotiation of meanings, and how subject content affects teaching. Subjects such as languages, social science, history, mathematics, or music are each differently conceptualized, codified, structured, translated into "teachable knowledge," taught, assessed, and revised. Adopting such an approach also allows teachers to examine how such knowledge can be classified according to the degree of insulation between other content areas (Bernstein, 1996), and translated into discussions of appropriate ways of teaching it (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998).

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