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(Re)Situating Cognition: Expanding Sociocultural Perspectives in Adult Education

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Abstract: We review key sociocultural perspectives of learning and cognition to begin to “make good” on the promise of situated cognition in adult education by incorporating its too-often ignored political analysis.

The theoretical insights of sociocultural perspectives of learning and cognition essentially derive from two parallel veins of scholarship: Vygotskian cultural-historical activity theory and anthropological situated theories of cognition. These independently conceived but related traditions provide the basis for understanding the historical, social, and cultural processes that characterize and constitute human systems of learning and knowing (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Engeström & Miettinen, 1999; Kirshner & Whitson, 1997; Lave, 1988; Lave & Wenger, 1991). A sociocultural perspective holds promise for expanding the theory and practice of adult education by distinguishing the ways in which learners are cultural and historical agents embedded within and constituted by social relationships and tool-mediated activity (Wilson, 1993). Learning and cognition in this tradition are thus mediated through socially and culturally-provided experience: “The nature of the interactions among learners, the tools they use within these interactions, the activity itself, and the social context in which the activity takes place constitutes the learning” (Hansman, 2001, p. 45).

While these perspectives continue to have an impact in the general field of education, the potential of sociocultural approaches to learning and cognition remain largely under-developed and under-theorized in adult education (Alfred, 2002, 2003; Hansman & Wilson, 2002; Wilson, 1993, 2005). Situated cognition has received wide attention in North America, but that attention has largely been confined to technical applications (Wilson, 2005); U.S. researchers drawing upon situated perspectives “have tended to utilize sub-constructs such as legitimate peripheral participation, communities of practice, and authentic activity” (p. 29) as stand-ins for the more significant theoretical claims of activity theory itself. Put differently, generally in North America sociocultural theories of cognition and learning have been “added on” to pre-dominant individual theories of cognition. Restricting our understanding of situated cognition to these sub-constructs alone limits the analytical focus to a model of learning where relations between the individual and learning context are simplistic notions of agents acting with various social contexts— which Edwards (2005) has noted in a context defined as “container.” Such functionalist notions limit us if we are to understand what it fully means for learning to be situated. Instead of seeing individuals in containers, Lave (1988) argues that learning contexts are socially dynamic and dialectically performed: “social practices are produced and reproduced in activity in the world, dialectally, rather than exclusively within or between persons” (p. 193). It seems clear to us that contributors in adult education have not taken advantage of the promise of the theoretical underpinnings for conceptualizing the politicized nature of learning-in-practice (Hansman &

Wilson, 2002). That is, conventional readings of situated cognition often discount or fail to take account of Lave's (1988) original synthesis of Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction and Giddens' theory of structuration. Lave argues that social theories such as these are the necessary "theoretical claims for the centrality of practice in the reproduction of society" (p. 17). Such analytical views, then, illuminate the complexities of situated perspectives of cognition and learning within and (re)productive of sociopolitical contexts.

Alfred (2003, p. 257), citing Hansman and Wilson (2002), Heaney (1995), and Pratt and Nesbit (2000), suggests that sociocultural perspectives of learning ought to be expanded to examine the "power dynamics inherent in a discourse community and question whose voices are heard and whose knowledge is validated in such communities." Similarly, Fenwick (2000) offers a critique of what she refers to as the participation perspective of cognition to illustrate the apolitical nature of how situated cognition is used. She maintains that most work generally disregards the ways in which class, race, gender, sexuality, and other social forces constitute learning and cognition. Fenwick further suggests that relations of power and knowledge saturate human cognition, so "we must, from a critical cultural perspective, analyze the structures of dominance that express or govern the social relationships and competing forms of communication and cultural practices within that system" (p. 256). According to Lave and Wenger (1991), a learner's position within the system is generally understood within hierarchical relations in that the mastery of knowledge and skills requires newcomers to move from the periphery toward full participation. Yet, as Fenwick (2000) points out, if full participation is valued in learning systems, then what theoretical insights can be used to evaluate "good" or "bad" ways of participating?

It is our intention to challenge the apolitical conceptualizations of situated perspectives of learning and cognition to move us away from "adding on" sociocultural notions to already existing individual frameworks of learning and knowing (Lave, 1988; Wilson, 2005). Such "add ons" do not fully explain how learning takes place as a mediated and situated activity embedded in and constituted by social relations of power. It is necessary, therefore, for a more rigorous analysis of the epistemological concerns, methodological debates, and political implications that surround sociocultural perspectives of learning and cognition. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to ask: what would a (re)situated theory of cognition look like if it actually incorporated a cultural view within relations of power? From a (re)situated theory of cognition, then, other important questions could be asked: how could we analyze the reproduction of hegemonic relations of power that produce privilege in educational practice? More particularly, how do dominant, traditional practices (e.g., patriarchal)—realized or implicit—legitimize and/or alienate individuals participating with/in various sociopolitical contexts? In an attempt to answer such questions, we bring forth the critical insights of key sociocultural perspectives of learning and cognition to begin to "make good" on the promise of situated cognition in adult education by moving us toward incorporating its too-often ignored political analysis. For the rest of discussion, we review politicized conceptions informing Lave's (1988) theory of practice and Vygotskian cultural-historical activity theory to elucidate the rich potential of sociocultural analyses of knowledge/power production in adult education.

Critical Insights of Situated Theories of Practice

Lave (1988) presents a theory of cognition as a socially situated process whereby practice is "distributed—stretched over, not divided among—the mind, body, activity and culturally organized settings (which includes other actors)" (p. 1). Lave's analysis of arithmetic as cognitive practice in schools and "everyday contexts," such as grocery stores, suggests that the appropriate unit of analysis necessary to understand the highly relational phenomenon of people learning in the

social world is the “whole person in action, acting with the settings of that activity” (p. 8). Breaking away from functionalist views of cognition, this framework keenly characterizes the dialectical nature of agents learning within and from a socially ordered world, thus emphasizing the ways in which human activity is dynamically linked to social and political structures or institutions (Kirshner & Whitson, 1997). At the heart of the analysis, Lave argues for a broadening view of learning in “context” to better theorize this new unit of analysis (e.g., characterizing “arenas” and “settings”). To do so, Lave draws upon theories of social action and cultural reproduction to explain how, albeit with different theoretical claims, the sociocultural order as one element of the dialectical relation, works to constitute human agency, as the other term of the relation, as well as the reverse. Such a view makes it difficult, according to Lave, to “argue for the separation of cognition and the social world, form and content, persons acting and the settings of their activity, or structure and action” (p. 16). This is made clear through Giddens’ (1979) theory of structuration. For Giddens, human agency and social structures do not operate independently of each other; instead, social action is informed through the way structural conditions and human activity are tightly interrelated, constituting the social world: “The concept of structuration involves that of the duality of structure, which relates to the fundamentally recursive character of social life, and expresses the mutual dependence of structure and agency” (p. 69). Structuration thus necessarily incorporates a dynamic view of power to explain how social practices are constituted: “Power relations are always two-way; that is to say, however subordinate an actor may be in a relationship, the very fact of involvement gives him or her certain amount of power over the other” (p. 6). Power here is depicted as a limiting and empowering force in humans systems of learning. This view emphasizes the dialectical character of society—that is, the relational nature of practice as a new unit of analysis. It is here that cultural and political aspects of participation and activity can be taken into consideration by incorporating social theories of social action.

Drawing upon Bourdieu (1977), Lave further exemplifies the way in which the “distribution of power and interests” are constituted through everyday activity (1988, p. 188). Lave refers to Bourdieu’s (1973, 1977) argument that cultural and social reproduction in social conditions (e.g., hegemonic class and race relations) occur through learning activity: “Processes of reproduction, transformation, *and* change are implicated in the reproduction *or* transformation or change of activity in all settings and on all occasions” (p. 190). For Lave, Bourdieu’s notions of “habitus” and “field” are an important effort to rethink how human action is constituted through a dialectical relationship between people’s thought and activity and broader cultural and political institutions. Although criticized for its lean toward social determinism, Bourdieu’s work is central to Lave to propose a situated model of cognition and learning that is informed by the dialectal nature of activity, which is embedded in and constituted from the sociopolitical order. According to Lave, Giddens’ and Bourdieu’s theoretical claims moves us toward theorizing the reproduction of social conditions through crucial insight into the active nature of people learning in the social world. It is these foundational views that Lave argues are central to illustrate how everyday educational practice, as a cultural practice, is a prevailing source of enculturation in society: education recursively reproduces social patterns of interaction that routinely and differentially order who gets to participate and who does not. This is the missing part—the lost promise in the use of sociocultural perspectives: sociocultural practices, like adult education, do not necessarily constitute a “level” social world – rather they discriminate, hierarchize, exclude, and dominate. Thus, notions of knowledge (re)production, such as these, are germane to an analysis of adult education.

Hodges (1998) expands on Lave and Wenger's (1991) analysis of participation in communities of practice to explicitly account for the politicized aspects of participation through the lens of her own participation in a teacher education program in Early Childhood Education. According to Hodges, to fully realize the sociopolitical implications of learning-in-practice, it is central to locate the historical and ideological conditions that are maintained through implicit cultural practices with/in a community of learners. This enables us to recognize the ways in which cultural and social relations of "implicit privilege and marginalization" are recursively reproduced through educational practice (p. 275). She gives the example of participating in her early childhood teacher community to illustrate how hegemonic social practices (e.g., feminine/heterosexual relations in childhood education) can lead to alienation, and what she refers to as "dis-identification" with/in that community. From this example, Hodges encourages situated researchers to distinguish between individuals who are legitimately on the periphery of the community and the socially marginalized: "To participate peripherally is to participate legitimately/inclusively within the community of practice. Marginalization, as a larger social effect, can be structured into participation in a community of practice, manifesting itself as repetitions of alienation and isolation" (p. 285). Hodges' politicized (re)conception of situated cognition thus moves us toward recognizing the rich complexities of situated learning and knowing.

Cultural-Historical Activity Theory

Lave's cultural theory of practice resembles but does not derive from the same philosophical orientations as Vygotsky's theoretical legacy. Yet the earlier but roughly parallel effort of Vygotsky, Leont'ev, and Luria enable further exploration into the ways in which learning and cognition are characterized by social and cultural processes through the dialectical nature of human activity (Edwards, A., 2005; Engeström & Miettinen, 1999; Wertsch, Del Rio, & Alvarez, 1995). Importantly, this work focuses less on the dichotomous notions of structure and agency; instead, it emphasizes "culturally mediated human activity" as a new unit of analysis. While a more familiar tradition in European than North American academies, U.S. reference to cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) often omits its close association with German philosophy, especially Marx's analysis of capitalism and alienated labor (Edwards, A., 2005; Engeström & Miettinen, 1999). CHAT, also recognized as activity theory, necessarily rests on the philosophy of dialectical materialism to renounce the division between the internal mind and external world by referring to the way in which human nature is known and structured by the "activity" of alienated labor (Engeström & Miettinen, 1999). Given Marx's focus on labor activity, tools play an important role in the process of creating and transforming human activity because tools are seen as concrete elements of labor practices. According to Engeström and Miettinen (1999), Leont'ev's and Vygotsky's reading of Marx formulates the concept of collective activity to explain the activity system by distinguishing it from individual action: "This dialectical concept is crucial for any serious analysis of the contradictory motives of human activities and human psyche in capitalist society"; thus, the "development of central theoretical ideas of activity theory presuppose a careful and critical study of Marx's work" (p. 5). Here lies further potential to shift the analysis toward the dialectical relations of power within enculturated systems of learning, again bringing neglected issues of power to the forefront.

Alfred (2002) argues that a Vygotskian analysis is indeed central to the sociocultural analysis of the reproduction of hegemonic relations of power within enculturated systems of learning and knowing. In more depth, however, Panofsky's (2003) review of literature pertaining to differential social relations in schooling is informed by Vygotsky's framework. By referring to the dynamics

of social class in low-income learners, she examines just how school experience mediates students' learning as a site in the production of their identity as learners. Here Vygotskian-inspired research attempts to elucidate how, for example, low-income students' "cultural development is differentiated in the processes of schooling" (p. 425), as they are often pushed into low-track groups, while there, receiving lower quality curriculum and interactions with teachers. Panofsky argues that class and cultural development are not typically examined from a sociocultural learning perspective, prompting her to suggest that there is "a need in sociocultural theory for an expanded definition of culture, such as Ratner's, and for an articulated theory of social space, such as Bourdieu's, to account for the dynamics of conflict and power in learning and development" (p. 427).

Toward Theorizing Adult Education as a Critical and Cultural Practice

Our thesis is that the promise of situated theories of learning and cognition will become productive in adult education only if researchers fully understand what it means for learning to be "situated." Incorporating the political conceptions of cognition and learning helps us to see how everyday activity, according to Lave, is a "more powerful source of socialization than intentional pedagogy" (1988, p. 14). Theoretically, such recognition would bolster what we consider to be the current or "weak" interpretation of situated cognition in North American adult education. Practically, we would gain a better understanding of the complexities of situated cognition; that is, we could move beyond a monolithic conceptualization of learning-in-practice by recognizing how power relations are embedded in educational practices. From this view, we could expect adult educators to be able to do several things. This viewpoint enables a keener political analysis of hegemonic relations of power that too often continues to allow the already privileged to benefit from education. More particularly, such a view makes possible to carefully examine the ways which an actor's social position affects learning and knowing within a community of learners, as to expose and interrupt inequitable social practices. If we expand our sociocultural framework to incorporate the politicized nature of situated systems of learning and knowing, we begin to move toward theorizing adult education as a critical and cultural practice. With this more situated interpretation, perhaps we can begin to revivify this important adult education tradition.

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