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“Social Learning” for/in Adult Education? A Discursive Review of What it Means for Learning to be “Social”

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Abstract: Our paper reports on a critical discourse analysis of “social learning” in the literature. We not only emphasize the kinds of investigations that have focused on social forms of adult learning but exemplify what it means for learning to be “social” in the field of adult education.

Introduction and Purpose

“Social learning” has been recognized as an important perspective for understanding and problematizing the relationships between learning as a social process and social contexts in the areas of adult, extension, and community education for several years. Literature ranging from Jarvis (1987) and Brookfield (2005) to Fenwick (2000), Foley (1999), and Usher, Byrant, and Johnston (1997) has emphasized a wide range of societal conditions, structures, and practices as defining characteristics of social forms of adult learning. Historically, several groups of learning theories have been identified as “social learning” theories in adult education scholarship including experiential learning (e.g., Fenwick, 2000), cultural-historical activity theory (e.g., Sawchuk, 2003a), situated cognition (e.g., Lave, 1988), social learning theory (e.g., Bandura, 1977), and transformative learning (e.g., Mezirow, 1991). Other influential dimensions of “social learning” include emancipatory learning (e.g., Hart, 1990), distributed learning (e.g., Lea & Nicoll, 2002), informal learning (e.g., Field & Spence, 2000), lifelong learning (e.g., Edwards, 2006), and participatory learning (e.g., Leeuwis, & Pyburn, 2002). According to Jarvis (2006) and Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner (2007), this extensive literature has become fairly visible as a foundation for exploring the societal dimensions of adult education in a variety of formal, non-formal, and informal learning settings.

Despite what appears to be a welcomed move toward increasing our understanding of those social aspects and circumstances in which people learn, conceptual clarification of “social learning” remains scarce in adult education scholarship. We argue that this lack of elucidation not only limits our understanding of the ways in which adults learn in/with the social world but enables the (re)production of asocial, individualistic conceptions of adult learning, as explained by “psychologism” and its parent discourse, individualism (Usher, Byrant, & Johnston, 1997, p. xiii). Individualism is a modernist framework best explained by the “Enlightenment ideal of the autonomous subject-person” (Finger & Asún, 2001, p. 117). A major premise for adult educators critical of the prevailing discourse of individualism is that learning does not occur “just inside the head.” “Social learning” has become a catch phrase used by adult educators to demonstrate how learning is something more than a psychological activity characterized by individuals accumulating knowledge and skills to be transferred across time and space (Niewolny & Wilson, in press). But what does it mean when adult educators say learning is social? Put another way, what is “social learning” for/in adult education? We argue that “social learning” should be viewed less as a particular learning tradition and more like a discourse of learning that is framed by relations of power that constitute its formation. Our paper is, therefore, focused on the discursive construction of “social learning” to better understand this emerging discourse and its significance for organizing and developing adult education as an alternative to the discourse of individualism.

Methodology

We refrain from reviewing the “social learning” literature as a distinct tradition of theory and practice in adult education; instead, we (re)locate the literature within a discursive framework by drawing upon the project of critical discourse analysis (CDA). While it is difficult to treat CDA as a unified framework, it is often explained as a form of discourse critique influenced by the techniques of applied linguistics and theoretical insights of (post)structuralist theory (Niewolny & Wilson, 2008). According to Gee (1999) and Fairclough (2003), CDA enables us to critically reveal larger formations of discourse and power in our everyday educational settings. Our approach to CDA is grounded in the scholarship of Fairclough (1992) and Foucault (1972). A key assumption of CDA in this view is that discourse 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). For Luke (1995), this form of discourse critique is described as a bridging together of the “macro approaches to discourse with more microanalytical text analyses” (p.10).

Following Foucault (1972) and Fairclough (1992), we examined the discourse of “social learning” for its underlying structure of meaning which, in turn, constitutes regimes of truth about what it means for learning to be “social” in adult education literature. This approach not only emphasizes the kinds of investigations that have focused on social aspects of adult learning but exemplifies what Foucault (1972) would describe as an underlying uniformity of meaning despite the apparent diversity of what has been said about “social learning” for/in adult education. Our analysis involved paying careful attention to the ways in which meanings of “socialness” are constructed and legitimated in some ways while not in others. We identified several themes of “socialness” from the literature to frame the analysis: nature of context, experience, mediation, social action, social purpose, and social positioning (Edwards, 2006; Fenwick, 2000; Foley, 1999; Jarvis, 1987; Lave, 1988; Lea & Nicoll, 2002; Salomon & Perkins, 1998; Sawchuk, 2003a; Usher, Byrant, & Johnston, 1997).

Building on earlier insights (Niewolny & Wilson, 2006, in press; Wilson, 1993), we examined empirical and conceptual writings in the areas of “cultural historical-activity theory,” “distributed learning,” “emancipatory learning,” “experiential learning,” “lifelong learning,” “situated cognition/learning,” “sociocultural learning,” “social leaning,” “informal/non-formal learning,” “participatory learning,” and “transformative learning.” In the tradition of CDA, we acknowledge that this corpus of literature is a discursive construction embedded in our own assumptions and perspectives. We further recognize that while the corpus comprises the bulk of the adult “social learning” literature, it does not capture all that has been written about “social learning” theory and practice.

Mapping the Discourse of “Social Learning”

“Social learning” is nothing new to educators. According to Salomon and Perkins (1998) and Wenger (1998), research in the field of education has shed a good deal of light on the ways in which learning—as a social phenomenon—is constituted by social behavior, experience, activity, mediation, positionality, and context. Adult educators have actively contributed to the “social learning” conversation. An initial reading of the “social learning” literature in adult education illustrates how “this” kind of learning is, on the one hand, many things to many people, depending on perspective. On the other hand, however, if viewed as a discourse of adult learning, we begin to see how “this” construction of power and knowledge is actually a discursive strategy employed by adult educators to challenge the established promotion of psychological theories of adult learning that understand learning as something that occurs “inside” the mind of the individual. Yet we argue that this discourse is too susceptible to misappropriation and

consequently circumscribed by the larger discursive construction of individualism currently circulating in adult education scholarship. That is to say, our findings begin to reveal that while adult educators are increasingly investigating adult learning as a social or sociocultural phenomenon by drawing upon several frameworks and concepts rooted in “socialness,” this discourse is actually a weak manifestation of resistance to the discourse of individualism, as exemplified in behaviorist, cognitive, and constructivist psychology. For the purpose of this paper, we limit the remaining discussion to two discursive positions that begin to illustrate the insecure nature in which the discourse currently operates. Before we share those crucial points, we briefly sketch the discursive configuration of the literature that frames the discussion by following Fairclough’s (1992) notion of “conditions of discourse practice.”

Focusing on the discursive ways in which literature emerges in adult education circles, our analysis demonstrates how the discourse appears to be broadly constituted though an array of conceptual camps and venues. First, we found that adult educators have liberally appropriated “social learning” to designate everything from the kind of learning that occurs through modeling behavior (Bandura, 1977), to group learning (Imel, 1999), to participatory learning in and for community organizing and sustainable development (Falk, 2001; Leeuwis, & Pyburn, 2002), to learning as a situated and/or sociocultural experience (Alfred, 2003; Sawchuk, 2003a; Wilson, 1993), to a kind of learning that characterizes the in/non-formality of adult learning (Field & Spence, 2002), to learning that has transformative power for purposes of social action and emancipation from oppressive conditions (Foley, 1999; Mezirow, 1991; Hart, 1990; O’Sullivan, Morrrell, & O’Connor, 2002), to learning that falls within the purview of mobility and distribution as explained by globalizing processes and postmodernism (Edwards & Usher, 2008; Usher, Byrant, & Johnston, 1997). Second, we located explicit and implicit meanings of “social learning” in numerous journals, texts, and edited contributions in the general areas of adult learning, adult and community education, lifelong learning, and community development; therefore, we argue that the discourse is widely circulated in adult education literature. Third, we learned that these meanings are variably characterized with such terminology as context-based learning, emancipatory learning, experiential learning, distributed learning, informal/non-formal learning, participatory learning, sociocultural learning, situated learning, social learning, and transformative learning. Finally, our point is amplified by the way in which the discourse is anchored in a diverse range of theoretical traditions including behaviorism, constructivism, feminism, Marxism, and postmodernism (Fenwick, 2000; Jarvis, 1987, 2006; Sawchuk, 2003b).

Drawing specifically upon the notion of “interdiscursivity” (Fairclough, 1992; Foucault, 1972), two discursive positions stand out from our analysis that indicate how the literature is poorly situated to challenge the (re)production of asocial, individualistic conceptions of adult learning. First and foremost, we revealed that not all social theories of adult learning operate outside of the prevailing psychological perspective. For example, it is no secret that Bandura’s (1977) popular social learning theory illustrates the behaviorist response to understanding people learning from each other in social settings through observation: “Bandura’s theory has a particular relevance to adult learning in that it accounts for both the learner and the environment in which he or she operates. Behavior is a function of the interaction of the person with the environment” (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 260). While adult educational research grounded in this theoretical perspective purports to incorporate the “learner and environment” as a valuable contribution to theory and practice, it is the way in which the social context is defined as a “container-like” variable that is of concern in this discussion. This functionalist amalgamation of the individual and the social clearly suggests that such a “social” perspective of adult learning is nothing more than an “add-on” to existing cognitive and behaviorist frameworks. On the one hand, it might be argued that this strategy is taken-up by educators to better build conceptual linkages with historically neglected dimensions, such as social factors as “external learning

factors” (Lent & Brown, 1996, p. 312). On the other hand, however, as we have argued elsewhere (Niewolny & Wilson, 2006; in press; Wilson, 2005), this “add-on” approach is more accurately described as a misuse of “socialness” that discursively limits us from fully exploring how learning occurs as a socially dynamic and culturally mediated activity embedded in and constituted by relations of power. In this view, we located several other efforts that employ this “add-on” strategy, most particularly in the area of situated learning (e.g., Daley, 2002; King, 2003).

The second discursive position characterizes the way in which “socialness” is dis/articulated as a political construction of adult learning. Without a doubt, some adult educators have not only taken up social learning approaches but have attempted to theorize an array of social, cultural, and historical perspectives as critical perspectives of adult learning (e.g., Barton & Tusting, 2005; Brookfield, 2005; Finger & Asún, 2001; Foley, 1999; Hart, 1990; O’Sullivan, Morrrell, & O’Connor, 2002; Sawchuk, 2003a; Sawchuk, Duarte, & Elhammoumi, 2006). Our reading of the literature suggests that politicized frameworks, such as emancipatory learning (Hart, 1990), have garnered much attention as viable social learning frameworks through references made to three themes: learning for social responsibility, learning for emancipation, and learning as ideological resistance. Focusing particularly on the way in which “social learning” is positioned as an ideological-discursive practice, we learned that several authors explicitly and implicitly draw upon “social learning” as an ideological-discursive strategy to challenge the role of expertism in technology and science as a leading development agenda (Falk, 2001; Leeuwis, & Pyburn, 2002; Wals, 2007). In this view, according to Wals (2007), social learning enables educators and community organizers to engage in the process of resisting and transforming hegemonic and oppositional ideologies and discourses, particularly as they relate to the struggle for sustainability.

While it is encouraging to discover that the role of power informs “social learning” discourse, we revealed that critically oriented frameworks overall are largely positioned at the periphery and therefore not visible as central ideas for understanding adult learning. Drawing upon Foley (1999), we argue that this inferior position makes it difficult for adult educators to recognize that learning is much more than a “technical and value-neutral process” characterized by individualistic conceptions of adult education (p. 2). Usher, Byrant, and Johnston (1997) further argue that such positioning limits our capacity to understand the interrelated relationships among social practices, selves, and the contemporary sociocultural context, as a guiding adult learning principle. This failure to fully articulate “social learning” as a political discourse is most evident in the ways in which critical readings of situated cognition and cultural-historical activity theory have been consistently overlooked by adult educators, thus ignoring the role of social action and cultural reproduction as the theoretical basis for conceptualizing the explicitly politicized nature of people learning in *and* with context(s) (Niewolny & Wilson, 2006, in press; Wilson, 1993; 2005).

Implications for Theory/Practice

Our paper is an argument for viewing “social” learning not as a particular learning tradition but more like a discourse of learning that is framed by relations of power/knowledge in adult education literature that constitutes its formation. With this discursive lens firmly in place, we argue that while it is promising that adult educators are increasingly committed to the ongoing discussion of social theories of learning, albeit with different perspectives and purposes, the conceptual fuzziness that surrounds the discourse remains troubling if we are to more robustly understand how adults learn embedded in and distributed across socially and culturally structured relations of power (Niewolny & Wilson, in press). It is our hope that this paper contributes to the understanding of “social learning” and its significance for organizing and developing adult

education as an alternative to the prevailing discourse of individualism, as explained by behaviorist, cognitive, and constructivist psychology. This review of the literature, therefore, attempts to challenge the status quo while proposing new possibilities as we move toward theorizing the multifarious and political nature of “socialness” in the theory and practice of adult education.

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