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Learning in Structures of Social Practice

In the paper I argue for a certain way of theorizing and studying learning. Learning is seen as situated in social practice, and in the pursuit of most learning persons are seen as moving around in social practice. They are involved in personal trajectories across various social contexts of practice. Even more so, these social contexts and the links between them, which persons learning draw on in their pursuit of learning, are institutionally arranged in various ways, and this affects the opportunities and nature of learning processes. These arguments about the nature of learning, theories of learning, and studies of learning are addressed first in the paper. But they really are part of a more general argument that psychology - the psychology of learning too - needs to develop a conception of structures of social practice so that it may capture the impacts of various arrangements on personal psychological functioning, including learning. Hence, the paper has a dual purpose, and as I unfold my analysis of learning, the more general line of argument increasingly comes to the fore. Still, the more specific arguments about learning and the more general arguments about structures of social practice are crafted in such a way that they mutually support each other. These two purposes of the paper are deeply theoretical of nature, but they have sprung from challenges faced in concrete empirical studies of persons learning in various fields of social practice. These challenges are sketched briefly throughout the paper to ground the theoretical arguments and illuminate which phenomena such a conception allows us to capture. My empirical research on these matters has centered on studying persons changing and learning by attending therapy sessions as a secluded part of their everyday lives in structures of social practice (Dreier, 2008). In the paper I occasionally briefly refer to phenomena and findings from this research as particular instances of my general argument.

Learning as Mental and Individual or as Situated in Social Practice

In psychological research, learning is generally taken to be an individual, mental process. This predominant framework has been subject to critique. Thus, Lave called for shifting from studying “trees of knowledge into fields for activity” (1988, chapter 6) in a pun paralleling the critique of cognitivism and the phylogenetic transition from primates living in trees to human beings producing societies for their subsistence (Holzkamp 1883; Schurig 1976). She argued for conceiving of learning as situated and as occurring in participation in social practice (Lave 1993; Lave & Wenger 1991). Likewise, in a series of studies on apprenticeship learning, Kvale proposed to study “landscapes of learning” (Nielsen & Kvale 2003).
Movement as Trajectories in Social Practice

These arguments rest on coming to realize, once re-search for learning had shifted from isolated individual heads into social practice, that learners are not stationary. Being situated does not mean staying in the same place. Indeed, in social practice learners are moving, and these moves play a key role in their accomplishment of learning. The very course of learning processes is grounded in learners’ movements in social practice. In that sense, I proposed to study learners’ trajectories of learning in social practice (Dreier 1999, 2003, 2008). This takes us beyond the assumption that learning simply follows standard procedures and obeys uniform mechanisms. It opens the doors to finding learning as complex and varied processes, of varying duration and composition, and even as proceeding by virtue of linking disparate occasions and occurrences of learning. It also makes us realize that the continuation of learning mostly is a discontinuous process. When a learning issue or assignment emerges for the first time for a particular person or group of persons, they encounter it in a situated way in a particular context. They address and pursue it in a particular manner in that context depending on the particular setup of materials, co-participants, and possibilities and on their particular personal concerns in relation to that context. Often they distribute their engagement with the learning issue in a particular way among themselves, leaving particular parts to particular persons and all participants with a need to negotiate, coordinate, and combine, or fight over what they (want to) learn. All this is, thus, clearly the case when persons address learning issues emerging in therapy sessions.

But persons’ pursuits of learning in relation to a particular learning issue are rarely finished in one learning situation and context. Their pursuits reach across diverse contexts with varying materials, co-participants, possibilities, and occasions for learning and with varying personal concerns for learning as well as for much else in these other contexts. In such complex learning trajectories, learners must therefore find appropriate ways to keep at their pursuits of learning. They need to find suitable ways of linking and combining their diverse activities of learning as well as the contents of what they learn in disparate times and places. Again, this is so when persons move from their therapy session into other contexts of their ordinary lives - such as their home, school, and workplace, and back again - and search for situated ways of continuing to learn about changing their troubles.

In pursuits of learning across places, the complex courses of learning that emerge incorporate many interruptions, and learners must find suitable times, places, and ways of picking up the pursuit of the learning issue anew. Indeed, they risk forgetting it in the intervals between learning episodes when it ceases being on their mind while they are engaged in much else. This may not matter much to them as far as some learning issues are concerned, and that learning may then be abandoned. But discontinuing the pursuit of other learning issues may later turn into a problematic neglect. Persons must then find ways to come back to that learning issue again when, perhaps due to this neglect, it may have turned into a genuine problem which it is therefore more difficult to face and resolve. In
this sense, they may learn the hard way not to neglect important learning issues and have to address these issues backwards, that is, to learn about them by unraveling them starting with the issue they have now turned into and reconsidering their emergence and course of change into that issue. The practice of therapeutically assisted change frequently holds such instances. As far as many learning issues are concerned, persons must, in other words, find ways to come back to them after an appropriate lapse of time. They must also find appropriate occasions for doing so and ways of picking an issue up again which their co-participants in the context and situation they are opting to use for picking it up again are willing to make room for and, perhaps, take part in. Identifying these occasions and ways may require various negotiations with various co-participants and may be hampered by various conflicts between them, including conflicts about when, how and whether to pick up the issue again and who is to play which part in doing so.

What is more, as learners move into different contexts from the context in which they first addressed a learning issue, the meaning of this issue for them may change, and other contexts may reveal other aspects of the learning issue and other opportunities for learning about it. This may provoke various processes of comparison which may lead to a more complex understanding of the issue as when a girl reconsiders the meaning and course of her bouts of anxiety in sessions, at home, in school, with friends and thereby reaches a more complex understanding of these troubles. It may also make learners reconsider the meaning of the learning issue and reevaluate their reliance on and use of their prior learning about it as when parents at home realize that the topic in a prior session about their raising demands at their children really is about the parents being unwilling to take any longer that their children “always are cross”. Indeed, persons often have various reservations about what they learn – even doubts or confusions about what they take it to mean and what they may want or not want to do with it. Persons must, therefore, make up their minds about what they learn, and this often requires reconsidering it across various relevant situations and contexts. In doing so, persons come to adopt particular personal stances on the learning issue, that is, to make up their minds about what they endorse and are against on the issue and its optional uses. In the course of reconsidering what they learned across various situations and contexts, and because other situations and contexts reveal other aspects of the learning issue, persons may even change their minds and adopt other stances on it, as when a father after half a year of complex reconsiderations makes up his mind that the key problem behind many of his troubles is his not having been sufficiently able to act consistently across situations and contexts. Persons may even call themselves to account in relation to what they learned earlier and change their minds quite markedly as when a mother struggles with issues for her about the relations between love and self-sacrifice. In fact, some learning proceeds by first finding out what you do not want to believe, stand for, and do and take this as a starting point for complex searches for other understandings, stances, and ways of doing things as was clearly the case in the last two mentioned instances.

It follows from the arguments above that much learning proceeds in an episodic manner and
that, although deliberate plans may be made for complex learning trajectories, learning processes hold important emergent qualities. It also follows that much learning has no definite, immutable endpoint. What was once defined as an endpoint turns out to be just a point on the way in a complex learning trajectory as when clients change their minds and ways of dealing with certain troubles away from what they had previously taken to be a complete and stable understanding. Much learning is, in other words, open-ended. This open-endedness makes it complicated for persons to define the status of their prior, incomplete learning and their reliance on it.

Furthermore, in their ongoing social practice persons are engaged in much else than learning. This has two important implications for learning. First, much learning must be pursued as linked with varying other ongoing activities and concerns, and this affects the ways, processes, outcomes, meanings, and uses of learning. Second, much learning occurs as an emerging side effect of an activity with other primary purposes and concerns than learning. The predominant framework on learning plays down the significance of this kind of learning as revealed in the chosen term for it, “incidental learning”. But such concomitant learning (Dreier, 2008), or as Holzkamp (1993) calls it “Mitlernen”, may be very important even though it is difficult to preplan. Most learning in relation to therapy elsewhere outside sessions is thus pursued as linked with varying other activities and concerns and as concomitant learning alongside activities holding other main purposes.

**Institutional Arrangements of Trajectories**

In the previous section we saw that in social practice learning acquires eminently socio-practical dimensions and qualities as well as eminently personal dimensions and qualities. However, the above characterization of the social and personal dimensions and qualities of complex and varied trajectories of learning in social practice is abstract and oversimplified in one important respect: social practice is arranged. Learning issues always emerge, and persons experience, address, and pursue them within particular arrangements of social practice. In shaping and realizing their pursuits of various learning issues in social practice, persons must therefore take the arrangements of those practices into account. They must somehow manage to combine their personal pursuits with the setups and scopes of those arrangements. To succeed, they must at least partially understand those arrangements and gain such a good overview over them that they may direct their pursuits of learning in relation to them. Moreover, the forms and degrees of ordering of social arrangements vary. While some are detailed and strict, others are sketchy and loose. The usabilities of arrangements vary too. Finally, social arrangements specify particular sequences of activity which constitute particular socio-practical, institutional trajectories for participation.

Among these are particular institutional educational arrangements for trajectories of learning. We see them in the age grading of students’ educational trajectories of learning, in the sequencing of educational trajectories into institutions of elementary, higher and specialized education with particular arrangements for advancement and transition, and in the sequencing and specification of
tracks and curricula. We also see them in the arrangement of school years, terms and timetables and the distribution of school subjects across them. The curricular planning of an educational sequence out of separate lessons for a particular school subject scattered across the timetable of weeks and school years is a further dimension of the institutional arrangement of trajectories of learning. This institutional arrangement is the basis for the assessment of student performances in a school subject across the school year as a cumulative effect of presumed immediate causal links between these separate lessons scattered across the timetable and school year and as being unaffected by whatever else the student is engaged in elsewhere in between. The institutional arrangement of the course of school days into lessons and breaks plus other regular and occasional activities affects the course and dynamics of learning about school subjects and about other matters of being a student and a growing person (Ingholt, 2007). The socio-material arrangements of ordinary classrooms affect the course and dynamics of learning processes in them as is evident when comparing them to learning processes, say, in computer labs in schools (Sørensen, 2005). However, institutional arrangements for trajectories of learning also comprise the arrangement for addressing learning issues by reserving timeslots in secluded lessons for a concentrated engagement in an issue and nothing but that issue. This arrangement abstracts the issue from its ordinary contextual connections so that it appears as an entity in itself with essential properties of its own independently of its ordinary contextual connections. It constructs an isolated abstraction - or a set of isolated abstractions - and it conjures up a special way of engaging with these abstractions which we call “concentration”, and which turns engaging in anything else, even in the various contextual connections of the learning issue, into disturbances of the learning process thus arranged.

On the basis of these arrangements of educational institutions, particular forms of learning and knowledge emerge which we can call “school learning” and “school knowledge” (Dreier, 1999). Because learning is mostly studied in relation to the practices of educational institutions and to teachers as experts in arranging and causing it, research on learning has generally taken school learning as the paradigm case of learning and conceptualized learning accordingly. The process of learning is then grasped as an isolated subject’s secluded and parcelled acquisition of a pre-given and secluded object of knowledge. Some educational researchers even argue that learning must take place at a distance from ordinary mundane practices in order to lead to knowledge at all as opposed to mere personal experience. The institutionally arranged forms of practice have thus led to the emergence of similar forms of thinking about the practice of learning couched in a positioned way from the position of expert teachers and researchers in relation to students. In fact, the institutional arrangements have infused the form of thinking so thoroughly that the significance of the practical arrangement for the process of learning is taken completely for granted and ignored. Few are concerned with what these arrangements were thought out for (Abbott, 2001), that is, with the history and ideas of learning and knowledge they represent or with the work knowledge (Smith, 2005) it takes to be able to participate as a student in those institutional educational arrangements.
Moreover, the personal pursuit of an educational trajectory of learning transcends these institutional arrangements and boundaries and incorporates other contexts, activities, and sources of learning (Nielsen, 1999). Education is, after all, instituted in order to make a difference in students’ practices in their everyday lives outside those institutions. Whereas the dominating framework on learning assumes that all important learning takes place inside educational institutions and that when students move out into other practices they merely apply what they already learned in the institution, I argued that learning reaches beyond those institutional boundaries and is pursued further in many ways. Indeed, much learning takes places in other social practices and is affected by the arrangements of those other social practices, so that we may find a variety of practices and trajectories of learning. Much learning is even pursued across social practices with diverse arrangements, and what is learned must be linked and combined across those diversities.

Similar Arrangements of Other Expert Practices

My analysis of personal trajectories and institutional arrangements has been inspired by discovering surprisingly similar arrangements and trajectories in various fields of social practice - even in practices normally believed to be quite distinct and different from each other. Let me briefly mention some striking similarities between the social practices of education, as sketched above, and therapy. The social practice of therapy is also generally arranged as a sequence of isolated sessions in a secluded room in which the troubles addressed in therapy are constructed as abstractions by means of a concentrated engagement with particular categories of problems/diseases so that clients in sessions deal with, experience, and come to understand their everyday troubles in special ways. Therapeutic experts are also seen as causes of the effects of therapy on their clients, and change is normally seen as a purely mental process. Research on therapy rests on all this as premises and, at the same time, it presumes that the very arrangement of therapy is of no significance for the dynamics of therapeutic change. In addition, although sessions are secluded from the everyday lives of clients, therapy is meant to work beyond their boundaries in the clients’ everyday lives elsewhere. But no strict transfer of session insights, advice, and so forth is possible because in other places clients live their lives with other co-participants, other scopes of possibilities, and many other everyday engagements and concerns than those addressed in sessions. For those and other reasons, therapeutic change and learning are open-ended and must be pursued by clients in trajectories across diverse contextual practices. A further case in point is the field of practice of research which is dominated by the “standard arrangement” (Holzkamp, 1996) of the experiment that deeply affects our basic conception of knowledge and learning and rests on a very similar social arrangement (Dreier, 2007; in press). These striking similarities made me reconsider my findings about therapy in light of a more comprehensive and general approach. The sketched arrangements of practices of expertise have led to a hegemonial form of thinking about institutions and experts in relation to the everyday lives of just plain folks in which the former judge performances in the latter as mere
applications of expert advice and knowledge. This amounts to an “institutional epistemology” (Rose, 1996) in which the idea of distance from the everyday as a condition of genuine knowledge overshadows the significances of the particular arrangements of these distant places. The concepts of trajectories of participation and learning replace this idea of distance. They let us study social practices as situated and arranged and persons as moving in and across diverse practices instead of as being immersed in their everyday lives or at the distance of a nowhere of privileged abstractions.

Structures of Social Practice in Social Practice

However, recent social theories, including social practice theories and their situated variants, pay scarce conceptual attention to structures of social practice and rather study processes in time. They are critical of some premises of traditional conceptions of social structure but neglect to develop other conceptions of social structure instead. As a result, they tend not to pay systematic conceptual attention to the various arrangements of social practices and, even more so, to their interconnectedness in a nexus of social practices. One exception is Schatzki (2002) who distinguishes between three existing conceptions of social order as regularity, stability, and interdependence and proposes to integrate them in a fourth conception of social order as arrangement. In that sense, social structure is the ordering of manifold social practices in a nexus of social practice. Such a conception has the advantage of not separating structure from activity and of seeing both as combined in structural arrangements in and for social practices. Structure is then seen as eminently practical of nature. Thus, the various ways of setting up and ordering practices in the shape of social contexts, and of separating and linking those social contexts and the social practices, which take place within them and which reach across them, are structural arrangements of social practice. No context can then be grasped on its own, as an island, but must be analyzed as being involved somehow in structural arrangements of social practice.

In classic, mainstream social theories, social structure is the structure of a society seen as a bounded nation state. Such a conception is too abstract and insufficient for studying concrete local practices and the lives of particular persons in and across local social contexts. Adhering to it leads to an underdetermined, simplified, and functionalist view on concrete local practices and phenomena. It is simply not possible to determine the structural status of concrete, local situations and positions with sufficient precision from the point of view of such an overall, nation state-level social structure. In a reaction to futile attempts at deriving concrete phenomena from such a structure, many theorists turned to poststructuralist approaches in which the significance of structure is watered down or set aside altogether (e.g., Urry, 2000). For psychology, which studies concrete individuals in concrete situations, such a distant and abstract notion of structure is particularly problematic. As a result, psychologists taking the call to relate the study of psychological phenomena to social structures seriously face special difficulties. As a remedy, Holzkamp (1983) proposed to study how the functioning of concrete individuals in immediate
situations is mediated by the overall social structure. The overall structure is seen as presenting itself in particular mediated ways in immediate situations, and thereby impacting the scope of possibilities and their meaning in those situations. Structure is then still believed to be located outside and above situations and to affect them from there. In the study of persons in concrete situations, there seems to be no structure in these situations because structure is merely captured as being of a mediated nature. So to persons in concrete situations, structure is seen as appearing as a particular meaning, or structure of meaning as Holzkamp puts it. As a result, it seems logical to search for the presence of structure in concrete situations as a phenomenon of language, thinking, and consciousness rather than as a particular practical arrangement. Furthermore, in such a theory, and in many others like it, the overall social structure is juxtaposed with an immediate life world. But because these theories neglect to work out the structural arrangements of ongoing social practices, they end up considering the life world as a homogenous space (Dreier, 2008), which is believed to call forth a homogeneous mode of individual functioning. However, social practice is not homogenous. It is divided into diverse local social contexts which are linked in a structure of ongoing social practice. These contexts are characterized by various arrangements for participation and for moving through them into various other contexts. In short, due to various structural arrangements, personal lives must unfold in movement through diverse contexts in the existing structure of social practice. Persons must shape their lives and pursue their concerns, including those for learning, by linking and separating their diverse participation in diverse contexts, and they must vary their modes of participating by taking the various arrangements of local contexts into account.

Challenges for Psychology: Persons in Structures of Social Practice

The theoretical arguments I have presented were triggered by studying persons in concrete social practices, especially persons somehow involved in expert psychological practices. Within the standard arrangement of psychological research, on the other hand, persons are studied in one isolated situation, as if that situation can be understood by itself and as if persons function in identical ways in all situations. It is done in this way regardless of the fact that persons do not live in one isolated situation. They conduct their lives in movement across a variety of diverse contexts in structures of social practice. This challenges the nature and scope of psychological theories. They must enable us to capture how persons move in structures of social practice, experience this and themselves in it, think and learn about it, and act in such ways in relation to those structures that they manage their lives, arrange themselves in these structures, and take part in their reproduction or change. They must also enable us to capture how persons come to conduct their lives by committing themselves to particular places, particular arrangements and rhythms of activities, particular social relations, and particular other persons (Dreier, 2008; Smith 2005), as well as how this affects their psychological functioning. The learning of particular persons in social practice thus
rests on and is affected by their particular commitments and conduct of life (Dreier, 2008). Until psychological theories consider all this, they will be affected by it blindly. Their conceptions turn into forms of thinking uncontrollably reflecting existing arrangements of social practice. They limit their capacities to think about and beyond the impacts of these forms of practice on the various dimensions and phenomena of being a person that psychology is meant to study. This is also the case in the study of learning which I have aimed to show, albeit briefly, in this paper. I have pointed to aspects of learning and of being a person which we cannot capture systematically without a conception of social structures of practice and which would, therefore, also get lost in theories which merely take concepts of action, activity, relation, or conversation as their core concept about the relation between human beings and their social world.

References


