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5. SCHOOLS AND THE NEW LANGUAGE OF LEARNING

A Critical Perspective

INTRODUCTION

The past 25 years have seen a striking rise in the concept of learning in the fields of education and educational research. As Biesta (e.g. 2005, p. 55) points out, the “new language of learning” or the “discourse of learning” (Contu et al., 2003, p. 931) has become dominant in educational discourse. Teaching is often redefined as facilitating learning and education is routinely described as the provision of learning experiences. Subsequently, the last few decades have witnessed the decline of the traditional concepts of “teaching”, “education”, “pedagogy”, “Erziehung”, and “Bildung”. This development has been especially visible in schools or other institutions of formal education, now redefined by the new language of learning simply as “learning environments”, “learning communities”, or “learning organisations” (see e.g. Wilson, 1996; Hargreaves, 2003). Terms such as “learning society”, “learning community”, and “learning organisation” also appear in policy and strategy papers of the European Union and of many countries in and beyond the European community (Jarvis, 2002, p. vii). Against this background, it is not surprising to encounter theorists and researchers proposing that the new, constructivist or sociocultural theories of learning *alone* can function as a foundation for creating, evaluating, and reforming both the process of education, and schools and other institutions of education (see e.g. Pépin, 1998).

While it must be admitted that the new theories of learning have had a remarkably positive impact on some educational practices in various institutions of education (Biesta, 2006, p. 31), there has been a limited critical discussion of the new theories of learning and the new language of learning to date. Therefore, I seek to examine and advance two critical propositions in my article. The first is that the new theories and the new language of learning do not constitute a sufficient basis for the understanding, critique, and improvement of the process of education. The fundamental question here is whether all the major aspects, and at the same time, the little subtleties and nuances of the process of education taking place in educational institutions, can properly be understood using the language and framework provided by the new theories of learning. I argue that this is not the case. Instead, the new language of learning tends to oversimplify the process of education and, at the

same time, leaves some of the key features of it undiscovered or, in some cases, misrepresented or misconstrued. Since the prevailing understanding of the process of education is generally an important factor affecting the creation, evaluation, and reformation of schools and other educational institutions, this shortcoming of the new language of learning might have consequences for the design and reforms of educational institutions, too.

The second critical proposition I seek to advance has to do with the institutional nature of schools and the role of schools and other institutes of education in society. Here, and parallel to the argument I shall provide for my first proposition, I wish to argue that the new language of learning alone is not a sufficient basis in our attempt to understand, explain, and reform schools as institutions of modern/postmodern society. Instead, it seems plausible that this attempt will require, in addition to learning theories and the new language of learning, traditional curriculum theories and theories of institutions of education drawing on the stock of ideas provided by the rich and multifaceted tradition of western educational and pedagogical thinking.

I will proceed by providing first a brief discussion of the main themes of the new theories of learning, the constructivist and the sociocultural orientation of learning research. In the same section, I will also explore the typical applications of the new theories of learning to schools and education in general. Next, I will discuss the problems arising when the new language of learning is used to describe and conceptualise the nature of the process of education. Finally, I will assess the suitability of the new language of learning for efforts to understand the nature of schools and other educational institutions.

THE NEW THEORIES OF LEARNING AND THEIR IMPACT AND APPLICATIONS ON EDUCATION

Although there is presently no canonical doctrine known as “new theories of learning”, this term coined by Biesta (2005, 2006) seems to make sense in so far as it refers to constructivist and sociocultural theories of learning, often subsumed under generic or undifferentiated “constructivism”. Emerging during the 20th century and gradually moving to the fore among educational researchers and theorists, constructivist and sociocultural theories share the common core belief that human knowledge is constructed rather than discovered and that learning is a process of constructing meaning and making sense of experience (see e.g. Merriam and Caffarella, 1999, p. 260).

As Gergen (1995, p. 27) points out, it is possible to locate both similarities as well as strong disjunctions between constructivism and social constructionism, the two major approaches of the new theories of learning. One of the early key studies comparing social constructionism and constructivism from the viewpoint of education and educational institutions is that of Shotter (1995, pp. 41–42), in which eight affinities of substantial significance are presented. For the purposes of this article, they can be presented as follows.

Creative, formative, or self-constructive activities of a reflexive kind should be the focus of studies in schools and other institutes of education, and creative processes and “making” are more important than “finding” or the processes of discovery.

- It makes no sense to talk about our knowledge of an absolute reality, since human knowledge is always a construct. Thus the character of any “thing” or “activity” beyond or outside the constructionist or constructivist activities remains unknown to us, except in relation to the very activities from within which all our knowing takes place.
- Notions such as coherence, viability, fruitfulness, or adequacy should be appealed to in evaluating the worth of our proposals.
- Instead of causes and effects, we should be concerned with meanings and significances.
- The question of the relationship between theory and practice is of the utmost importance. Constructivist or social constructivist views hold that practice is not learned by first learning theory, and theories are not in any case accurate representations of a state of affairs. Therefore, the entire framework of teaching, communicating, or presenting knowledge has to be reformulated.

It is also useful to consider the contrasts with these two closely related orientations. Following Gergen (1995, p. 27), I suggest that perhaps even the major difference between these two approaches is the primary emphasis. For (radical or individual) constructivism, it is on the mental processes of the individuals and the way in which they construct knowledge of world from within. In other words, the different variations of the individualist constructivist view understand learning to be an intrinsically personal process whereby “meaning is made by the individual and is dependent upon the individual’s previous and current knowledge structure” (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 261) and as a result can be considered an “internal cognitive activity” (ibid., p. 261).

The proponents of social constructivist orientation, on the other hand, typically apply the metaphor of culturally and historically contextualised social interaction or dialogue to describe the process in which learning is constructed and meaning is made. Finally, it should be noted that constructivism and social constructionism are not singular theories, but families of related theories that are not always seen as compatible (Efran et al., 2014, p. 1). Even within the perspectives of radical/cognitive/individual constructivism and social constructionism, there are plenty of definitions and views regarding the centrality and the specific role of the individual cognitive structuring process and the social and cultural context of learning.

Regardless of their affinities and perceived incompatibilities, social constructionism and constructivism have had a huge impact on instruction and curricula, institutes of education, and educational research in general. The educational applications of new theories of learning actually cover a broad range of scales. At the small scale end of the continuum, one can find a plethora of applications of social constructionist or constructivist orientation, such as those commonly found in schools through

the widespread use of cooperative and collaborative teaching and instructional strategies, collective activity, and in-class debates (e.g. Jones & Brader-Adaje, 2002, p. 6). Terhart (2003), drawing on the studies of Wolff (1994), Dubs (1995), and Meixner (1997), has presented a detailed account of what class instruction based on constructivist principles would actually look like. For the purposes of this article, it can be shortened to include the following examples:

- Contents to be learned should not be fixed and organised beforehand, for then they cannot be connected with the subjective experience and knowledge that the students will bring with them. Only the core content of the curriculum can be fixed or organised beforehand.
- Learning environments (instructional materials, classrooms, media, and other aids, and, ultimately, the school itself as an organisation) have to be structured in such a way that they are authentic and complex in the sense of real-world experiences.
- The learning of how to learn, which includes the development of individual thinking and metacognitive tools, as well as generally becoming aware of one's own thinking and learning, as well as its processes, is one of the highest-level characteristics and goals of constructivist learning. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same can be said of the social and cultural processes of learning.
- Instruction should look to complex problem domains that are close to real life and have to be dealt with holistically.
- Learning should be understood as an active, reality-shaping, and identity-shaping process, during which individually existing knowledge and skills are adapted and personalised through the individual's own new experiences and interaction with peers.
- In this kind of self-regulated learning – in contrast to traditional pedagogy – mistakes play an important role. Discussions in small groups are only meaningful when errors occur and when they are then discussed and corrected.
- Feelings, meaning dealing with joys and anxiety, as well as personal identification (with learning contents), are important.
- The learner should be brought to the point where she builds her knowledge autonomously from the context and interactions and where she learns from her own mistakes (see Terhart, 2003, pp. 24–36).

At the grand scale end, one can find more or less foundationalist attempts to base everything a concept of education might encompass on the principles and fundamental ideas of the new theories of learning. It is the applications of the grand scale end of the continuum that are of interest from the viewpoint of the argument I am trying to develop here. There are numerous examples of authors for whom, as expressed by Matthew (2012, p. 12), “constructivism is even larger than a theory of learning, education and science; it is a worldview or *weltanschauung*”. In her often cited declaration, Yvon Pépin, for example, has stated that constructivism “offers a global perspective on the meaning of the human adventure, on the way

human beings impart meaning to their whole existence in order to survive and adapt” (Pépin, 1998, p. 174). In the same vein, Tharp and Gallimore (1988, pp. 8–9) propose that the interactionist-constructivist views about human learning, interaction, and development that they refer to as “neo-Vygotskianism” will not only have profound impacts on teaching, schooling, and education, but will actually provide “the basis for a theory of schooling and teaching” (ibid., p. 6).

A considerable part of the available literature on how the new theories of learning should be applied to education deals with the question of designing and developing institutions of education. Hargreaves (2003, p. 29), for example, argues that teachers should make their schools into learning organisations where capacities to learn and structures that support learning and respond constructively to change are widespread among adults as well as children. Similarly, Tokoro (2003) thinks that advances in information and communication technology have finally given us ubiquitous access to information, forcing western societies to transform schools into individualised, learner-centred learning institutions that should be designed based on the recent results achieved by the cognitive sciences and neurosciences.

In addition to these efforts of individual authors to base the process of education and institutions of education on learning research, there have also been collective endeavours aiming to realise the same objective. In 1990, Charles Spielberger, president of the American Psychological Association (APA), urged members of the APA to take a more visible role in the reform of America’s schools. Thus, the APA appointed a task force of leading experts in psychology and education, whose charge was to develop a set of principles based on the field’s understanding of what learning is and what promotes optimal human learning (Murphy & Alexander, 2006, p. 14).

Thus, between 1990 and 1996, a team of psychologists, learning research experts, and educational researchers formulated an initial set of 12 psychological principles that they hoped would guide the redesign and transformation of American schools (see e.g. Alexander & Murphy, 1998). Later on, the 12 original principles were revised and expanded by another APA task force, major scientific societies, psychological organisations, and professional educational associations (Murphy & Alexander, 2006, p. 14). A detailed examination of these principles is beyond the scope of this article, but it is evident that they draw heavily on the orientations of social constructionism and constructivism. For example, learning is defined as a natural process of discovery through which the learners seek meaningful knowledge and construct and link new information to old. At the same time, the principles emphasise that learning is facilitated by social interactions in diverse settings (see e.g. Murphy & Alexander, 2006).

Overall, the discussion above highlights the fact that, for several authors, the new theories of learning seem to provide the entire and sole basis that the processes of education going on in institutes of education, and the institutions of education themselves, should be built on or modelled after. In his critical analysis of constructivism in science education, Matthews summarises this with the following words:

Constructivism is undoubtedly a major theoretical influence... In its postmodernist and deconstructionist form, it is a significant influence in literary, artistic, history, and religious education. Constructivism seemingly fits in with, and supports, a range of multicultural, feminist, and broadly reformist programmes in education. Although constructivism began as a theory of learning, it has ... expanded its dominion, becoming a theory of teaching, a theory of education, a theory of the origin of ideas, and a theory of both personal knowledge and scientific knowledge... Constructivism has become education's version of the 'grand unified theory,' plus a bit more. (Matthews, 2002, p. 121)

THE PROCESS OF EDUCATION AND THE NEW LANGUAGE OF LEARNING

Previous remarks should suffice to show that, as Biesta (2006, pp. 15–17) has argued, the concept of learning and the related constructivist concepts discussed above have become almost omnipresent in contemporary educational discourse. They are the favourite concepts of national and international policy-makers and, thus, policy documents. The wide range of constructivist concerns can also be seen in the headings of articles and the names of books, where we are informed of “A constructivist view of learning”, “A constructivist view of teaching”, “A view of science”, “A constructivist view of curriculum”, and “A constructivist view of curriculum development” (Matthews, 2002, p. 123), as well as “Constructivist learning environments” (e.g. Wilson, 1996).

There might be, however, a danger or at least problems for educational researchers, policy-makers, and practitioners of education drawing too heavily on the new language of learning and the new theories of learning. As suggested by Biesta (2005, 2006), one of the main problems here is that the new language of learning seems to misconstrue the roles of the educational professional and the role and position of the learner in the process of education. In his analysis of the new language of learning, Biesta (2006, p. 22) found that it has made it possible to think of education as an economic transaction in which (a) the learners are the consumers with their needs; (b) the teacher or the educator, or the institute of education, is seen as the provider, who is there to meet the needs of the learners; and ultimately, (c) education itself becomes nothing but a commodity, something delivered by the teachers or educational institutions and consumed by the learners.

Why is this a problem? As Biesta (2006, p. 20) notes, in one respect it makes sense to look at the process of education in these terms. At least, it might allow us to redress the imbalances of a provider-led and inflexible education. To think of students as learners and learners as customers who want value for their money can, in this sense, be helpful in achieving equal opportunities of education for all (ibid., p. 20). This might then decrease the risk of creating a divided strata of development, separating those who cater for a knowledge society from those who merely cater to it (Hargreaves, 2003, p. 205). In the same vein, one should welcome constructivist

or social constructionist critiques of authoritarian forms of education focusing solely on the activities of the teacher and conceiving of education solely as a form of control.

The main problem with the new language of learning, however, is that it is insufficient for expressing what finally and fundamentally matters in education. Regarding the roles of the student and the teacher, Biesta (2006, p. 22), for example, points out that the major reason for students to engage in education is precisely to find out what it is that they actually need or desire. Furthermore, teachers and other professionals in education often have a crucial role to play in the process of need definition. This, however, is something that really cannot be conceptualised or expressed using just the new language of learning or the concepts provided by the new theories of learning.

Biesta (2015, pp. 76–77), in his recent discussion of good education and teacher professionalism, has also developed a slightly different line of argumentation to question the hegemony of language of learning in education. He sees the problem with the language of learning – not only the language itself but also the ways in which it is used and contextualised in educational research, policy, and practice – in the fact that it tends to prevent people from asking the key educational questions concerning content, purpose, and the relationships between the process of education and institutions of education. Instead, the new language of learning seems to steer researchers, policy-makers, and practitioners to talk in abstract terms about promoting learning, supporting learning, facilitating learning, about learning outcomes and student learning; and too quickly forget to specify and discuss the “of what” and the “for what” of the learning (*ibid.*, p. 77). For schools and other institutions of education, this tendency is, of course, problematic, since the creation, evaluation, and reformation of educational institutions has to be centrally concerned with the purpose and aims of education.

EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS AND THE NEW LANGUAGE OF LEARNING

As mentioned above, it is evident that the prevailing way of construing the process of education has an impact on the characteristics of schools and other institutes of education. At the same time, however, it is also evident that the conceptions and theories of the process of education upheld and proposed, for example, by policy-makers, learning researchers, and theorists and philosophers of education, do not completely determine the nature and the functions of educational institutions. Instead, relationships between education and society, state, and other social institutions are infinitely complex and constantly changing. Schools and other educational institutions both create sociocultural order and respond to the ordering of their environments within society and culture (Erickson, 1997, p. 356). It must also be kept in mind that schools and other educational institutions constitute a relatively recent occurrence in human history, and so the contradiction and incoherence in school practice is not surprising (*ibid.*, p. 359).

Considering the complexity of both the educational institutions and the larger sociocultural systems they are a part of, it is understandable that educational theorists are divided on the question of whether schools and other educational institutions really are capable of sponsoring and fostering significant social and cultural change (Skilbeck, 1997, p. 498). Furthermore, the complex structure of educational institutions and their surroundings offers many different paths for modifications and revisions of schools and schooling (Fend, 2008, p. 189).

This complexity is taken as the starting point in Benner's (1991) discussion of the tasks and horizons of a theory of educational institutions, as well as in his study of the interconnections between school didactics, curriculum theory, and the theory of school as an institution (Schultheorie) (see Benner, 1995). It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a detailed description of Benner's account, but some remarks are necessary to ground my argument here. Benner (1991, pp. 170–173) starts with the notion that, on the one hand, the facticity of the existing complex system of educational institutions and the multiple sociocultural processes of differentiation and structuration behind the genesis of contemporary schools and other institutes of education must be the starting point of reflection. On the other hand, a proper theory of educational institutions must not limit itself in such a way that it should only aim for a description and explanation of existing educational institutions and their connections with other subsystems of society. Instead, there is a fundamental need for the theory of educational institutions to be critical and reform-oriented.

As already implied above, to properly voice this fundamentally critical tone, a theory of educational institutions needs to apply multiple lines of thought, utilise different views and methods of reflection and research, and create fusions of facts, models, and theories produced by the various different branches of educational research and theorising. To be more specific, it is the task of the theory of educational institutions, for example, to initiate a dialogue between the didactic recommendations of classroom-level reforms suggested by the new theories of learning and the new ways of apprehending a curriculum proposed by curriculum theorists, and finally to reflect the emerging synthesis from the viewpoint of the fundamental principles of the process of education (see Benner, 1995, pp. 48–51)

A common problem with various initiatives and demands by the proponents of the new theories of learning to reform or completely reshape the institutions of education is the failure to properly address the complexity discussed above. As Cobb has pointed out, in education the case for constructivism tends often to be argued from nature and first principles: "if reality and the human mind are thus constituted, here is what a classroom (or a school, J.P.) should look like" (Cobb, 2006, p. 85).

Given the profoundly complex nature of educational institutions and their elaborate connections with other institutes and subsystems of society, basing the reforms or revisions of schools and other institutions just on the principles suggested by the new theories of learning is, of course, something that one may be tempted to call a pauperization of educational discourse. By framing the creation, development, and revision of educational institutions as a task that will only require a proper

(constructivist) understanding of human learning, the new language of learning limits and hampers the dialogue requested by Benner as a necessary condition for a proper theory of educational institutions. Furthermore, institutional education can be seen as an intentional and interactive process through which individuals become encultured into the complex web of human competence and the social networks constituting societies (Uljen, 1999, p. 2). If this is the case, an adequate theory of educational institutions, as well as any attempt to reform educational institutions, simply cannot restrict itself to operate only with the language provided by the new theories of learning. Instead, and as suggested by Biesta (2005, p. 64), we may need, in addition to learning theories and the new language of learning, a new language of education, or at least a revitalised version of the traditional discourse of education.

DISCUSSION

During the last three decades, educational research and educational practice have witnessed a decline in traditional concepts of educational theories, and the emergence and, ultimately, the triumph of the new language of learning. Despite some obvious positive effects provided by this shift of discourse, this has led to some fundamental problems for educational research and the practice of education. Thus, I have argued, above, against attempts to reduce the discourse or language of education only to the language provided by the new theories of learning, mainly the constructivist and social constructionist approaches of learning research.

In addition to serving an expressive function, the language of education serves an important constructive function. It determines, at a very fundamental level, the way we construct the elements and the totality of the process of education. Since the institutions of education are partly shaped by our conceptions, models, and theories of the process of education, the language preferred by researchers, policy-makers, administrators, and teachers also determines the nature of schools and other institutions of education. One of the major problems, if not the major problem, associated with the new language of learning is that it oversimplifies and, to some extent, misconstrues the nature of the process of education: when the roles of teachers and students, the intentions of those engaged in education, and the entire process of education are framed using the terms provided by the new language of learning, the process of education appears to be a type of economic transaction. This, ultimately, may prevent people from asking for and seeking an answer to fundamentally important questions about the aims and purpose of schools and education in general.

My second argument against the hegemony of the new language of learning has to do with the complex nature of schools and other institutes of education. Several authors, starting from very different sets of premises, have argued that any adequate theory of schools and other educational institutions requires a dialogue and a synthesis of the theories and lines of thinking provided by different branches of educational research and educational theory. To use only the framework and the ideas provided by the new theories of learning as a starting point in designing and

reforming educational institutions is to severely limit or even pauperize the horizon of reforms or revisions. An interesting question for further research here would emerge from the notion put forth, for example, by Griffin and Brownhill (2002, p. 64): in the educational sphere, the notions of self-directed learning and related notions seem to have a tendency to de-institutionalise the process of education. Is this really the case, or in other words, do the new theories of learning, coupled with the notions of the information society, really abolish the need for institutionalised processes of education?

Finally, it should be noted that the arguments I have made against the new language of learning and its effects on educational discourse do not imply that the conceptual framework and principles of the new theories of learning should always be rejected. On the contrary, they constitute one major line of thought and provide a set of tools to be utilised both in the analysis of the process of education and in the study of educational institutions. At the same time, one must, however, acknowledge that the new language of learning cannot claim an all-encompassing position or universality in the discourse of education.

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