

Introduction

The Long Life of Learning in Practice

The seven essays brought together in this book trace a trajectory of critical theoretical and ethnographic research as it has grown and changed over many years. My work as a whole attempts, it has been said, to excavate the politics of knowledge that inform theories of learning, and to reconceive learning in/as transformation, and as itself always a cultural/historical practice. This began with a conception I proposed years ago of learning as “situated in context.” It has continued into my recent attempts to work out a dialectical notion of learning as “changing participants’ changing participation in (humdrum, complicated, conflictual) everyday practice.” The essays show how those ideas have changed in the process of moving, first, from my early ethnographic work on apprenticeship and everyday math practices, to a very different view of trajectories of changing participation in the practices of everyday life; second, from the idea that there are island-like contexts (plural) in which persons thus situated engage in “the same” activities differently, to that of participation in social practice of persons moving in complex relations through and across the contexts of their everyday lives (everyday lives now understood as produced with others in historical, political relations); and, third, from an inkling that these are contradictory processes to a deeper appreciation of the dialectical relations of which they are composed.

It probably is not a surprise, then, that I do not believe “learning” is an individual or psychological phenomenon. I worry about the theoretical, ethnographic and political implications of work in fields that claim “learning” as central to their disciplines (e.g., education, psychology). By reducing learning to individual psychological processes they thereby ignore the conflicting forces and relations that change participation in always-changing social practice. Educative disciplines and institutions that limit themselves to such reductions do not have the critical analytic power to conceive of learners and learning in such transformative terms. As for anthropologists, they too largely share the common sense view of learning, which is to imagine that “learning” is already accounted for in notions of teaching. Or they just avoid the subject altogether, assuming that it is not part of their remit. My own view is that anthropologists who ignore that learning is, as this book contends, an effect and source of

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social change, do so at their peril. But it is rare that those interested in social change – whether as interaction, or institutionalized local practices, or epochal struggles – feel compelled to seek, again, a *transformative* rather than reproductive conception of learners learning.

So, whether because of their politics or their (lack of) social theoretical formation, or both, researchers in the social sciences tend to think of learning only as the means for reproducing a stable social order. This is an unfortunate view, given the integral role that learning plays in undermining, upsetting, reordering – *changing* – the social processes that compose social life. Each essay in this book can be read as a response to this state of affairs. If I were to summarize my approach here (as elsewhere), I might distill it into these six points:

- 1) Try to formulate critical arguments against problematic customary psychological, educational, sociological practices that underwrite reduced and decontextualized conceptions of learning. Such arguments are difficult to make – but they are needed for the foreseeable future for others who will in turn change and pass them on.
- 2) Insist that a *critical* social theoretical formation, and not just political will, is urgent and necessary in order to pursue change. Show why this is so as concretely as possible.
- 3) Recognize at the same time that a critical theoretical formation is never adequate by itself, but always only part of critical encounters between the analytic terms and questions addressed in historical/ethnographic research projects, and the assumptions and theoretical claims that underlie them. At best, each should inform and also change the other.
- 4) There are, of course, many brilliant exceptions to my hyperbolic complaints, so find colleagues who share in the same struggles from similarly critical perspectives and try to join with them and change my work in response to their work.
- 5) On the basis of the above, work toward an encompassing, dialectical understanding of learning as an integral part of the condition of possibility for social life in all its political–economic, historical, and processual particularities.
- 6) Recognize that these tasks are worth spending a lifetime on, because learning, which always embodies possibilities for change, always embodies possibilities for transformative change. It is part of – and essential to – revolutionizing future practice.

This critical “agenda” sums up the impetus that led me to write these essays. But there is also another, more immediate reason for gathering them together here. This book has taken shape in collaboration with anthropologist Ana Gomes at the Federal University of Minas Gerais. I began to write about the

situatedness of learning around 1980, a decade before the publication of *Situated Learning* (1991); and even that book has had a longer life than many of its current readers. Thinking about the age of this work led us to wonder how, in communicating among generations of researchers, it would be possible to show what has happened as both my work and the times have changed – and Ana suggested that this collection of essays might help.

But there is more to it than that. I found Ana Gomes and the anthropologists with whom she works in Belo Horizonte engaged in close studies of everyday life and learning in their city. I was intrigued by the way in which they were looking at participants' everyday engagements in practice, and following them through and across the multiple contexts that compose those everyday lives. These anthropologists are also participants in struggles to transform relations between the hegemonic educational apparatuses of the Brazilian state, UFMG, and new indigenous visions of educational practice. These initiatives are emerging as indigenous people and anthropologists have invented new state and local organizations to provide the kinds of spaces they need in which to work together, reinvented relations between universities and indigenous communities, and remade anthropological participation in indigenous community practices as well; both parties are engaged in new forms of co-production of their shared ethnographic practice. (Ana Gomes explores these challenges in her Afterword. You might want to read that next.) The impetus for this book came, then, from finding that my ideas about learning in and as changing practice resonate with and inform their work. Their radical vision of ethnographic relations and political action make me feel that this book is worth sending out into the world.

Ana and I collaborated in choosing the essays, bringing together work that explores interrelated research questions, the sometimes divergent collective conversations that nourished them, and the particular intellectual movements that in different ways allowed me to write them in the first place. Though the essays came together as a whole as we selected and assembled them, they can also be read in almost any order. I have accordingly provided a separate introduction for each of them, and will only say a brief word about them here.

The first essay (Chapter 1), “The Savagery of the Domestic Mind,” (1981), was for me an opening salvo on a cluster of issues common to early anthropological concerns with rationality and “the primitive mind” and to psychological theories of learning (and experimental method). Ethnographic research on everyday math practices provided the empirical resources for joining the debate. This essay serves as a point of departure for exploring the book as a whole. The second and third essays open out to questions of theory – and then practice – provoked by discussions that followed from *Situated Learning* (1991): “The Problem of Context” (Chapter 2) asks what a variety of our theoretically sophisticated colleagues were debating about conceptions of

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situation, context, practice, learning, and activity; and “Ethnographies of Apprenticeship” (Chapter 3) reviews a large body of ethnographic studies of craft practice and apprenticeship, wondering how (or if) they contextualized learning in illuminating ways. Ana proposed the fourth essay (Chapter 4) as an antidote to common complaints that I rarely discuss teaching. Even there the title serves notice that it explores “Teaching as Learning in Practice.” In that spirit, the following essay (Chapter 5), “Production Schools,” explores the subtle and contradictory power of an extraordinary Danish school that operates as a matter of course with the assumption that teaching is a complex practice of learning. The final two essays reflect changing theoretical developments in ways that bring them closer to the present. “Everyday Life” (Chapter 6) explores different ways in which “the everyday” is conceived with respect to learning, for sooner or later every theory of learning makes claims about the everyday life of which it is part. This question (along with broader theoretical debates around “everyday life”), looms increasingly larger in my work, as the relation between them is ubiquitous and yet often conceived in confused ways that demand clarification. Finally, I wrote the last essay for this book (Chapter 7) to bring it to an end with (something close to) a point of arrival. It begins with my own critical review of *Situated Learning* as a prelude to exploring relations between Gramscian theory of practice and critical psychology on the conduct of everyday life.

The essays indeed reflect a long arc of change in the theoretical and ethnographic projects they explore. Read in sequence, they demonstrate what I mean by saying, as I often do, that we are all apprentices to our own changing practice. In fact, every ethnographic project I have undertaken has felt like a preamble to the one before and has ended with an inevitable sense that yet another project is needed; surely an active process of apprenticeship to past and future work.

Theoretical development, too, is similarly open ended: Think of one’s theoretical formation as being like an ethnographic project. A field research project is many years in the making, involving years in the field, years of analysis and writing, and years of talking with others about it. The same can be said about the exploratory and transformative intentions animating the process of theoretical formation. It is a very long-term project; it changes over time, and is a situated practice – it is situated, that is, as part of *other* practices. It is an ongoing process of collective discussion and puzzling over difficult theoretical texts, and of ethnographic inquiry, analysis, and critique. (It is in part, also, its institutional, intellectual, political, scholarly contexts, and relations.) But perhaps the most important, and most difficult, step is the labor of getting one’s theoretical understanding and related ethnographic inquiry to meet “in the middle” and challenge each other – so that neither stays the same.

Coming to take a critical stance toward conventional theorizing is probably a matter first of coming to recognize that our common sense understandings of the world and their epistemological and ontological presuppositions are the very same ones that frame conventional academic theorizing. They will, if taken for granted, lead to the diagnosis of only the problems and visions of change confined to, and defined by, that framework in the first place.

Ana Gomes recently co-edited a special issue of *Horizontes Antropologicos* on Culture and Learning (Gomes et al. 2015). She began with a diagnosis of common anthropological assumptions about culture and learning in Brazil. (They are the same ones I took with me to begin the research on apprenticeship among Liberian tailors in the 1970s.) She observes that they stand between two widely shared traditions. One is a venerable theory of cultural transmission. The other is borrowed from cognitive psychology, notable for its rationalist, individual, and behaviorist assumptions. They both issue from the same positivist, empiricist theoretical problematic that informs the common sense of the discipline as well as our lives more broadly.

It took quite an extended struggle to break with the theoretical traditions that Ana Gomes identifies even today, and that included both conventional distinctions between “formal” and “informal” education, and common assumptions about learning. As soon as I began fieldwork in tailors’ workshops in Monrovia I found evidence that Vai and Gola tailors’ apprentices were learning a lot (as, obviously, the master tailors to whom they were apprenticed must also have done), but I could not see it happening. I was faced with a deeply frustrating question about *how* apprentices were learning to tailor. And that was not even the complete question. More honestly I was caught up in asking “how are the apprentices learning to tailor – if they are not being taught by teachers, as pupils?” How could I find out how to characterize what was going on, since the only conceptual tools at hand when I started came from those theories that “knowledge gets transmitted,” on the one hand, and “mental activity leads to internalized knowledge,” on the other? How was I going to inquire into how the apprentices learned to become master tailors if ethnographic inquiry made it amply clear that what I was seeing could not be explained in school-centric theoretical terms? First, recognizing the limitations of the conventional theory clearly grew out of experiencing the limitations of ethnographic inquiry as well as vice versa.¹ Further it takes work to come to inhabit a theoretical problematic other than “the usual.” And figuring out, and figuring out how to articulate, an alternative theoretical stance – a theory of *practice* – has clearly been crucial in

¹ Lave (2011) speaks to the disconcerting challenges posed by the ethnographic inquiry in Liberia to commonplace theory – and the development of social practice theory, including the notion of “situated learning” as well.

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responding to the challenges raised both by my ethnographic work and by the constricting claims of common sense theory.

The variety of theory of practice which I have been working with, and trying to extend my grasp of, began to become clearer to me in the early 1990s, when reading Marx's work with a group of colleagues, while also struggling to make better sense of the tailors' project. Marx's theory of praxis has been fought over and enriched in generations of scholarly debate. There are crucially diverse Marxist theoretical stances – a hugely complex field of scholarly and political debate that has taken place for over a century and a half. This domain is easily ignored when "Marxism" is reduced to a single, politically convenient stereotype: That is, a fixed, dogmatic "theory" about a political-economic system, capitalism, that would be one pole in a grand dualism where the economic "base" completely determines everything else – merely "superstructure" – in collective and individual history in a teleological, linear fashion. Clearly that's not the strand of Marxist theory running through Marx's Theses on Feuerbach; Gramsci's philosophy of praxis; the dialectical method of Bertell Ollman (1976, 2003); the work of Henri Lefebvre (1991, 2000); Stuart Hall's reading of the *Grundrisse* (2003); or Paul Willis's ethnography of working class learning (1977). I have slowly learned from these and other thinkers, all of them working within Marx's theory of praxis, a relational, dialectical conception of material, historical processes and practices. This critical theory does indeed reject common sense assumptions about those dual divisions that we register as mind and body, subject and social world. Ollman tells us that rather than being related in just one way, as is the case when something is either one thing or its opposite – e.g., individual or social, mental or manual, produced or reproduced – a dialectical relation is a matter of "*both and*." It is precisely that Marxist insight that makes it possible to articulate that culture is not just something to be learned. Culture produces learning, even as learning always produces culture, in relations that are themselves cultural and historical; those relations make *culture/learning* what it is. In other words, those relations (which are multiple and contradictory, i.e., composed of many relations) are, together and at the same time, also a relation – call that relation "learning in/as practice."²

² "Things as their relations" is a difficult idea to grasp. But to introduce the idea here, Ollman helps:

The philosophy of external relations, which reigns in both the common sense and learned discourse of our time, holds that there are both "things" . . . and relations, but that they are logically independent of each other. Thus, in principle, the relations between two or more things can undergo dramatic changes and even disappear altogether without affecting the qualities by which we recognize these things and with which we define the terms they refer to.

Ollman's characterization of relations expresses in a more formal way theoretical insights that developed gradually as the questions I worked on changed. What I can do here is trace those evolving theoretical questions over the years as they shaped the essays, beginning with the ethnographic project on craft apprenticeship in Liberia. That project had the effect of generating unanticipated, field-inspired pressures to rethink dualist premises about "formal and informal education." It was crucial in coming to see learning as a relation – "situated learning" – because it brought me face to face with questions about participants' access, through each other, to participation, in ongoing practice.

But craft apprenticeship arguably also had limitations as a resource for changing theory. A Vai tailors' workshop was not a school but it nonetheless involved an intentional educational practice; apprentices were there to learn a trade while they were taking part in it. That raised questions for me about learning in circumstances that were not educational in an institutional sense. My subsequent ethnographic project, on math practices in everyday life, pushed me toward questions about learning as everyday participation in ongoing practice. This reframed the theory project to ask: *How* is learning part of the moving, cross-contextual, profoundly interconnected, conduct of everyday life?

In turn this led me to grapple with the concept of "everyday life." Conventional theoretical claims about "everyday life" are saturated with assumptions about learning and schooling – learning, in common sense and academic educational theory is treated as movement away from "the everyday" toward (high-) cultural knowledgeability and the extra-ordinary. (This argument is laid out in the essay "Everyday Life" [Chapter 6]). Differently theorized notions of everyday life – not as a thing in itself but as people participate in it, and thus as "the conduct of everyday life" – made it possible to arrive at a radically different view. Critical psychologists argue that everyday life quintessentially involves movement across a series of contexts and their ongoing practices, as participants engage with sundry others who are part of those contextual engagements (Dreier 2003, 2008a, 2008b). So, the question "how does learning happen?" changed for me through iterative transformations, to another that takes learning-in-practice to be constituted as participants, changing, move across and deal with, and among, the contexts in which they participate.

In contrast, the philosophy of internal relations holds that what others take to be a "thing" that may or may not undergo change and may or may not have relations with other things is itself both a "process" and a "relation" . . . What was a thing for the philosophy of external relations becomes a relation evolving over time (or a process in constant interaction with other processes). (Ollman 2015: 10)

Eventually, I came to realize that even transformative struggles for broader, radical social change are made in everyday practice. I am thinking, again, of the many-sited everyday practices that compose new initiatives for indigenous education in Brazil. In another register, 18-year-old participants in Danish Production Schools come to understand that they are there, not for the purpose of accumulating scholasticized “knowledge,” but rather (as they engage in their work with others in the school’s workshops to produce things used and valued by others, and contribute in other ways to collective projects at the school) in order to develop a stronger grasp on their own future possibilities – what Henri Lefebvre identifies in virtually the same words, as the basis of revolutionary change.

In bringing this Introduction to a close I would like to respond to at least one among the common ways this work has been misunderstood over the years. Yes, learning is always a political project, a collective endeavor, situated in everyday practice and a key to future transformative change. Yet a reader who works through the essays might wonder why I keep the focus on learning when I do not take it to be a project in theorizing mind or brain or individual subjects. Does not all this talk about “practice,” she might ask, amount to a behaviorist claim that we (must) bracket out what goes on in minds because we can only infer internal processes from external inputs and outputs (stimuli and responses)? In general, my response comes in the form of another question: How can you have a theory of mind or brain that does not situate them in the world of which they are a constitutive part – in changing practice? A theory of mind or cognition as a thing-in-itself will not get you to an understanding of how unemployed coal miners’ wives and daughters join their evangelical church in forming a Tea Party group, nor account for tensions between apprenticed young women and men struggling to transform and hold on to traditional masculine arrangements for working in bakeries in Denmark. Starting instead with either of those scenarios puts you in a position to ask questions about what and how participants as incoherent persons, with multiple partial identities – contradictory, emotional, thought-embodied beings – are made in practice, through practice; as *they* make themselves in practice. These are questions about history, power, relational being and conflict – not questions about “the mind” or an individual mind, or different “kinds of minds.” Thought, thought forms, self-reflection, and critique are *part, but only part*, of ongoing social practice, just as are participants struggling for coherence and collective meaning-making, for their identities and lives. My penchant for saying that “it is (only) learners who learn” is a way of arguing against claims that human existence is completely determined, or inevitable, or unchangeable, and that the powers of inculcation and repression guarantee this. In my view it is altogether too well kept a secret that as people engage in “learning” (that is, as changing participants engaged in changing participation

in everyday changing practice) – they do inhabit possibilities for transformative social change.

This introduction has been an account of political struggles over the theory and practice of learning in and as practice. A dialectical theory of praxis embodies these struggles in several different respects. It situates ethnographic studies of learning in political relations in the historically made and present world and refuses to dissemble or hide them. It recognizes that every project is necessarily incomplete and partial. “Partial,” it should be carefully noted, never justifies bracketing off narrow bits of social life, picking them apart from their participation in making and being made in the world. Instead it is a way of asserting the crucial nature of simultaneous attention to political/economic historical configurations of forces and their relations in and through everyday life. In contradictory ways they are part – past, present, and future – of possibilities for bottom-up transformations of everyday life’s practices.