KNOWLEDGE IS PERSONALLY CONSTRUCTED, SOCIO-ALLY MEDIATED, AND INHERENTLY SITUATED

(Clarke, Modified, 2015)


Three assumptions about knowledge and its generation underlie any attempt to understand and support learning: it is personally constructed, socially mediated, and inherently situated. These assumptions are intimately related.

Recognizing that individuals personally construct knowledge about the world is essential for understanding the nature of learning. Constructivism: asserts two main principles:

1. knowledge is not passively received but actively built up by the cognizing subject;
2. the function of cognition is adaptive and serves the organization of the experiential world, not the discovery of ontological reality" (von Glasersfeld, 1987, p. 37).

If this were not the case, and if knowledge acquisition was largely a transmissive process, then experience (e.g., a practicum for student teachers) would be merely be a setting for the application of existing knowledge and not the construction of new knowledge.

With respect to the second assumption, researchers such as Wertsch (1991), drawing on the works of Vygotsky and Bruner, note that the ways in which individuals construct knowledge of the world is not "something that is predicated only of the individual" (p. 15) but must be considered in terms of the "social and mediational properties" (p. 15) that contribute to its construction. This perspective of knowledge recognizes the importance of social interaction and its influence on the ways in which we come to make sense of the world about us.

In addition, a number of researchers have explored in greater depth the inherently situated nature of cognition. Recent investigations of learning challenge:

[the] separation of what is learned from how it is learned and used. The activity in which knowledge is developed and deployed, it is now argued, is not separable from or ancillary to learning and cognition. Nor is it neutral. Situations might be said to co-produce knowledge through activity. Learning and cognition . . . are fundamentally situated. (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989, p. 32)

In a review of the literature in this area Hennessy (1993) notes that:

situated cognition considerably widens our view of cognitive models of problem solving to:

(a) recognize the critical role of the social and physical circumstances in which actions are situated, when interpreting those actions (Suchman, 1987); and
(b) encompass thinking as a part of a culturally organized activity which is carried out within a community of practitioners. (p. 2)

According to this view, learning is a process of participation in socially-organized practices through which local knowledge and language are constructed. Of particular interest in this area is the work is of Lave and Wenger (1991) who argue that learning is a process of participation in a ‘community of practice.’ For example, if one wishes to become a teacher then one must participate in a community of practice that is engaged in the practice of teaching. In short, it is not good enough to merely study the practice of teaching within a
decontextualized university classroom if one expects to become good teacher. They argue that entry and access to a community of practice is gained through the process of legitimate peripheral participation, that is, "gaining access to sources for understanding through growing involvement" (p. 37) in a community.

As newcomers move from peripheral participation towards full participation in a community they are engaged in the process of constructing new identities, not the replication of existing identities. In a similar fashion, these authors argue that Agent, Activity, and the World are mutually constitutive and therefore communities of practice are constantly "engaged in the generative process of producing their own future" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 57). As such, communities of practice are dynamic entities characterized by change and evolution.

If knowledge is individually constructed, socially meditated, and inherently situated, what questions might we ask of communities of practice (such as a school setting in which a teaching practicum occurs) that would illuminate the ways in which such a community enhances or constrains learning? Given the perspectives outlined above and drawing upon the work of Lave and Wenger (1991), one way to frame such an inquiry would be in terms of five attributes which are said to constitute learning within a community of practice, namely, that learning is:

- about participation: mastery resides within the community not within the master, and members move from peripheral to full participation;
- about the construction of identities: 'becoming' teachers and teacher educators;
- about the negotiation and renegotiation of meaning: meaning is produced, reproduced, and changed through interaction;
- about meaning in context: a learning curriculum, in contrast to a teaching curriculum, unfolds in the immediacy of the action setting; and
- about gaining legitimacy - involvement by newcomers entails access to the arena of mature practices within the community.

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