Expansive Learning, Third Spaces, and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

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EDUC 918

Fall 2016

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In his article, “Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy: A Needed Change in Stance, Terminology, and Practice,” Django Paris (2012) proposes a new term: *culturally sustaining pedagogy*. This terminology, Paris asserts, demonstrates a commitment to a radical reconceptualization of the purpose of schooling in the United States. Paris proposes that dominant policies and practices in K-12 education “have the explicit goal of creating a monocultural and monolingual society” (2012, p. 93). Paris suggests that the object of schooling should instead include sustaining linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism, perpetuating and fostering students’ heritage and community practices.

In this paper, I will argue that cultural-historical activity theory, especially in its expansive learning theory manifestation, offers a valuable lens for analyzing the transformation of the object and activity of schooling to align with a more culturally sustaining approach. First, I will describe the foundations of expansive learning theory, including cultural-historical activity theory, Bateson’s (1972) levels of learning, and Bakhtin’s (1981) *heteroglossia*. Then, I will trace the empirical development and evolution of expansive learning theory, focusing especially on the horizontal dimension of learning and expertise. Finally, I will articulate how Kris Gutiérrez and colleagues’ (Gutiérrez, 2008; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Tejeda, 1999; Gutiérrez & Larson, 2007; Gutierrez, Rymes, & Larson, 1995) concept of the “third space,” which Paris (2012) offers as a forerunner of culturally sustaining pedagogy, offers an example of how expansive learning theory can be used to reconceptualize what counts as knowledge in schools.

Foundations: Cultural-Historical Activity Theory

Engeström (1987) proposes expansive learning as an extension of **cultural-historical** activity theory. Engeström (1996) identifies three generations of CHAT, situating expansive

learning in the third generation. In this section of the paper, I will describe each generation's distinguishing features.

Lev Vygotsky (1978) initiated the development of the first generation of activity theory, introducing the sociocultural perspective on learning. Reacting to the behaviorists' assertion that learning was a simple relationship between stimulus and response, Vygotsky (1978) introduced the concept of *mediation*. Vygotsky (1978) insisted that the individual's response was mediated by the cultural environment, and that this cultural environment was in turn shaped by the agency of the individual. The individual and society were interdependent; neither could be understood without the other. Vygotsky pointed to cultural artifacts as mediators of learning and experience. One potential mediator, Vygotsky proposed, was social interaction. Vygotsky (1978) offered the concept of the *zone of proximal development* to describe the effect of social mediation, defining it as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (1978, p. 86).

Engeström (2001a, 2014) identifies the second generation of CHAT as emerging via the work of Vygotsky's colleague Alexei Leont'ev (1981), as well as the scholars Eval'd Il'enkov (1977, 1982) and Vasily Davydov (1988, 1990). Leont'ev (1981) added to Vygotsky's theory a distinction between individual action and collective activity. In Vygotsky's conception, the individual subject was the unit of analysis. Leont'ev introduced the idea of a division of labor among participants in a collective activity, making the activity itself the unit of analysis. The division of labor enables a group to accomplish a goal or outcome, the motivation for or object of the activity. Il'enkov (1977, 1982) incorporated Marxist ideas about dialectics and contradictions into the theory, positing that internal contradictions were the driving force for change and

development within the activity. Finally, Davydov (1988, 1990) translated Il'enkov's (1977, 1982) dialectics into classroom-based learning theory, introducing the dialectic of learning activity as movement from the abstract to the concrete via learning actions.

In the work in which he proposes the concept of expansive learning, *Learning by Expanding: An Activity-Theoretical Approach to Developmental Research*, Engeström (1987) incorporates the concepts from the first two generations of CHAT into a depiction of activity systems that includes not just subject, mediator (tools), and object, but also rules, community, and division of labor. The third generation goes beyond the single activity system. In this third generation of CHAT, the minimal unit of analysis is two interacting activity systems. One of the forces driving this development is the need to recognize cultural diversity (Cole, 1988; Griffin & Cole, 1984) and consider the ways that activity systems might vary across cultures.

Engeström (2001a) identifies five principles at the heart of the third generation of CHAT:

1. The prime unit of analysis is “a collective, artifact-mediated and object-oriented activity system, seen in its network relations to other activity systems” (Engeström, 2001a, p. 136)
2. “An activity system is always a community of multiple points of view, traditions and interests.” (Engeström, 2001a, p. 136)
3. “Activity systems take shape and get transformed over lengthy periods of time. Their problems and potentials can only be understood against their own history.” (Engeström, 2001a, p. 136)
4. Contradictions are “historically accumulating structural tensions within and between activity systems” (Engeström, 2001a, p. 137), and these tensions are the central sources of change and development within activity systems.

5. “An expansive transformation is accomplished when the object and motive of the activity are reconceptualized to embrace a radically wider horizon of possibilities than in the previous mode of the activity.” (Engeström, 2001a, p. 137)

This last principle is the driving force behind expansive learning theory, but expansive learning inherits all five of CHAT’s principles.

Foundations: Bateson and Bakhtin

To the principles and concepts drawn from Cultural-Historical Activity Theory, Engeström added two other conceptual sources (Engeström & Sannino, 2010): anthropologist Gregory Bateson’s (1972) levels of learning and double bind and Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1982) concept of heteroglossia. Bateson’s Learning I is conditioning leading to correct answers as embraced by the behaviorists. Learning II is learning derived from context, for example, learning how to behave in school. In Learning III, a group of learners begins to question their learning context and construct a new learning context. Learning III arises as a result of the double bind, in which an authority figure imposes two conflicting demands on a learner. From Bakhtin (1982), Engeström takes the idea of *heteroglossia* or *polyphony*, capturing the multiple voices in an activity system throughout the expansive learning process, which involves debate, negotiation, orchestration, and transformation.

The Empirical Development of Expansive Learning Theory

Engeström first undertook an activity-theoretical study during his doctoral program at the University of Helsinki in 1982 (Engeström, n.d.; Engeström & Glăveanu, 2012). As a member of the radical student movement in Finland in the 1960s and 1970s, he “was dissatisfied with the then-dominant positivist, decontextualized, statistically oriented approach to education and psychology” (Engeström & Glăveanu, 2012, p. 515). He believed that empirical research should

not only describe the world as it is, but rather lead to direct action to make the world better (Engeström, 2014). With his fellow students, he searched for theoretical frameworks that suited this work. He found the activity-theoretical work of Vygotsky, Leont'ev, and Davydov, among others (Engeström & Glăveanu, 2012).

Engeström initially collaborated with classroom teachers to develop intervention studies that would apply these scholars' theories (Engeström & Glăveanu, 2012). He found this difficult, however, due to curricular constraints present in the classroom environment. He shifted his research to focus on work and organizations, and how learning and development happen in those settings. He initiated a study of learning among janitorial workers in 1982 and found this setting more open to trying new ideas and instituting new practices. This was the first study to use the developmental work research method (Engeström & Engeström, 1986). As Engeström continued his studies, he refined this methodology (Engeström, 1991a, 1991b, 1996, 2000, 2005) and developed his theory of expansive learning (Engeström, 1987, 2001a, 2014).

Engeström first presented expansive learning theory in his book, *Learning by Expanding* (1987). Rather than using his own research data to explain the development of the theory, which he felt would make the book too voluminous to be manageable for readers, he drew on earlier “theories and theoretical propositions related to human learning and expansion” (Engeström, 2014, p. 11), “general historical accounts of the development of human learning and expansion” (Engeström, 2014, p. 13), and “specific historical cases in the development of human learning and expansion” (Engeström, 2014, p. 14) drawn from literature and science.

Major Premises of Expansive Learning Theory

Engeström (1987) developed expansive learning as an extension of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory. It inherits the five principles of CHAT as described earlier in this paper. In

addition to these principles, Engeström (1987) introduces additional premises related to expansive learning.

Engeström (1987) proposes that learning activity is a specific type of activity, but that this activity must have another activity, such as reading or working, as its object. Expansive learning leads not only to a transformation of the subject of the learning activity, but the creation of an “an objectively and societally new activity form” (2014, p. 168), a transformation of the activity itself.

Expansive learning is most likely to take place when an adolescent or adult experiences “historically and individually pressing inner contradictions” (Engeström, 2014, p. 108) in a leading life activity such as schooling, work, science, or art. These internal contradictions lead the subject of learning to experience a double bind in their everyday actions, “a social, societally essential dilemma that cannot be resolved through separate individual actions alone – but in which joint cooperative actions can push a historically new form of activity into emergence” (2014, p. 134).

In undertaking these joint cooperative actions, subjects of learning activity take a voyage across a collective zone of proximal development. Reformulating Vygotsky’s definition of the individual zone of proximal development, Engeström defines the collective zone of proximal development as “the distance between the present everyday actions of the individuals and the historically new form of the societal activity that can be collectively generated as a solution to the double bind potentially embedded in the everyday actions” (Engeström, 2014, p. 138).

Engeström (1987, 2014) suggests that as they undertake this voyage across the zone of proximal development, subjects of learning activity collectively conceive of the new form of activity by moving from the abstract to the concrete. An abstract conception of the new activity

becomes concretely elaborated over time via “heteroglossia or orchestrated polyphony” (Bakhtin, 1982). “Applied to expansive learning and research, this means that all the conflicting and complementary voices of the various groups and strata in the activity system under scrutiny shall be involved and utilized” (Engeström, 2014, p. 247).

Finally, Engeström (1987, 2014) asserts that this expansive transition does not happen only by chance, but instead can be mastered through a deliberate process. Facilitating this process is the goal of expansive developmental research.

The Evolution of Expansive Learning Theory

Engeström continues to be the driving force behind expansive learning, but other scholars have joined him in pursuing this work. The theory has been elaborated in a variety of ways. Engeström (2000) identifies four dimensions for the potential expansion or transformation of an activity: “the social-spatial (‘who else should be included?’), the anticipatory-temporal (‘what previous and forthcoming steps should be considered?’), the moral-ideological (‘who is responsible and who decides?’), and the systemic-developmental (‘how does this shape the future of the activity?’)” (Hasu, 2000, p. 8).

Engeström describes expansive learning as occurring in cycles (2001b) which proceed through an ideal-typical sequence of epistemic actions similar to Davydov’s (1988, 1990), but were observed in work environments rather than in classrooms. These actions include:

1. *Questioning* existing wisdom and practice,
2. *Analyzing* the current situation and transforming it to identify explanatory principles,
3. *Modeling* these explanatory principles in an observable and transmittable medium,
4. *Examining the model* to determine its dynamics, potential, and limitations,
5. *Implementing the model*,

6. *Reflecting* on the process, and
7. *Consolidating* the outcomes of the process into a new, stable process. (Engeström & Sannino, 2010)

The expansive learning cycle is set in motion by a collective need to resolve a contradiction. Engeström and Sannino (2011) identified four types of discursive manifestations of contradictions: dilemmas, conflicts, critical conflicts, and double binds. “A dilemma is an expression or exchange of incompatible evaluations, either between people or within the discourse of a single person” (Engeström & Sannino, 2011, p. 373). Conflicts between individuals appear in discourse as “resistance, disagreement, argument, and criticism” (Engeström & Sannino, 2011, p. 374). A critical conflict occurs when inner doubts paralyze a subject “in front of contradictory motives unsolvable by the subject alone” (Engeström & Sannino, 2011, p. 374). A double bind is a situation in which an individual repeatedly must choose between “pressing and equally unacceptable alternatives in their activity system, with seemingly no way out” (Engeström & Sannino, 2011, p. 374).

An expansive learning cycle leads its participants to develop a new, shared transformative agency (Engeström & Sannino, 2013; Virkkunen, 2006). Engeström & Sannino (2013) developed a typology of the expressions of this transformative agency, identifying six types: “criticizing the existing activity and organization, resisting the interventionist or the management, explicating new possibilities, envisioning new patterns or models of the activity, committing to concrete actions aimed at changing the activity, and taking consequential actions to change the activity” (Engeström, 2014, p. xxiii).

Finally, Engeström (2014) emphasizes that expansive learning occurs both vertically and horizontally. Traditional views of learning conceive of progress as moving upward, with a

learner beginning as a neophyte and over time accumulating more expertise. In expansive learning, however, horizontal learning is as important as vertical learning.

Horizontal learning occurs via boundary crossing, in which experts move between different contexts and activity systems in order to solve problems, applying information and tools gained in one context to a problem in another context (Engeström, Engeström, & Kärkkäinen, 1995). When what needs to be learned “is not stable, not even defined or understood ahead of time” (Engeström, 2001a, p. 137), subjects of different, interacting activity systems must work together, crossing boundaries from one activity to another, to create new conceptual tools. “In this sense, boundary crossing may be analyzed as a process of collective concept formation” (Engeström et al., 1995, p. 321). Learners “must move across boundaries to seek and give help, to find information and tools wherever they happen to be available” (Engeström et al., 1995, p. 342). Horizontal expertise, then, consists not of deep knowledge of a particular subject, but of an awareness of which resources to pursue to solve a novel problem.

In some cases, the process of developing new conceptual tools and identifying appropriate resources leads to knotworking, collaboration in which separate threads of activity are tied, untied, and retied together to solve problems (Engeström, 2008). In these cases, the transformed activity has no “stable locus of control” (Engeström, 2001a, p. 140). The subjects of different activities must “be able to connect and coordinate with one another... quickly ‘on the spot’ when needed” (Engeström, 2001a, p. 147). No single party dominates this activity, but no party is able to evade taking responsibility for the activity, either. A framework of the three basic types of interaction that takes place during knotworking includes coordination, cooperation, and reflective communication (Engeström, 2008).

Horizontal Learning, Third Spaces, and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

Expansive learning's inclusion of horizontal expertise makes expansive learning a suitable framework for studying culturally sustaining pedagogy. In their article, "What Are We Seeking to Sustain Through Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy? A Loving Critique Forward," Paris and Alim (2014) ask, "What if... the goal of teaching and learning with youth of color was not ultimately to see how closely students could perform White, middle-class norms but to explore, honor, extend, and at times, problematize their heritage and community practices?" (p.86). This question suggests a radical reconceptualization, a transformation, of the object of schooling. Embedded in this question is the idea that youth of color's out-of-school practices have the potential to be tools, that youth can cross boundaries and collaborate with their families, communities, and teachers to create new concepts of schooling. Kris Gutiérrez and colleagues' (Gutiérrez, 2008; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Tejeda, 1999; Gutiérrez, Rymes, & Larson, 1995; Gutiérrez & Larson, 2007) concept of the "third space" provides a model for how expansive learning's notion of horizontal learning and expertise can facilitate this approach.

Gutiérrez, Rymes, and Larson (1995) first propose the concept of the "third space" after observing a teacher's classroom interactions with his students. In their observation, they focus on the tools of talk and interaction in classroom activity to examine how classroom activity mediates learning. The teacher they observe enters the classroom with a "rigidly monologic script" (p. 447) designed to silence other voices. When this happens, students generate their own counterscripts. The teacher delivers a monologue about the *Brown v. Board of Education* supreme court case, while students riff about the musician James Brown. The teacher's script takes place in the official space of the classroom, while the students' counterscript takes place in the unofficial space of the classroom. Gutiérrez and her colleagues propose that in order for all

students to participate in classroom activity and learn, the classroom must “become a site where no cultural discourses are secondary” (p. 447). Horizontal expertise must be valued.

In order for this to occur, they suggest that the teacher and students could co-construct a “third space,” where the official and unofficial spaces of the classroom intersect. They would each bring their knowledge to bear. This would allow students the opportunity to cross the boundary between school and home, transforming the classroom activity by redefining “what counts as effective classroom practice. Effective practice, in this sense, exists in contexts in which various cultures, discourses, and knowledges are made available to all classroom participants, and thus become resources for mediating learning” (Gutiérrez et al., 1995, p. 467).

Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, and Tejeda (1999) further develop the concept of the “third space” in a study in which they observe a teacher who actively creates such a space. They make more explicit the connection to expansive learning, describing the “third space” as “an expanded activity...in which the object of the activity is extended and the activity itself reorganized, resulting in new opportunities for learning” (p. 287). They refer to the “third space” as a specific, collectively constructed zone of proximal development. In this study, the classroom teacher views students’ hybrid language practices as a resource that can transform classroom activity and expand learning. By strategically incorporating students’ home knowledge as well as their school knowledge, the “third space” that this teacher creates reorganizes classroom roles, participation frameworks, and divisions of labor. “In this learning context, no single language or register is privileged, and the larger linguistic repertoires of participants become tools for participating and making meaning in this new collaborative activity” (p. 293). As students bring knowledge into classroom activity from their home lives, they are transformed into experts.

After first proposing the “third space” upon observing a classroom where it was a missed opportunity, then describing its creation in one teacher’s classroom, Gutiérrez (2008) goes on to describe an entire learning program, the UCLA Migrant Student Leadership Institute, in which a learning ecology is designed to create a “third space” in every part of the program experience. In this program, students’ horizontal expertise is valued by all program staff members. Their movement across literal borders between nations, as well as figurative borders between different activity spaces, is seen as a resource. This movement provides students with a variety of tools that they might use to facilitate their own development and to engage in new, shared forms of activity. Gutiérrez suggests that in addition to creating learning ecologies where this expansive learning can happen, a “productive framework and method of study traces students’ movement across their daily practices to understand what tools and resources are taken up or are available across the practices that give meaning to everyday life” (p. 151). Gutiérrez essentially proposes expansive learning theory as a theoretical lens for studying students’ movement between contexts.

Conclusion

With its focus on transforming activity and leveraging horizontal expertise, expansive learning theory is a promising theory for analyzing the implementation of culturally sustaining pedagogy. Culturally sustaining pedagogy is a relatively new stance, but Gutierrez and colleagues’ (Gutiérrez, 2008; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Tejeda, 1999; Gutiérrez, Rymes, & Larson, 1995; Gutiérrez & Larson, 2007) work on the “third space” provides a model for how this type of work fits with expansive learning theory. As more educators and researchers commit to enacting and studying culturally sustaining pedagogy, expansive learning theory can provide a valuable framework for considering how different school and community activity systems

interact, what tools students and teachers bring with them across contexts, and how the object of education can be reconceptualized to sustain a variety of cultural practices.

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