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Reorienting to Expectations of Change

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Keywords: Adult learning, human activity, change

Abstract: This paper explains implicit and explicit theoretical assumptions of change and an emerging reorientation to expectations of change by using activity and meaning making theory to uncover a more expanded, integrated understanding of our expectations of change. The purpose of this reorganization is to better navigate social interactions as practitioner theorists.

Problem and Purpose

How many psychiatrists does it take to change a light bulb? Just one. But the light bulb has to really want to change. Even though this joke is cliché, it still accurately describes a fundamental reality of adult learning. Most adult learning theories and methodologies assume that individuals or groups will make some sort of change in beliefs, attitudes, or norms that result in observable change in behaviors or actions, political maneuverings, and/or social policies. In practice this expectation is quite often met with confusion, bewilderment, or even disdain for those who “just don’t get it,” refuse to get it, or do not respond to our organized activity as we thought they should. As educators and practitioners we expect change—it is synonymous with what it means to learn—but we have difficulty articulating what change means in analytical terms, how it happens or not, and how we could think about being in relation to our expectations of change from a different or reformulated purview.

The thesis of this paper is about change within a very small slice of adult learning: the unquestioned expectation of change in interactions that happen in learning activities. Rogoff (1995) refers to interactions as planes of sociocultural activity: personal, interpersonal, and community processes. This paper is concerned specifically with the interpersonal plane. Rogoff fittingly explains that this “concept does not define when a particular situation is or is not guided participation [interpersonal], but rather provides a perspective on how to look at interpersonal engagements and arrangements as they fit in sociocultural processes, to understand learning and development” (p. 147). I provide an analysis of the interaction that occurs on a micro level of communication and dialogue in face-to-face, proximate, and more distant activity along Rogoff’s plane of interpersonal or guided participation of sociocultural analysis. I stand on the premise that learning theories have an inherent expectation of change. I use aspects of activity and meaning making theory to analyze these expectations to suggest a reformulation of internal and external sociocultural activity. The purpose of this reorganization is to create a more expanded, integrated definition and expectation of change so that as practitioner theorists we will have a way to better navigate social interactions when communications seemingly reach an impasse, communication breaks down, and the mobility to move forward is impeded—expected change is not happening as we had anticipated or hoped for.

Literature

A basic assumption of learning theories is an implicit and/or explicit expectation of how change takes place. Most often researchers of learning theories can tell the reader what happened, what series of events occurred, and even provide a model for a series of steps to follow to bring about change. Some authors contend that change occurs when people are given the right opportunities for aha experiences, because of the ability of groups to be reflective and flexible, or because of management strategies through a series of steps. But these explanations insufficiently incorporate the full dimensionality and complexity of change that operates on the micro level of human interactions in learning situations. They fall short of helping us organize or navigate the activity of learning.

I am not referring to reasons for change such as life altering events that can either catapult one into having no choice to change either positively or negatively (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999), being persuaded to change through media (Bandura, 2005), or self-selected opportunities to change (Kegan & Lahey, 2001). What I am focusing on is how can we observe, interpret, and understand change through the mediated activity of sense making and environment, broadly defined. Change is about sense making, in a motivational realm, in relation to action. Change can happen when people's motives create a purpose for action (Loent'ev, 1978). For example, if people in a learning relationship are tightly wedded to ideas, beliefs, or principles as a way to protect a world view, a way for them to move within their sense making would be because of their engagement in dialogue they could come to reorganize how they understand the world. Unfortunately, we cannot make this happen. We can increase the possibility for change by putting ourselves in situations where we are likely to bump up against a different worldview but this is a conscious choice. The change I am referring to is in personal, working, or professional relationships where there is not a demand to change and people are not voluntarily signing up for change opportunities. It may be admirable to say or think people "should" change but there is either no incentive or ability to make a fundamental shift in worldviews.

Emergent Properties of Human Activity

Wertsch (1995) proposes a lens that is more comprehensive and incorporative of the complexity of human relations. He suggests a lens of antimony of the individual and cultural setting. That is, the inherent contradiction that exists between apparently valid principles of the individual (agent) and society (structure) can be understood as "dialectically interacting moments" (p. 60). According to Wertsch, we can consider human interaction as aspects of individuals' mental functioning and aspects of sociocultural norms. Kegan (1994) describes this dialectical lens as transcending or objecting systemic knowing—more than exposing and questioning one's ideology or the expectation that others will engage in a similar process—actually being able to transcend it—reformulating being. Kegan contends that reformulation is a mental and social demand of holding similarities and differences simultaneously, to make connections between whole systems of thought, which will most likely yield knowledge different from the properties of individual parts. Beilin (1992) depicts this emergent knowing construction between systems of thought with the analogy of sodium and chlorine which are toxic substances but when combined make sodium chloride, a non-toxic substance necessary for most animal life. Beilin argues, "This is another way of saying that two systems, each with discrete properties, when combined, create a new system with emergent properties" (p. 10). Beilin's analogy illustrates the unknown emergent properties of human interactions and the necessity of observing what happens in "the doing" of human activity because we cannot predict with any reasonable

claims what new emergent ways of being together will look like. Grigoriu's (1998) socioemotional explication of Kegan's theory goes further in recognizing the dynamics of emotion in making transformation happen in human interactions. Emotion is fundamental to how transformation occurs because it is what drives meaning making that occurs between cognition and emotion on a structural level with emotion experienced in the present. One of the first steps in reorienting ourselves to change expectations is moving beyond speaking in terms of "what people think" and "how people feel" as if these were two isolated operations. Generally, emotion is treated as something about us that is unstable and gets in the way of rational thought. However, more and more psychologists and physiological scientists are realizing the necessity of emotion in rational thought. Damasio (1994) contends that rational thought cannot occur without emotion. Emotion is how we come to value something and we make decisions on what we value. We can begin to reformulate being in relation, or human interactions, by asking critical questions as we go along and paying attention to socioemotional cues: how might we be uncovering hidden interests, fears, or vulnerabilities, what is the interaction between what we value and want to protect, what are strengths and limitations of our perspective taking in relation and interpretations for meaning, what are our needs to maintain our sense of self in relation, identity with a group or groups with competing interests? This reflective process is ambiguous and demands that we see conflict as an opportunity to change—not just mentally shifting gears—but to see and use conflict as an opportunity for reformulating or re-organizing our relationship to the expectation of change.

To appreciate the challenge of seeing conflict as an opportunity for change, consider the implications from a developmental perspective. Adults spend a considerable amount of time and energy establishing and maintaining a worldview or commitment to a way of knowing and being. Development in adulthood is about "sealing up" within such an "institution" in Kegan's terms (1994). For example, this self-authorization of one's institution is an unstated theoretical assumption of self-directed learning—there is an expectation that people will take the initiative or take charge of their lives. A different way of looking at this would be to ask, "What self does one bring to a learning situation?" or "What selves are brought to learning situations?" Questions from this angle appreciate and respect the hard work that most adults accomplish to some degree. That is, our "psychological surround" as adults becomes more sophisticated and complex and at the same time, most likely, more rigid (Grigoriu, 1998). Threats to maintaining our "rules of life" are or can be intense and acutely affect the quality, direction, and outcome of human exchanges to change something about how we know others, come to know others, and solve problems.

Reorienting ourselves happens in the activity of human interactions. Kegan and Lahey (2001) contend that a reorientation to change is difficult (if not impossible in some situations) because of hidden interests or competing commitments. Competing commitments play out in baffling ways because of the inconsistencies in what people say they value and how they actually interact and behave with others. However, when we can collectively uncover and be appreciative of committing commitments, then we have a better chance as a group to bring about necessary changes to live and thrive together.

These two explications of reorientation are about aligning ourselves differently to what we think should happen, what people should do, and how they should do it. In one study by Schusler and Decker (2001), people in a community with competing resource interests, convened to collaboratively create a plan to thrive as a community of users. Through a deliberative process people became aware of other interests and reasons for values underlying strong commitments. Collectively, people did not necessarily change their fundamental positions but most people,

because they engaged in this process, changed their attitudes about other people's opposing interests. Some were able to realize and express that they would have the same values as those were their interests, some were able to hold both theirs' and others' interests simultaneously and generate possibilities of co-habiting without giving up fundamental positions. Others were unable to engage in collaborative relations. But non-cooperation by some did not thwart the process from happening. This case illuminates the notion that reorientation is not treating everything and everyone the same. If we as practitioners organize a learning activity, letting the meaning evolve in the doing—Beilin's idea of emergent properties—and anticipate that what gets negotiated will probably not look like most of the original notions, ideas, beliefs, positions of those who engage in human activity.

When A Change-Oriented Process Breaks Down

Recognizing the mental and social demands it takes to be a good facilitator or team member or instructor illuminates reasons why the process often breaks down. Break downs or arriving at an impasse are usually difficult to comprehend because we either cannot understand how or why the other parties could possibly hold inexplicable views, or, even if we can understand the why, we have difficulty understanding how to change a downward direction in the process. Or, we may think we are on the same playing field only to find that obviously we are not even playing the same game. A breakdown in human interactions is also difficult to make sense of when we do not understand why the other party's proposal or behavior bothers us so much.

When we treat human exchanges as the same for everyone, that is, there are no distinct delineations in how people process information or social interactions, it leads to frustration and break down in communication and the ability to move forward. The greatest potential for breakdown occurs when hidden interests are in the process of being uncovered. This is the place of the greatest threat to our vulnerabilities. Uncovering hidden interests refers to uncovering our own as well as others' needs and objectives. It is difficult, if not impossible, to completely uncover hidden interests because we are both subject to what we do not know and can object about what we do know.

Reorientation Framework

In some regards we do not have control over that which we do not know. However, there are ways that we could come to know through the reflection of our experiences. Reflection that would allow us to reorient may not seem possible during the actual activity of interactions and exchanges; however, it is possible when people learn to consciously think about and pay attention to emotional cues during their live interactions with people. For example, being skillful in the following suggestions can be ways of reorienting ourselves to situations in the activity of human interactions. These suggestions are based on the assumptions outlined above a) emergent properties of a collaborative happen in a process of socioemotional exchanges, b) appreciating the sincerity of commitment to well established contextual worldviews in social interactions, and c) the potential breakdown in the activity of human interactions—the space between where change is most likely to take place, if it does: Learning to ask, “What is this about?” because this helps to get at our limitations of perspective-taking and how we use emotion in the process. Asking this question helps us to realize what is at stake psychologically for other people or groups of people. What is it that either others or we feel threatened of losing or giving up and have a need to protect?

Related to psychological threats is learning what are our fears. There are two primary ways to go about this: what is the fear of losing self-boundaries and/or losing the relationship? If we fear losing the boundaries we are establishing with other people, we will probably feel quite threatened until we have internalized boundaries to the point where we experience them as secure and stable.

Asking questions to uncover hidden interests such as “What emotional cues am I aware of for myself and for others (e.g., Does someone talk in terms of mutuality or maintaining boundaries)?” “What is important to me and the other person (people) (e.g., Does someone seem to have a high need to be recognized for what they have to offer? Do I have a need to maintain my ‘rules’ because I fear getting lost in the process?)”. Paying attention to other people’s demonstration of irritation, anger, impatience, for example, requires the ability to read emotional cues and how people use their emotion to make sense of what is happening around them. By paying attention to emotional cues to understand how people might be using emotion helps us uncover hidden interests.

Related to how people use their emotion in various evolutionary places of being is the role of emotion in how people come to understand their world. As mentioned earlier, emotion is treated as something about us that is unstable and gets in the way of rational thought. But rational thought is possible because of emotion. Emotion is how we come to value something and we make decisions on what we value. Understanding how people use their emotion tells us a lot about what they value.

Learning to uncover needs means ascertaining where people are situated in the need to maintain their sense of self, identity within a group, or their group’s identity, and keeping the relationship (are there undifferentiated boundaries, striving to maintain clear boundaries, or a comfortableness with risking the relationship?). Knowing what is underneath people’s needs tells us a lot about what is important to them, where they are most likely to get stuck, and how we might support those needs while changing the direction of our dialogical and behavioral exchanges. The ability to reflect on what pushes our buttons and those of others helps to uncover hidden interests because we have a way to learn what is really important to us and what we will strive to maintain.

The ultimate goal of reorienting is working towards a comfortableness with ambiguity in “the doing” or activity of human interactions within the conceptual framework of Rogoff’s plane of interpersonal or guided participation. Reorientation is about recognizing conflict or competing interests as an opportunity for emergent properties of human activity.

Implications

This paper explains implicit and explicit theoretical assumptions of change in learning theories, interpretation of assumptions in action or practice, and an emerging redefinition of change in people’s exchanges evidenced through their action and interactions by using activity theory and meaning making theories to uncover a more expanded, integrated understanding of our expectations of change in learning to navigate the interpersonal relationships we encounter in practically every aspect of our lives.

Examples of relating to change expectations and challenges are explored and analyzed by considering learning activities or “in the doing” as a window to understand something about how people are likely to change or learn. I believe it is worth the struggle of mentally wrapping our heads around an idea to re-think or reconstruct how we have come to understand adult learning

theories and our assumptions and expectations for change. So that we are not struggling so hard all the time to teach, instruct, persuade, train, educate.

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