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Sangok Park
Pennsylvania State University, USA

Fred M. Schied
Pennsylvania State University, USA

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The Limits of Dewey's Philosophy: Cultural Historical Activity Theory and Experience

Sangok Park and Fred M. Schied
Pennsylvania State University, USA

Abstract: This paper argues that activity theory, specifically cultural historical activity theory (CHAT), has explored the concepts of mediation, tools, signs, and appropriation as a means to overcome the inherent dualism in Dewey's theory of experience and learning.

Introduction

That social context is central to learning has become generally accepted in discussions of learning in adulthood. From this perspective, learning is understood to be an everyday event that is social in nature in which knowledge is socially constructed and situated in a particular context (e.g. Kilgore, 2001; Welton, 2001; Newman, 1999; Lave, 1991).

John Dewey is the theorist who first examined the importance of experience in the context of learning. Although Dewey had no specific theory of adult education, his thinking has had a profound influence on the entire field and most adult educators have emphasized the fundamental role experience plays in learning in adulthood (e.g. Finger & Asun, 2001; Brookfield, 1987; Knowles, 1980, Lindeman 1961). The paper argues that Dewey's theory is inadequate in fully explaining the central importance of social context. The problem is that Dewey's ideas cannot overcome the dualism between the individual and society. The limit of Dewey's theory is that he doesn't suggest what the mediation between the individual and the society is, even though he emphasizes the interaction between the two. Thus as Engstrom & Miettinen (1999) have pointed out, the problem with Dewey's theory is the almost total absence of the process of cultural mediation. We contend that activity theory, specifically cultural historical activity theory (CHAT), has explored the concepts of mediation, tools, signs, and appropriation as a means to overcome the inherent dualism in Dewey. Thus CHAT has made it possible for us to understand the internal and essential connection between the individual and society.

The Meaning of Experience in Dewey's Philosophy of Education

Dewey's philosophy of education rested on the meaning of experience. Dewey argued that there is an organic connection between education and personal experience. Dewey (1923, 1938) challenged traditional education, which he argued is an imposition from above and from outside. Dewey rejected the transmission of knowledge of the past as the endpoint of education and only emphasized its importance as a means. Dewey tried to discover the connection between what actually exists within experience and between the achievements of the past and the issues of the present. His purpose was to ascertain how knowledge of the past might be translated into a potent instrumentality for dealing effectively with the future. Dewey stated that "education is a development within, by, and for experience" (Dewey, 1938, p. 17). By this he meant that not all of experience is educative, only a portion. Furthermore, it is only by means of experience, by interacting with one's environment, that a person becomes educated. The goal of education, its ultimate payoff, is not higher scores on this or that test, nor is it increased feelings of self-esteem or the development of psychological powers of this or that kind, nor is it preparation for a future

vocation. Instead, the true goal of education, is richer and fuller experiencing; the ever-expanding capacity to appreciate more fully the living present.

In developing a theory in order that education may be intelligently conducted and built on the basis of experience, Dewey concentrated on two aspects that provided the measure of the educative significance: the principle of continuity and the principle of interaction. According to Dewey (1938), the two principles are not separate from each other. The principle of continuity is the longitudinal aspect of experience and interaction is the lateral aspect of experience. The principle of continuity is involved “in every attempt to discriminate between experiences that are worth while educationally and those that are not” (Dewey, 1938, p. 24). Every experience lives on in further experiences. Hence the central problem of an education based upon experience is to select the kind of present experiences that live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences. Of course, students in traditional education have experiences. But traditional education offers the wrong experiences in that experiences without connection are not linked to further experiences. As Dewey states, “The principle of continuity of experience means that every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after” (Dewey, 1938, p. 27).

In addition to the concept of continuity of experience, Dewey focuses on “growth, or growing” in order to get at the basis of discriminating among experiences. Thus the educative process can be identified with growth. However, growth might take many different directions, and growth itself is not enough. We must specify the direction in which growth takes place, the end towards which it tends. Dewey argued that criterion of education as growing should be universally applicable, not specialized and limited to a particular line. Dewey (1938) notes “experience doesn’t occur in a vacuum” (p. 34). Experience does not occur simply inside a person. There are sources outside an individual that give rise to experience and external conditions always affect educational experiences.

The category of interaction addresses the situated character of experience. It says that there is always some kind of interchange occurring between us as organisms and our environment. We act upon the world and the world acts upon us. This interactive condition in which we find ourselves and in which we participate forms the situation we currently inhabit. Moreover, a crucial set of elements within that interactive mix includes all that we bring to the situation in the way of knowledge, needs, purposes, interests, the residue of past experience, our readiness to respond in this way or that, and so forth. According to Dewey (1938), interaction assigns “equal rights to both factors in experience-object and internal conditions” (pp. 38-39). Also, he says, “any normal experience is an interplay of these two sets of conditions. Taken together, or in their interaction, they form what we call a situation” (p. 39). As a result, the individuals always live in “the series of situation” (p. 41), and the conceptions of situation and of interaction are inseparable from each other. Thus, as experience continues, further experience (or growth), creates new situations through the interaction with the environment. Every experience influences the objective conditions under which further experiences occur and are influenced by objective conditions.

The Contributions and Limits of Dewey’s Philosophy of Education

For Dewey, internal and objective conditions are inseparable from each other. Thus a central contribution of Dewey is the idea that in order to understand education and learning we must see the connection between the individual and society. For Dewey education should be explained by the active participation of the individual in objective conditions, and by the

integration of the individual and society. Finger & Asun (2001) argue that “Dewey’s philosophy of education is anthropological in nature: it built on the specific learning capacities of the human species, from which Dewey then derives his optimistic view of the development process, which he calls ‘growth’” (p. 31). For Dewey, learning is always part of a larger anthropological growth process, any problems occurring during this process are learning opportunities, and what is good for the individual human being is necessarily good for the human species and vice versa. Education plays a key role when it comes to advancing the processes of humanization, development, and growth. Dewey (1897) argued:

I believe that all education proceeds by the participation of the individual in the social consciousness of the race. This process begins unconsciously almost at birth, and is continually shaping the individual’s powers, saturating his consciousness, forming his habits, training his ideas, and arousing his feelings and emotions. Through this unconscious education the individual gradually comes to share in the intellectual and moral resources which humanity has succeeded in getting together. He becomes an inheritor of the funded capital of civilization.

Accordingly, democracy is instrumental in this process of unlimited growth. Humans become habituated to their environment by having experiences in it. This habituation produces habits, which are ways of looking at things through values, beliefs and world views. Habits, in turn, translate into actions, in which new experiences are made. Thus, the more open the culture, the more open and dynamic the habits. Open cultures enhance the capacity to learn from experience, and the potential to transform the environment according to human needs. As a result, Dewey makes the link between education and democracy; education is not simply a technique or a content, rather, it is a means to further the process of humanization in a democratic way.

When Dewey suggests that the principles of continuity and interaction are central to experience, he does not mean that an individual as subject is separable from objects. The term “a series of situations” shows the Dewey’s idea for overcoming the dualism. Every experience of the individual “influences in some degree the objective conditions under which further experiences are had” (Dewey, 1938, p. 30). Through experiences (or activities), the individual creates a new situation in which further experiences will exist. For Dewey (1938), the principle of experience determines “the ultimate foundation for the utilization of activities” (p. 105) in education. Also, the individual as the subject of experience is inseparable from the objects because his or her experiences are influenced by the situations and create new situations for further experiences. Thus Dewey’s work can be regarded as transcending the dualisms between thought and activity, theory and practice, facts and values, subject and object. On this point, the ideas of Dewey have much in common with the theoretical aims of activity theory (Engestrom & Miettinen, 1999). Dewey (as quoted in Engestrom & Miettinen, 1999) argues as following:

It means that knowing is literally something which we do; that analysis is ultimately physical and active; that meanings in their logical quality are standpoints, attitudes and methods of behaving toward facts, and that active experimentation is essential to verification. (Dewey, 1916b, p. 331) Thus the object of knowledge is practical in the sense that it depends upon a specific kind of practice for its existence. (p. 334)

However, there still exists a dualism in Dewey’s theory. Dewey (1897) believed that educational process has two elements-one psychological and one sociological. Of these two, the psychological is more influential. The child’s own instincts and powers furnish the material and are the starting point for all education. Dewey sees the individual as stemming from internal

conditions and the environment as stemming from external conditions, although he emphasizes the interaction between both.

The reason why Dewey's idea seems to a dualism, even though he tries to overcome it, is that he stresses the interaction between internal and objective conditions, but does not suggest what connects the two. Dewey does not suggest how society is internally related to individual. In this point, it is possible to criticize Dewey's idea for the same reason as the contextualist approach. Contextualism also avows a dialectical view of psychological process that integrates the individual into the social milieu, but the individual is still seen as the preexisting and external to the society, in the same way with Dewey's idea.

The limit of Dewey's idea is that it doesn't suggest what the mediation between the individual and the society is, even though Dewey emphasizes the relationship between both. In other words, Dewey stresses the interaction between the individual and society that exists independently, because he does not explain what internally connects the two. Thus Dewey's idea can be seen as the dualism. Activity theory offers a way to overcome the limits of Dewey's idea. Activity theory has developed the concept of the mediation, tools, signs, appropriation, and so on. This cultural-historical theory of activity has made it possible for us to understand the internal and essential connection between individual and society.

Activity Theory as a New Approach to Learning

The cultural historical tradition in the field of psychology centers on human development of culture and the ways in which humankind's fundamental psychological structures have developed in interaction with culture. The central point in this approach is that psychological factors can only be understood in historical perspective and in interaction with the cultural environment. This point can be seen as similar to Dewey's. However, the cultural historical tradition suggests not only that the two interact, but also what internally connects the two. In the cultural historical approach, humankind's interaction with the environment is characterized by the key concept of activity. Through activity, the individual acquires the cultural conditions that he or she is a part of, and at the same time influences cultural development within the society.

Activity theory is an interdisciplinary approach to human sciences that originated in cultural historical psychology initiated by Vygotsky, Leont'ev, and Luria. It takes the object-oriented, artifact-mediated collective activity system as its unit of analysis, thus bridging the gulf between the individual subject and the societal structure (Engestrom, Miettinen, & Punamki, 1999). Activity as "a specific form of the societal existence of humans consisting of purposeful changing of natural and social reality" (Davydov, 1999, p. 39) exists "in both collective and individual forms when a person acts as a generic social being" (p. 41). Humans can't be isolated from culture and society. Artifacts mediate human activity and humans fulfill their needs and purpose by using artifacts, which are tools that have evolved throughout human history. Mediation by tools and signs is not merely a psychological concept. It is an idea that breaks down the Cartesian walls that isolate the individual mind from culture and society (Engestrom, 1999).

Tolman (1999, pp. 71-73) shows the societal nature of humans through the example of the beater in the primitive hunt. He argues that the individual human's societal nature emerges in conscious divisions of labor in human society. "Survival in the strictest is impossible for individual members of our species on their absolute own" (p. 72), and "the emergence of action as a coordinated part of social activity performed by an individual must be accompanied by a shared meaning of the action that is reflected consciously by the actor" (p. 73).

In his or her activity, the individual make use of various tools, which are not simply material instruments and devices but also include language, social conventions, knowledge, theories, and so on. And “man’s activity can have a structure that is created by given social conditions and the relations between people engendered by them.” (Illeris, 2002, p. 49) Activity theory makes the societal nature of the individual clear. It is important conceptual frame to explain a societal process of learning. Activity theory shows that learning has social and cultural dimensions beyond the cognitive and psychological. It goes beyond the explanation of learning as simply being interaction between the individual and the world of objects, as Dewey emphasized. In order to overcome Dewey and contextualist accounts of learning, the concept of ‘appropriation’ in activity theory needs to be discussed.

Leont’ev defines appropriation as “maturing ... the experience accumulated by mankind in the course of social history” (Leont’ev, 1981, p. 419). Tolman, (1999, p. 74) states: “Development cannot be fully understood in terms of the acquisition of adaptive behaviors. It is not reducible to biological adaptation or to any form of adaptive behavior, but supersedes adaptation as a specifically human mode of dealing with and living in the world. Appropriation results in “the individual’s reproduction of historically formed human capacities and functions, and the capacities and functions formed in the course of this are psychological new formations” (Leont’ev, 1981, p. 296). Appropriation of societal information, “reflecting an evolutionary new process linked to the new societal nature of the human species”, is “a developmental process in which the individual is drawn into societal practice; at the same time, a societal process by which new psychological formations are developed” (Tolman, 1999, p. 74).

It was this sort of thinking that was expressed in Vygotsky’s term zone of proximal development. Vygotsky bases his work on the concept that all human activities take place in a cultural context with many levels of interactions, shared beliefs values, knowledge, skills, structured relationships, and symbol systems. These interactions and activities are mediated through the use of tools, either technical or psychological, provided by the culture (Hansman, 2001). Engeström comes closer to the mark when he describes this zone as the “distance between the everyday actions of individuals and the historically new form of societal activity that can be collectively generated as a solution to the double bind potentially embedded in ... everyday actions” (Engestrom, 1987, p. 174).

Conclusion

Activity theory shows us the cultural and historical nature of human’s activity mediated by tools and signs, and then bridges the gap between the individual subject and the societal structure. Also, activity theory explains development and learning as a societal process of appropriating historical experience in the form of actions and meanings. In the end, through the explanations of cultural and societal processes that internally connect the individual with society, activity theory overcomes the dualism between the individual and the society and Dewey’s idea that just emphasizes the interaction between the both.

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