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What Does “Transformation of Participation” Mean in a University Classroom? Exploring University Pedagogy with the Tools of Cultural Historical Theory

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One of the prerequisites of professional programs is that the world of work is brought into contact with powerful concepts that help practitioners interpret and act on problems of practice in usefully informed ways. When university-based teachers engage with practitioners from worlds with which they are also familiar, they aim at achieving an interplay between the field of practice and useful concepts through evidence-based conversations. These conversations can ratchet up conceptualizations of the field and allow informed scrutiny of everyday responses to problems of practice. However, when the field of practice is poorly understood, achieving a productive interplay is more difficult. In this chapter, we identify such a problem, in this case arising when teaching a course in a national culture we did not know. We then discuss how ideas from Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) helped us build a basis of shared knowledge with students that could act as a springboard for their learning.

As teachers in higher educational settings, our concern is to help students on professional courses transform their participation in the activities of their academic and professional communities (Rogoff, 1995, 2003; Rogoff, Mistry, Göncü, & Mosier, 1993; Rogoff et al., 2007). The analytic resources of CHAT concepts have allowed a systematic reflection on our work. They have led to some suggestions for making relevant professional courses, so that local practices may connect with or raise questions about the global, where the global is represented by the powerful explanatory concepts offered by the course. In this concern we were mindful of the need to avoid intellectual colonialism. Instead, we wanted to create learning spaces where concepts could be tested as potentially useful tools in detailed examinations of local conditions.

The teaching context was a unit of study as part of a Masters of education in early childhood. It had previously been offered on campus at an Australian university and was being launched in distance mode in Singapore, a country
neither of us knew well. The unit was one of three specialized early childhood units offered in combination with units focused on educational leadership. On this occasion, it was the first unit in which the students enrolled as part of their course. The course was designed in thirteen-week terms with four to five weeks of independent study, four days of intensive face-to-face interaction, and then four to five weeks of continued independent study. The readings for this unit asked students to consider tensions between local and global contexts of childhood and the ways adults’ conceptions or images of children affect opportunities for learning, including the type and organization of activities through which children learn. The unit assignments asked students to present images of children and childhood found in some domain of children’s lives in their local context and then to research the kinds of activities in which children participate with adults in that context. During the research they were to employ CHAT-based concepts from the unit.

Students read about learning as transformation and about how the images of children and childhood that adults hold may have different affordances for early childhood educational practice (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999). They were also introduced to historical analysis and provided with concepts to help them examine how childhood was constructed in different historical eras. At a conceptual level the unit required students to analyze learning and development employing concepts such as mediation and tool use across multiple, interrelated levels (e.g., historical contexts, institutional settings and contexts, interpersonal relations, and individual understandings, actions, and characteristics). They were also helped to see learning and development as a dynamic process of transformation as individuals become increasingly capable of using and transforming the tools and material resources of their cultural community that they initially see others use (Rogoff, 2003).

The unit of study represented some of the tensions between local and global interests in higher education, not least because the four students following it were paying a high tuition fee for an international product offered through a Singaporean school of business and management, which was selling the intellectual property we had generated in a faculty of education in Australia. For example, the management school recruited students by marketing the degree on the grounds of the status we conferred as international scholars. However, our very status as scholars from outside Singapore meant we were not familiar with local contexts.

We interpreted the challenge of making what we brought to Singapore relevant to local circumstances through the analytic tools of CHAT. The topic of the unit was “contexts of childhood,” and because of the way the course had been developed in Australia, the initial frame of reference offered to
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the students in Singapore was derived from content local to Australia. We gathered examples of children interacting in everyday contexts in the region of Australia where we were working and compiled a CD-ROM that presented the local examples together with quotations from the readings and questions to guide their reflections.

Examples included video clips of children engaged in preparing food with an adult or sorting through groceries to put them in their proper places in the pantry. These clips provided concrete examples from which to discuss the different ways adults structure learning interactions, ranging from task-oriented language (such as language focused on how to get the roti the right shape for dinner rather than on teaching about shapes as concepts) to directed, language-rich instructional discourse (such as “what shapes are these cookies?” Or asking how a child knew where to put groceries).

The students were then asked to research and present parallel examples of the theoretical concepts in use in early childhood settings from their own local contexts. As a consequence we taught each other about our different environments using unifying conceptual tools to bridge across the contexts and constructing a more global understanding through a shared theoretical frame.

The students drew on the knowledge they brought to the unit to create a shared fund of knowledge as a resource for staff members and students. For example, one student with a professional background in advertising used the images of childhood we had discussed to analyze advertisements from the past and from different magazines with different target audiences to explore how children were represented. She brought her prior experiences of analyzing advertisements for gender bias to examining images of children in advertising while still incorporating the intellectual tools of discourse, historical setting, and so on. In presenting her analysis to the class, she taught the authors about the local Singaporean context, and drawing on her understanding of advertising, she helped her peers reinterpret their local contexts using the common language of course concepts combined with expertise developed in her prior professional work.

The unit of study also represented a time of transition at the personal, professional, institutional, and national levels for us, for the students, and for the host institution. As relatively new and probationary faculty, we were making the transition from graduate student to professor and at the same time learning to teach in an unfamiliar context. The students, we soon learned, were not predominantly early childhood professionals, as we had expected. Three were moving on from previous occupations as homemakers or business professionals (marketing and engineering), and only one was working in early childhood settings. At the institutional level, this was a new unit of study.
and part of an emerging collaboration between the business school and the university in which we worked in Australia.

The two nations were also in transition in the field of early education – with Singapore enthusiastically seeking to develop a higher education-based infrastructure in early childhood education at the same time as Australia was severely cutting back on investment in its own early years higher educational infrastructure. As a result of all these transitions and multiple layers of context, there were often competing discourses that made learning both complex and potentially rich.

In analyzing the situation we begin by describing how the CHAT concepts of guided participation, activity, and community (Rogoff, 1995) were useful to us in planning for and understanding the interpersonal dynamics of learning in the environments we have described. We then explain how the concepts of common knowledge and relational expertise (Edwards, 2010) provided analytic tools for understanding the changes we saw in ourselves and the students. We finally reflect on our experiences overall and the impact they have had on developing an ethical approach to teaching and learning that made the global relevant to the local through a sensitivity to the purposes and priorities of cultures inhabited by the students.

Guided Participation

In considering how to be mediators of what matters in society across a distance and without direct access to the society in which the students would be working, we found Rogoff’s writing about guided participation particularly useful. It occurs as:

[...]he events of everyday life as individuals engage with others and with materials and arrangements collaboratively managed by themselves and others. It includes direct interaction with others as well as engaging in or avoiding activities assigned, made possible, or constrained by others, whether or not they are in each other’s presence or even know of each other’s existence. Guided participation may be tacit or explicit, face-to-face or distal, involved in shared endeavors with specific familiar people or distant unknown individuals or groups – peers as well as experts, neighbors as well as distant heroes, siblings as well as ancestors…. Participation requires engagement in some aspect of the meaning of shared endeavors, but not necessarily in symmetrical or even joint action. (1995, p. 147, emphases added)

This way of describing learning activity encouraged us to look for (a) how individuals contribute to understanding each other, which Rogoff terms mutual bridging of meanings and Edwards describes as the building of common
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knowledge (Edwards, 2010); (b) how individuals coordinate their activity in participating together, which Rogoff calls mutual structuring of participation and Edwards terms the exercise of relational expertise; and (c) the purposes of activities from the perspectives of all the participants, remembering that “activity is directed, not random or without a purpose” (Rogoff, 1995, p. 148).

Activity

According to CHAT approaches, learning and development are best understood in the context of meaningful joint activity. In this view, we can misrepresent and misunderstand if we attempt to examine components of activity without regard for the intertwining of contexts, public meaning, and personal sense making. Rogoff explains:

The use of “activity” or “event” as the unit of analysis – with active and dynamic contributions from individuals, their social partners, and historical traditions and materials and their transformations – allows a reformulation of the relation between individual and social and cultural environment in which each is inherently involved in the others’ definition. (1995, p. 110)

For example, although reading could be seen as an individual or solitary activity, Rogoff’s approach suggests that during reading a student engages with the author as well as historical traditions mediated by the educator through direct and indirect means. Consequently, the reader is actively involved in making personal sense of public understandings. We used these ideas to design a multimodal resource that supported the students’ learning.

We designed an electronic study guide that directed students to excerpts from the readings and asked them to relate the ideas they contained to their own experiences and contexts. This was important because few of the readings examined the particular contexts of childhood in Singapore. Nonetheless, they contained theoretical constructs for analyzing how specific features of childhood in one context might relate to features of childhood in others, that is, to bring into dual focus the local and the global. We prompted students to reflect on their own experiences in relation to the extracts. In this way, we directed their sense making by highlighting particular elements; while also leaving possibilities for students to engage with the questions raised elsewhere in the readings. The study guide required students to create reports of their responses to the extracts and to the prompts given to guide their reading. The intention was that they would bring the reports to face-to-face meetings, when the authors were in Singapore, as texts for discussion and/or post them to the relevant web-based discussion forum prior to the meetings.
Another way educators in higher education contribute to mutual bridging of meanings in the activity of reading is by sharing examples of data to complement ideas in the readings. Many of the readings for the unit referred to patterns of interaction between children and between adults and children that were difficult to imagine when working solely from textual descriptions; but few commercially produced videos exist to illustrate the patterns of interaction described. We, therefore, included video examples from our research in Australia and provided prompts to help students relate the video examples to their readings and local contexts. The video clips presented examples of children’s everyday experiences across diverse Australian settings. Prompts included directing students to identify components of the activity, based on theoretical constructs from the readings, and asking them to reflect on the kinds of activities children in Singapore might experience and how those activities might compare with the activities portrayed in the video examples.

The study guide and the prompted data sharing provided students with strategies for making sense of complex material, while learning at a distance from the providing university. In addition, the intention was to create opportunities for students to exercise their personal agency in deciding how to structure their participation in the activities provided. We asked students to keep a log of their thoughts about the material and to share the log with classmates and with us as they saw fit. We had also hoped the students would be able to contribute to and adjust the design of the technology in a process of co-construction. However, flexible technology that could be used easily in dynamic ways across a distance was not available to us at that time. We were therefore restricted to CD-ROM technology (Auld & Tonyan, 2006) to distribute the electronic study guide. Nonetheless, we hoped the study guide could be redesigned during face-to-face sessions with students, using examples they identified themselves for their assignments. Unfortunately, the students were not interested in redesigning the technology; but instead chose to structure their participation by presenting their ideas and examples in the form of technology they all knew well already: PowerPoint presentations.

Persistently, we continued with our intention of redressing what we saw as the imbalance of a knowledge flow predominantly from faculty members to course participants. We therefore structured the face-to-face sessions to achieve a shift from more expert-guided to more student-guided interactions. Sessions early in the unit were designed around guided joint exploration of the texts, whereas later sessions involved students bringing the extracts and images they had been selecting and gathering to create a new set of examples they would organize and structure themselves. The final face-to-face session
involved the students presenting drafts of what would be their presentation assignment where students and faculty were the audience.

Mutual structuring of participation was also incorporated into assessments by our designing tasks that focused on students examining teaching and learning processes. The assignment guidelines and marking criteria privileged critique and deconstruction of the contexts and activities that adults designed for children. The guidelines and criteria also indicated some of the theoretical concepts to be used in the analysis of contexts and activities. The students decided how to use those concepts in the context of their chosen topic, with assistance provided during face-to-face sessions. This structured support appeared useful in setting expectations, as all the students were able to use ideas from the unit to analyze and understand aspects of their own local contexts by the time they completed their final assignment.

Communities

From the beginning of the program we did not profess to be creating a community of practice. Nonetheless, we had anticipated entering a professional community when we planned the Singapore experience. We drew on Rogoff’s view of communities as “groups of people who have some common and continuing organization, values, and understanding, history, and practices” (2003, p. 80). In Melbourne, all Australian students enrolled in the course were practicing early childhood professionals, with only a few students enrolling to change from one profession to another. Therefore, we expected the enduring Singapore community from which the relatively temporary groups of students would be drawn would be an overarching early childhood community (Fleer et al., 2006). We understood the early childhood community in any cultural environment to involve professionals trying to accomplish the care and education of young children. These communities would be marked by: some stability of involvement as regulated by government bodies and professional organizations; attention to the ways they relate to each other in terms of government regulations and professional standards; and traditions that transcend individuals as curricula are adopted and changed. In most countries, training is provided by institutions; governments or regulating bodies manage accreditation; and certification is required for participation.

However, we soon found that the model we have just outlined was not matched by what we found in this case. In Singapore, the students did not see themselves as participating in a community of early childhood educators. Instead, they saw themselves as planning to participate in the community of early childhood practitioners, mostly in the role of directors of early
childhood centers. Their resistance to our intentions to engage them in the wider community obliged us to broaden our sense of what participation in communities meant and raised questions about how to maintain the focus on learning to engage in practices with historical legacies and meanings that might link individuals together into meaningful groups or communities.

Although we did not recognize it at the time, we had created a space where “common knowledge” (Edwards, 2010) could be exercised. Edwards argues that when people from different practices come together to work on a shared problem, their interactions are mediated by knowledge held in common and that knowledge consists of “what matters,” that is, the motives that give shape to action in activities in those practices, in each of the contributing practices. In the unit we are discussing, common knowledge was built by revealing what mattered in the different practices that informed it by applying the analytic resources of CHAT to local Singaporean practices and to the practices in the Australian video clips. Our reflections on how we met the challenges of bringing local practices into broad conceptualizations of practice suggest we created what Edwards has called “emergent, flexible configurations of practices” (2010, p. 29).

Conceptualizing the unit in this way has the potential to offer a vision more generally for professional courses in higher education. In the context of the temporary, but potentially “emergent, flexible” groups of people who find themselves together in higher education courses, educators can work toward first establishing shared understanding of conceptual tools and then engage in working with and on them. These shared tools subsequently become the means to understand the practices participants have come from and those they are hoping to either enter or inform once the course ends.

**Research Projects as a Way of Practicing Expertise**

We also reflected on the reconfiguring of understanding that arose for ourselves and the students during processes of sense making. Following the CHAT line taken by Edwards (2010), we see learning as involving working on problems using concepts that allow us to enhance our understanding of the problem and how we might respond to it. Edwards has used the terminology of activity theory, which sees an “object of activity” as a problem space at which energy is directed. She has explained learning as follows: “transforming the object of activity through acting on it and seeing it differently,” for example, “revealing more of the meanings inherent in a task” (Edwards & D’Arcy, 2004, p. 148).

The call for pedagogy as “enhancing [students’] disposition to engage with and transform features of their worlds” (Edwards & D’Arcy, 2004, p. 147) resonated...
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The assignments for the unit provided evidence that students were seeing increased complexity and transforming features of their worlds. The digital study guide we produced and the organization of the face-to-face sessions were planned to help students learn about the intellectual tools, internalize them, and begin to act with them on unit tasks. The first assignment asked them to formally externalize their understandings of those tools by finding images of children and childhood in their local context, analyzing them using the intellectual tools that were the topic of the unit, and presenting the analyzed images to us during the face-to-face sessions. The second assignment asked students to research a local context designed for children, interview key stakeholders, and use concepts from the course to understand the evidence generated. Both assignments, originally developed by our colleague Marilyn Fleer, encouraged the development of students’ ability to see a new complexity in previously unremarkable aspects of their local environment (e.g., advertisements, the organization of parks or spaces, the design of clothing).

The common knowledge built over the unit brought together students’ prior expertise, their interpretations of local contexts, evidence from Australia, and conceptual tools from CHAT. That knowledge then became a resource for the whole group and for us as educators to be used to expand understanding of previously taken for granted phenomena.

A CHAT approach to learning also highlights the dialectic of individual internalization and externalization. The assignments, for example, aimed at capturing the students’ externalization of course concepts in the worlds in which they were to be working. To find local images of children and childhood, which they saw as historically and culturally situated representations embedded in local practices, the students had to internalize a set of intellectual tools. Subsequently presenting their analyses of images to us and to each other involved externalizing their analyses using these tools. Each presentation involved matching examples of the ideas from the assigned readings with their own interpretations and relating these to local examples. In the resulting PowerPoint presentations they worked with globally recognized theoretical ideas to understand local conditions and practices and then related the local back to the global to understand the implications for theory and practice.

Face-to-face sessions provided the first steps in what we now see as encouraging students to build common knowledge which, in turn, we were able to connect to global analyses of early childhood education and care. For example, one student examined advertisements for early childhood programs in Singapore specifically to understand how the programs positioned children in the
Advertisements. In response to his presentation, the class discussed the intellectual and cultural origin of the programs. The discussion considered the extent to which Singapore programs highlighted Western philosophies and curricula (e.g., Montessori or a U.S.-based model called Developmentally Appropriate Practice) with little attention to local cultural heritage or practices.

Another example of a growing understanding of links between local and global occurred when one student examined provision for children at four different religious institutions. He interviewed the staff members responsible for organizing the activities about the goals of the activities and how the activities were organized. He then analyzed the activities using intellectual tools from the course to identify how the activities varied across sites in, for example, what was mediated and how the mediation occurred and how children were positioned as learners at each site. He was able to critique the activities and suggest ways the activities could more effectively recognize and encourage children to be seen as active agents able to begin to take some responsibility for their own learning trajectories. Coursework encouraged him to look for new ways of conceptualizing children and childhood in his own local context with respect to a problem he identified – how adults inadvertently restrict opportunities children have to participate in the practices of their religious institutions.

The final assignment also provided students with opportunities to demonstrate their developing capacity to work alongside others on a shared problem. The “relational” form of expertise needed for that kind of activity is described by Edwards as “being able to make what matters for you as a professional visible; and being able to negotiate interpretations and responses to complex problems which incorporate what others can offer” (2010, p. 21).

The assignment asked students to identify experts and work alongside them on a locally meaningful project, interview them, and analyze their interpretations of and responses to the problem using the intellectual tools of the course. In doing so, the students were encouraged to take the standpoint of the other professional and recognize the expertise being brought to bear on the problem. Edwards has argued that the ability to recognize the expertise and intentions of others is an important component of work with children as, so often, early childhood workers need to collaborate with other professionals and of course parents in supporting children’s well-being and development. She terms such a capacity to align different interpretations of problems and the responses to them as the exercise of “relational expertise” (Edwards, 2010).

By working together as a group to first analyze local images familiar to them and explain the meaning of those local images to us as outsiders, the
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students learned to communicate and work together as preparation for subsequently talking to other professionals in the course of their research projects. The face-to-face sessions helped them exercise a growing capacity for working relationally with others as they helped each other use the intellectual tools to understand the local context they were all beginning to see with new complexity. The more relational approach to expertise was also important to us because it allowed us to legitimately place ourselves as learners keen to remedy a lack of knowledge about their local context and were genuinely interested in their interpretations of practices.

Conclusion

Designing the technology, teaching the unit in a context for which it had not been designed, and reflecting on our work using CHAT, have provided us with a renewed sense of “becoming” as educators. As Morson has identified, the process of becoming in interactions with others populates our minds with a complexity of voices and provides opportunities for us to think with these voices, test ideas and experiences, and “shape convictions that are innerly persuasive in response” (2004, p. 330).

CHAT concepts for learning in activities in social worlds help us articulate how we were able to get beyond our naïve notions of professional courses as inevitable communities of practice. For example, our focus on building common knowledge enabled us to recognize and overcome the lack of shared background knowledge among participants in the unit and to create and mobilize a resource that could help everyone accomplish course aims. Instead of organizing the unit around mastering content, the content – knowledge of local practices brought by students and CHAT intellectual tools – formed the basis for common knowledge we could use to work together on problems of local practice.

For us as educators, the concepts of guided participation as students undertook activities helped us recognize we were working together with the students on a shared object of activity as a problem space: structuring environments for children’s learning and development. Consequently we were able to create a temporary community in the short span of four days and organize activity meaningful to that temporary community in the form of research projects the student members then completed on their own.

Subsequent reflection has led us to suggest that the rather cumbersome CD-ROM technology we used limited the building of common knowledge. Had the technology created opportunities for continuous interactions between meetings, the knowledge sharing might have been enhanced. Baguley, Pullen,
and Short (2009) suggest there is a move toward a collaborative approach to learning where there is rapid change in technology. Bigum (2002) identifies that successful learning around technology happens where there is an emphasis placed on the relationships between the learners and the teachers rather than the information provided by the teachers. Feenberg similarly suggests "the social values placed on the design, not just use, of technological systems" (2002, p. 14) will be a measure of how much new technological practices empower people.

Wiki environments in which learners can extend their participation between each other in both face-to-face and online environments as they co-construct a series of hyperlinked texts appropriate to their needs offer exciting possibilities. Our experiences with the digital study guide suggest attention to the community, shared activity, and the role of technology within the interpersonal dynamics of guided participation will be important assets when engaging with unfamiliar teaching contexts using these technologies.

The course was also an unfamiliar site for the students. Higher education can represent a boundary or transitional space for students seeking a new career or a career change, as was the case for three of our students. Indeed, if an object of education is to facilitate the adoption of new practices, we must acknowledge the risks involved for at least some students. Edwards uses language of "safety" and describes the difficulties professionals may face when they work in boundary spaces and "need to negotiate task accomplishment with others in activities where their expertise is not shored up by a historically accumulated set of practices which they can expertly navigate and manipulate" (2010, p. 26). Building common knowledge as a resource to be used in the work of the course as a boundary space was clearly helpful.

References


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