

Internal deliberation and learning environments: possibilities for a realist social theory of student learning (0045)

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Abstract

Higher Education substantively underplays the role of ontology in shaping student learning. In this speculative paper, we adapt perspectives from Margaret Archer's realist social theory to develop a theory of student learning that is fully tailored to the context of higher education. We consider specific sets of concerns that students might bring with them to learning, and ways that these concerns might give rise to distinctive patterns of internal deliberation as students respond to given learning environments (socio-cultural structures). In this way we would expect to see variation in the agency that students display in learning, with internal deliberation (conceived more widely than reflexivity) mediating the effect of structure on agency. This paper seeks to pave the way for further empirical research and for educators to imagine teaching and learning in new ways.

Introduction

Dall'Alba and Barnacle (2007) argue that higher education suffers from a number of shortfalls, including a de-contextualisation of knowledge from practice and an overemphasis on intellect in learning. Biggs (1999), for instance, in articulating what is now a dominant approach, proposes that students are unable to escape learning when a learning environment is constructively aligned. He downplays the relevance of students' own identities and their willingness to exercise agency as learners.

In looking to address shortfalls that stem from a focus on epistemology at the expense of ontology, and in adopting a sociological rather than philosophical approach, we turn to the work of Margaret Archer (2003; 2007). While her realist social theory was developed principally in relation to sociological interests, as with social mobility, studies have begun to address educational matters (see, e.g. Clegg (2005), Czerniewicz et al (2009)). Such studies, however, tend to *apply* rather than *adapt* her ideas in addressing the given contexts. As Kahn et al (n.d.) notes, however, education constitutes a relatively controlled setting in contrast to the more open context of social mobility. This paper looks further to tailor Archer's underlying approach.

Internal deliberation and learning environments

Archer's recent work highlights how reflexivity mediates the influence of structure on agency, whereby reflexivity is 'the regular exercise of mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts and vice versa' (2007, p4). Courses of action are grounded in the concerns of the individual and taken forward through their reflexive deliberations, with personal identity rooted in one's priorities. It is through pursuing social projects that one engages with the constraints and enablements of given socio-cultural contexts. Archer suggests that the prioritisation of different sets of

concerns in relation to experiences of social continuity or discontinuity gives rise to distinctive modes of reflexivity (namely autonomous reflexivity, meta-reflexivity, communicative reflexivity and fractured reflexivity). It is in this way that she accounts for variation in social mobility.

Deliberation rather than reflexivity

Archer acknowledges (2007, p63), however, that her work does not address non-reflexive forms of internal deliberation, such as abstract inner dialogue or imaginative inventiveness. But clearly a wider set of mental processes come into play for learning, including both deliberative and routine mental processes. Can one incorporate such wider mental processes and retain Archer's overall approach in understanding how a learning environment influences learning? Can we adapt Archer's work to allow for distinctive modes of internal deliberation as a means to mediate the influence of socio-cultural structure on an individual's learning?

Clearly, rigorous answers to these questions will require further empirical study. But even at this stage we can outline possible ways forward. Learning represents a project in the sense outlined by Archer of an intentional course of human action. In the absence of a prescribed route forward, we would suggest that the mental activity required to drive forward a learning project is helpfully characterised as deliberation. Learning mirrors the pursuit of a project in a new social context in that the way forward is uncertain. But we can also characterise educational contexts in terms of the degree of control open to the student over their own learning, the level of social interaction entailed and the complexity of the body of knowledge under consideration: as these all affect deliberation. Specific socio-cultural contexts could offer profiles of inducements (or inhibitory factors) for engaging in different forms of internal deliberation.

Intention and modes of deliberation

Different students still have scope to respond to any context according to their own unique configurations of concerns. What then are the concerns relevant to taking forward an educational project? The notion of a concern connects to the theory of approaches to learning (Marton & Saljo 1976), with intentions of completing the task (something suited to formulaic courses of action) and seeking to understand the material. But we can also identify concerns focused on the activity of learning itself, on partners involved in learning, and on extending the body of knowledge under consideration. There are likely to be further sets of concerns, or ways to conceptualise concerns, held by students in relation to their study.

Archer's work might suggest that interplay between concerns and experience in socio-cultural contexts would give rise to different modes of internal deliberation, with varied outcomes in relation for learning. Where the concern is simply to complete the task, a 'restricted' mode of deliberation could be entailed. Deliberation is substantively evaded. Mental activity centred around a concern to understand could be termed 'connected deliberation', highlighting the making of connections between ideas. 'Meta-deliberation' would constitute a mode of cognition that is reflexive, in bending back upon the subject himself or herself; and linking to the literature on meta-cognition (Favell 1979). This is a mode of deliberation that is particularly required of the novice as opposed to the habituated expert. Both the scope and a concern to extend a given body of knowledge would in contrast be characteristic of the (expert) researcher, giving rise to an 'expansive' mode of deliberation. Learning in groups or in professional settings would allow scope for communicative forms of deliberation, where mental activity is completed through external deliberation that involves others. We need to increase our understanding of the mental processes employed as an individual conducts a project that involves learning, directly linking this understanding to the influence of socio-culture structure.

Conclusions

We have considered learning environments as arenas for internal deliberation, taking advantage of the analytical distinctions employed by Archer and adapting our focus to the educational context. Even at this

early stage of the investigation, our analysis would suggest that the literature on student learning has not begun sufficiently to consider the role of the concerns that students bring with them to learning or the forms of internal deliberation employed. We need as educators to imagine teaching and learning in new ways, so that our attention extends beyond de-contextualised knowledge and an over concern with the intellect in learning.

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