SRHE paper

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Environments for development and learning: making use of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) to understand transformative learning contexts in higher education (0141)

Investigating complex, intentionally developmental environments is a challenge to educators and researchers. One approach which may prove useful is Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) as it provides the opportunity for considering a whole environment, and then for sharing and interrogating information in a visible format.

This research relates to a collaborative study, exploring the practice of practitioners who profess to intentionally provide opportunities for student development, and the response of their students. The context for the study has been higher education courses in business and art and design, taught in FE colleges (HE in FE), and involved 2 colleges, 7 higher education teachers and their students. The higher education teachers were purposively selected as practitioners who explicitly stated that their intention through their teaching was to 'develop students'. The first part of the research followed a naturalistic design, resulting in a significant amount of qualitative data from interviews, observations and documentary analysis. HE in FE is an under-researched arena, with practitioners working in it also having less opportunity to engage in research about practice than their university counterparts (Blackie et al 2009). This research aimed not only to find out about developmental learning contexts, but also to involve HE in FE practitioners in research, and to find ways of sharing that research in a format useful for professional development opportunities.

Exploring students experience of higher education, their communities and the practice of educators from a transformatory perspective (Mezirow 2000), may be useful where the aim is to promote future possibilities through an authentic higher education (Barnett 2007), and support the development of individuals who are capable of 'making up their own minds'. This may be considered to be particularly relevant both for the individuals themselves and for a wider society during times of global social, economic and environmental difficulties. Kegan (2000), suggests that educators who ask students to be able to develop this capacity are not simply asking them to take on new skills, but are asking for a transformation in the way individuals relate to themselves, the construction of knowledge and their relationship with the world.

The ability to 'make up their own mind', is described by Kegan (1994) and Baxter Magolda (1999) as self-authorship, and relates closely to ideas associated with independent, autonomous or self directed learning. Kegan (1982), suggests that individuals have an evolving relationship between how they understand themselves, their world and the relationship between the two, involving periods of change and stability. Significant to discussions regarding the expectations of higher education are the nature of the stages through which the self evolves, and the types of psychosocial environments, or 'holding environments' (Kegan 1982:116), which provide a balance between the challenge and support necessary for encouraging evolution through these stages and also interventions which might promote movement towards self authorship (Pizzolato 2005).It is anticipated that transformative learning is experienced as disruptive, therefore in order that learning continues to thrive through discomfort, the environment within which I takes place needs to provide appropriate support as well as the challenge to prompt development. The practice and purpose of educators who promote transformative learning has been investigated (for example Cranton 2006a;

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2006b), and some research has been undertaken about transformative learning in cohorts (Kegan et al 2001). It is not possible to predict that transformative learning will take place, even if that is the intention, however, research data may be used to interpret whole higher education environments to find out more about the influence of practice on outcome.

Kozulin (2003), has suggested that the theories put forward by the work of Lev Vygotsky are particularly useful in contemporary research as they help with answering questions that have not been asked before . In the context of this research, they help with understanding the development of learning potential, how students and teachers influence the outcomes of learning environments and the significance of mediation. The culture of the context within which learning is anticipated will influence the type of learning and development that takes place (van Oers 2008). Finding out about a 'holding environment' which deliberately professes to provide the opportunity for individual change, may be supported by an approach that links the individual with the social structure (Engeström 1999). Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), helps to explain how external actions get transformed into mental processes in a sociocultural context (Arievitch 2008), and the model of an activity system developed by Engeström (Blackler 2009), proposes that the unit of analysis, instead of being the socially mediated individual, that it be the collective project, the 'activity', and take into account relevant mediators, roles played, the community and subject involved and the associated rules and boundaries. The model enables data to be visualised, and also for relationships between different elements to be seen and open to discussion.

This research aims to find out more about transformative learning cultures, and uses activity theory to help convey these findings to the higher education community
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