

MANIFESTATIONS OF IN/NON-FORMAL LEARNING DISCOURSES IN “SOCIAL LEARNING” LITERATURE: IMPLICATIONS FOR ADDRESSING THE COMPLEXITIES OF LIFELONG LEARNING

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INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE

Non-formal and informal learning are variously defined yet influential conceptualizations that hold promise for organizing lifelong learning pedagogies. The use of these terms within formal learning discourse has a particularly long history. While debates about the nature of informality, non-formality, and formality are abundant, there is little agreement about how these concepts should be defined and applied within lifelong learning communities. According to Colley, Hodkinson, and Malcolm (2003), new debates have surfaced in recent years. These discussions largely emphasize issues of recognition, validation, and assessment in the policy domain (e.g., Colardyn & Bjornavold, 2004; Gallacher & Feutrie, 2003). Another prominent thread of debate addresses access, participation, and social action issues in the adult and community education sector (e.g., Edwards, Gallacher, & Whittaker, 2006; Oduaran & Bhola, 2005). Other important writings provide clarification of non-formal and informal learning paradigms by reframing them as discourses and ideological constructions of power (e.g., Colley, Hodkinson, & Malcolm, 2003; Foley, 1999). Following Colley et al. (2003), our interest in this area of inquiry moves beyond situating formal, non-formal, and informal learning as competing constructions of theory and practice; instead, we seek to address the way in/non-formal learning discourses are formed, used, and bound to better understand the informal and non-formal learning phenomenon and its significance for organizing and developing lifelong learning pedagogies. In this paper, we draw upon earlier insights (Niewolny & Wilson, 2009, in press) to explore the discursive manifestation of in/non-formality in “social learning” literature as one way of reaching this aim. We conclude with key insights for educators to continue investigating the discursive context of in/non-formal learning in the adult and lifelong learning literature.

We locate in/non-formal learning discourses in an on-going discussion about the social context of learning. Numerous writers have contributed to “social learning” theorizing over the years. Literature ranging from Salomon and Perkins (1998) and Greeno (1997) to Lave (1988), Wenger (1998), Jarvis (1997), and Engeström, Mietinen, and Punamäki (1999), has notably improved our understanding of those social and cultural aspects and circumstances in which people learn. Recent efforts in adult and lifelong learning literature have further revealed how societal and cultural conditions, structures, experience, activity, and practices constitute human systems of learning and knowing (e.g., Barton & Tusting, 2005; Fenwick, 2000; Hodkinson, Biesta, & James, 2008; Lea & Nicoll, 2002; Wals, 2007). According to Niewolny and Wilson (2009), several learning theories have been historically identified as “social” theories of adult learning, including cultural-historical activity theory, distributed learning, experiential learning, informal learning, non-formal learning, situated cognition, social learning theory, sociocultural learning, and transformative learning. Other influential dimensions of “social learning” theorizing include lifelong learning (e.g., Edwards, 2006), participatory learning (e.g., Leeuwis, & Pyburn, 2002), and social capital (Field, 2005). Further, it is important to note that learning in this view is not only widely defined but anchored in several different theoretical traditions, such as behaviorism, constructivism, feminism, Marxism, and postmodernism (Fenwick, 2000; Hodkinson, Biesta, & James, 2008; Jarvis, 2006; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007; Osborne, Sankey, & Wilson, 2007; Sawchuk, 2003b).

While social aspects of learning are increasingly recognized as important perspectives for understanding how learning is a socially and culturally situated process, there are problems with the way current learning theory conceptualizes the social domain. For Hodkinson, Biesta, and James (2008), tensions between social and cognitive learning views profusely exist, which consequently limit our ability to theorize the particular ways in which actors learn in/with/from the social world. Our concern here is related to this point. We suggest that the term “social learning” not only carries confusing implications, but it is often too wide to be of much use. We have recently argued (see Niewolny & Wilson, 2009) that “social learning” should be seen less as a tradition of learning and more like a discourse that is framed by relations of power that constitute its formation. When we do that, we

begin to see how this construction of power and knowledge actually (re)produces certain knowledges and truths about the social/individual learning divide. Particularly, we can begin to see how “social learning” is a discursive strategy employed by writers to challenge the established promotion of psychological theories of adult learning that understands learning as something that occurs only inside the mind of the individual. Put differently, “social learning” and its partner terms have increasingly become rhetoric used by writers critical of the (re)production of asocial, individualistic conceptions of adult learning. Our work on “social learning” discourse is on-going. In what follows, we seek to address the manifestation of in/non-formality in “social learning” literature to further elucidate this discursive phenomenon.

CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AS METHODOLOGY

This paper reports on findings from a discourse analysis of “social learning” literature (see Niewolny & Wilson, 2009). The methodology that guides our examination is grounded in critical discourse analysis (CDA). We understand that although several forms of CDA exist, it is frequently expressed as a form of discourse analysis influenced by the techniques of social linguistics and theoretical insights of (post)structuralist theory (Niewolny & Wilson, 2008). CDA aims to critically reveal larger formations of discourse and power in everyday educational settings (Gee, 1999; Fairclough, 2003). Following the influential work of Luke (1995, 2002), our approach to CDA draws upon the scholarship of Fairclough (1992) and Foucault (1972). A key assumption of CDA in this view is that discourses and social practices are linked together and to wider social structures by taking into account the heterogeneous and historicized nature of discourse (Foucault, 1972), and the textual, discursive practice, and social practice dimensions of discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992). According to Luke (1995, p.10), this kind of analysis can be described as a bridging together of the “macro approaches to discourse with more microanalytical text analyses.

Focusing on Fairclough’s (1992) three-dimensional framework of discourse analysis and the constitutive features of Foucault’s (1972) discourse theory, we examined a large body of “social learning” literature. Building on earlier insights (Niewolny & Wilson, 2006, 2009, in press; Wilson, 1993), this literature comprised empirical and conceptual writings in the areas of “cultural historical-activity theory,” “distributed learning,” “emancipatory learning,” “experiential learning,” “informal learning,” “lifelong learning,” “non-formal learning,” “participatory learning,” “situated cognition/learning,” “sociocultural learning,” “social leaning,” and “transformative learning.” For this paper, we examined the literature for the ways in which “non-formal” and “informal” learning meanings manifest and constitute the larger discourse of “social learning.” This approach not only emphasizes the kinds of investigations that have focused on dimensions of in/non-formality but sheds light on what Foucault (1972) would describe as an underlying uniformity of meaning despite the apparent diversity of what has been said about in/non-formality in learning theory.

Our analysis comprised two main tasks. First, we identified several themes of “socialness” from the literature to examine the “conditions of discourse practice” (Fairclough, 1992): nature of context, experience, mediation, formality, activity, purpose, and social positioning (e.g., Colley, Hodkinson, & Malcolm, 2003; Edwards, 2006; Fenwick, 2000; Field, 2005; Foley, 1999; Jarvis, 1987; Lave, 1988; Lea & Nicoll, 2002; Salomon & Perkins, 1998; Sawchuk, 2003a, 2003b; Usher, Bryant, & Johnston, 1997; Wenger, 1998). Secondly, we focused on how meanings of “non-formality” and “informality” were constructed and legitimated in some ways while not in others by drawing upon the notion of “interdiscursivity” (Fairclough, 1992; Foucault, 1972). Here, we examined for the explicit and implicit meanings of “non-formality and “informality” in statements (Foucault, 1972) across several domains of in/non-formality that were derived from the above literature, including learning context, content, purpose, activity, experience. It is important to note that we examined dimensions of in/non-formality as inter-related learning discourses to better emphasize that while different paradigms and characterizations exist, informal and non-formal learning are companionable discourses that share a similar history and purpose in learning theory (Colley, Hodkinson, & Malcolm, 2003).

EXAMINING IN/NON-FORMALALITY IN “SOCIAL LEARNING”

A few discursive themes stand out from our analysis of in/non-formality conceptualizations in “social learning” literature. First and foremost, we found that “social learning” has been (mis)appropriated to designate everything from the kind of learning that occurs through modeling behavior (e.g., Bandura, 1977), group learning (e.g., Imel, 1996), participatory learning in and for community organizing and

development (e.g., Falk, 2001; Leeuwis, & Pyburn, 2002), learning defined by experience (e.g., Jarvis, 1987; Fenwick, 2000), learning as a situated or sociocultural process (e.g., Alfred, 2003; Sawchuk, 2003a; Wilson, 1993), learning that is incidental and lifelong (e.g., Foley, 1999; Field & Spence, 2000), learning that occurs for the purposes of transformation and emancipation (e.g., Hart, 1990; O'Sullivan, Morrell, & O'Connor, 2002), and learning that falls within the purview of mobility and distribution as explained by globalizing processes and postmodernism (e.g., Usher, Bryant, & Johnston, 1997). Secondly, we learned that several dimensions of in/formality saturate the literature and thus tightly constitute the larger and emerging discourse of "social learning." Focusing on the notion of "interdiscursivity" (Fairclough, 1992), we limit the remaining discussion by revealing how "social learning" writing draws upon a wider set of in/non-formal learning discourses concerning power and collectivism.

According to Colley, Hodkinson, and Malcolm (2003, p. 20), several dimensions of "formality/informality are potentially useful in analysing and understanding learning in a variety of contexts." These dimensions fall under such general categories as *learning process*, *learning location/setting*, *learning purpose(s)*, and the *nature of content being learned*. Drawing upon these characterizations of in/non-formal learning, we found that "social learning" discourse implicitly and explicitly recognizes the significance of power. While it is by no means a secret that learning theory in adult and lifelong learning literature is linked with numerous critical traditions, we identified how motifs of "politicalness" discursively manifest in/non-formal learning writing and consequently work to inform the political nature of "social learning" discourse. For example, our reading of in/non-formality in the expansive area of adult and community education depicts how learning is (re)produced by the social, cultural, and historical context in which it occurs (e.g., Sawchuk, 2003a), operates for purposes of social responsibility and justice (e.g., Oduaran & Bhola, 2005), and is implicated in ideological processes of political struggle and resistance (e.g., Foley, 1999). By focusing particularly on the way informal learning and education function as ideological processes that have the power to transform social conditions, we learned that "social learning" then becomes a powerful discursive strategy used by writers to engage in the process of resisting and transforming hegemonic discourses and oppositional ideologies. In other words, according to Foley (1999, p. 16), "the concepts of ideology and discourse help us to understand that social reproduction and change are cultural as well as economic and political processes. Consciousness and [informal] learning are central to the processes of cultural and social reproduction and transformation." This argument is exemplified by several other authors writing in the vein of non-formal education to challenge the prevailing role of science and expertism in community development programming and policy (Falk, 2001; Leeuwis, & Pyburn, 2002). Wals (2007) further argues that "social learning" theorizing provides the necessary conceptual footing for educators and community organizers to learn in the everyday struggle for sustainability. Other politicized dimensions of in/non-formal learning vary in meaning and purpose from these points but generally draw upon issues of participatory learning (e.g., Leeuwis, & Pyburn, 2002) and social capital and learning (e.g., Field & Spence, 2000).

It is important to note that although these manifestations of in/non-formal learning tightly constitute the politicized nature of "social learning" discourse, we found that such critical meanings are not consistently located throughout the discourse and are therefore not operating as central ideas for analyzing and understanding the social domain of learning. In agreement with Hodkinson, Biesta, and James (2008) and Usher, Bryant, and Johnston (1997), we argue that that such positioning does at least two things. First, it largely restricts our ability to explore how learning occurs as a socially dynamic and culturally mediated activity embedded in and constituted by relations of power. Secondly, which is related to the first point, it makes it difficult for us to recognize how learning is much more than a set of technical activities characterized by behaviorist, cognitive, and constructivist psychology. This failure to fully articulate "social learning" as a political discourse, however, is beyond the scope of this paper (see Niewolny & Wilson, 2009). We now briefly illustrate how in/non-formality discourse informs a "social learning" debate between collective and individual learning.

The second discursive position characterizes how in/non-formal learning discourses address whether "social learning" is a collective or individual process. Drawing again upon the four dimensions of in/non-formality derived from Colley, Hodkinson, and Malcolm (2003), we see how informal learning, and non-formal learning to a lesser extent, is contrasted to formal learning theory in the way in which the learning process is perceived to be mostly communal or individual. This social/individual debate is extensive and materializes in several different areas of education literature rooted in both modern and postmodern thought (see Hodkinson, Biesta, & James, 2008). For our purpose here, we focused on

the social side of the debate where in/non-formal learning is most often depicted as a collectively-conducted learning process where education and training are understood to take place socially and relationally (Livingstone, 2001).

Most recent “social learning” writing that integrates notions of collectivism with in/non-formality falls under the purview of workplace learning and computer-mediated learning, most of which focuses specifically on the role of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in and across the workplace. It is within the context of globalization that interrelations between notions of collectivism and in/non-formality stand out. For instance, Edwards and Usher (2008, p. 76), refer to the recent expansion of in/non-formal learning in relation to the play of globalization: “the pedagogic spaces of the educational institution cannot any longer be isolated from those of the home, the street, and the workplace, etc.....Such an approach brings to the fore the social nature of learning, something we can see illustrated in the current interest in collaborative learning, itself a possible analogue of moves toward inter- and trans-disciplinarity and team working.” While this passage is busy with meaning, our attention is with the way the meanings of in/non-formality and collaboration discursively meet and inform the larger discourse of social learning. That is, these authors argue for a shift toward understanding the more social and cultural interpretations of learning and education and away from prevailing individualized frameworks. Beckett and Hager (2002, p. 128) present a similar argument where they promote an informal workplace learning approach that explicitly shifts the focus of learning toward “collaborative/collegial” ends and away from the asocial, individualistic conceptions of adult learning, as explained by the modernist theorizing of psychology and individualism.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In this paper, we have briefly examined the role of in/non-formality in social learning discourse. This paper, therefore, not only addresses an emerging and influential body of writing about “social learning” but emphasizes two discursive dimensions of in/non-formality that help constitute “social learning” discourse in adult and lifelong learning scholarship. Particularly, we revealed how “social learning” writing draws upon a wider set of in/non-formal learning discourses concerning politicalism and collectivism. We argue that revealing these discursive positions help shed further light on the complex relationship between social and individual learning discourses. It is not our intent, however, to reproduce unnecessary tensions between the social/learning divide. Debates about the social/individual dualism are already plentiful and mostly limit our ability to theorize about the interrelations between situated and cognitive learning frameworks (Hodkinson, Biesta, & James, 2008). Instead, our findings compliment Colley, Hodkinson, and Malcolm’s (2003) argument for addressing the context in which informal, non-formal, and formal learning discourses are produced, circulated, and used to elucidate the relationships among dimensions of informality/ non-formality/formality.

We suggest doing two things to address the complexities of lifelong learning based on these findings. First, we propose expanding our analytical view of the social domain of learning. We, therefore, recommend bridging further gaps in lifelong learning literature by viewing “social learning” not as a distinct learning tradition and more like a discourse of learning that is framed by relations of power/knowledge. Secondly, which relates to the former point, we argue for further illustrating the emergence of a discursive strategy working in opposition to the (re)production of the prevailing discourse of individualism in learning theory, as explained by behaviorist, cognitive, and constructivist psychology. It is our hope that by revealing this discursive strategy in its entirety, lifelong learning communities can move closer to understanding the complex ways adults learn embedded in and distributed across socially and culturally structured relations of power (Niewolny & Wilson, in press).

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