Towards an innovative learning rationale for curricular justice

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Abstract

Nearly half a century or so of unsuccessful attempts to achieve structural equity in educational outcomes exposes the ultimate ineffectiveness of conventional educational practices. This is of great concern because in the era of ‘fast capitalism’ and the globally competitiveness of the ‘New Work Order’, educational achievement by working class and ‘minority’ group students, and therefore our commitment to ‘curricular justice’ is even more critical.

Whilst much innovation has been unleashed on curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, without any lasting structural success, the theories of learning that underpin these practices have in essence received little critical attention from educational researchers, and even less so from practitioners. I consider that this generally unquestioning allegiance to the psychologist paradigm as the fatal flaw in attempts to produce socially just outcomes in education.

Despite some recent innovative theorising by literacy educators and sociologists of education, most thinking about learning – and hence teaching - are still firmly dominated by psychology, and often narrow forms of psychology at that. One consequence is that the critical relationship between the social world of learners and academic achievement never receives serious consideration. However, socio-cultural learning theories, though slow to evolve in terms of their systematic application, are increasingly contesting the many ways in which conventional psychologistic approaches to learning and teaching separate off our educational institutions from the real world. This insulation between the knowledge-worlds of working class and minority group students and the knowledge-worlds of school and university, embodied in curriculum, pedagogical and assessment practices - what Bernstein (1975; 1990) terms the ‘three message systems’ of education - represents a crippling barrier to many of these students. As long as the three message systems and its related institutional structuring are dominated by the psychologist paradigm, they will remain unable to deliver curricular justice to students from disadvantaged and disprivileged social groups.

Building on this argument, structural equity is achievable when we (1) detach learning theory from its historical dependence on psychology, (2) adopt a socio-cultural learning paradigm which addresses the social, i.e. structural, institutional and interpersonal dimensions of learning, and (3) restructure the three message systems of education in line with an integrated educational knowledge code and socio-cultural praxis.

Education and equity in New Times

How would the least advantaged, that is, students from working-class and minority groups judge the quality of our education system as we enter the second century of Australian Federation? Why have conventional pedagogical practices failed them in achieving equitable educational and hence labour market outcomes? How might we redesign our educational message systems around socially just outcomes? These are provocative questions as we enter into ‘New Times’
where structural inequity is still endemic even after decades of rhetoric about improving access and equity.

Students from low socio-economic milieus continue to experience unacceptably high levels of socially structured underachievement, exacerbated by living in rural and isolated areas, or by belonging to a non-English speaking ethnic group. Their predicament tells us that they need, and have the right, to something better. As (Hixson 1993:1) pointedly observed,

“… despite the tireless efforts of thousands of educators, policymakers, parents and concerned others; formulation of numerous strategies for change and improvement; countless research and policy studies; new knowledge about teaching and learning; and myriad examples of remarkable success, the overall pattern of achievement for far too many students remains largely unchanged, particularly in poor or urban communities or communities of color. In fact, in many communities, the number of students identified as being ‘at risk’ has actually increased. Clearly, something is wrong!”

To date, explanations for underachievement tend to be polarised between socio-centric and school-centric perspectives. Although the former puts the blame for underachievement primarily on home and social milieu, and the latter points to curriculum and pedagogical practices, neither effectively explains the relationship between social milieu and school achievement (Street 1998). On the other hand, more critical and sociologically inclined approaches explain this relationship in terms of communicative practices. They point to the critical link between the Discourse communities of students, their linguistic and discursive practices, and the language and literacy practices encountered in schools and universities. Their effective linking of the ‘social’ to the pedagogical ironically ensures the peripheral status of these theories because their explanation falls outside the scope of the dominant psychological paradigm. Psychological theories are, in the final analysis, unable to follow up on the critical link between the social world of students - their ways of being in the world and their language use and literacy practices in particular - and effective learning. The dominant psychological learning paradigm locks educators into a limited range of conventional and often ineffective pedagogies that effectively disprivileged the life-worlds, language and literacy practices of working class and minority group students. This leads to poor school and labour market outcomes, and increasingly places teachers in unproductive and stressful classroom situations. Increasing rates of disruptive student behaviour and the pronounced difficulty in attracting graduates to careers in teaching are but two indicators of the inadequacy of the psychological paradigm. Thus, despite some valiant efforts, psychologist theories negate even the best attempts to make a difference. Given that education and hence learning theory are sites of interclass struggle and negotiation, one could even argue that psychological theories of learning are associated with hegemonic practices that are not intended to deliver socially just outcomes.

We can overcome this destructive impasse by drawing on and extending more recent and promising developments in socio-cultural learning theories and adopt a critical-socio-constructionist learning paradigm. This foundation for a new architecture of learning embraces the social nature of the person and of knowledge construction, and thereby productively addresses the connections between language, literacy and learning, responds to issues of power, and deploys the three educational message systems to attend to the interpersonal, institutional and structural dimensions of learning.

Building on this argument, I will lay the groundwork for a new learning architecture in three stages. I will first clarify the pivotal link between communicative practices and educational disadvantage, and stress the importance of educational equity in the ‘New Communicative
Order’. Next, I will outline the critical roles of ‘curricular justice’, and of learning theory as necessary points of departure for any equity motivated restructuring of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. These are conceptualised by Bernstein (1975), as the three educational message systems, and are discussed in terms of their central importance in providing a powerful framework for integrated, critical, socio-culturally-based educational praxis. Lastly, I argue for a transformation in educational praxis by pointing to the poverty of psychological theorising and the promise inherent in a critical, socio-constructionist paradigm.

At this stage it must be pointed out that there are various entry points to the argument for moving beyond a purely psychologist view of learning and pedagogy. Some of these are dealt with elsewhere (Eijkman 2000; 2001; 2001(b), allowing this paper to focus specifically on one rationale for a transformation in practice.

Disadvantage, higher education and learning in the New Communicative Order

A substantive body of social literacies research makes a convincing case for explaining poor school achievement in terms of the often significant differences that exist between the linguistic and literacy practices used in school and those used by various social groups in low socio-economic environments (Heath 1983; Gee 1996). The middle/upper classes have succeeded in having their Discourse – their ‘ways of being in the world’ and their ‘ways with words’ as Gee and Heath eloquently point out - accepted as the norm in mainstream institutions such as in education. Hence, when it comes to having access to and participating in the communicative practices of educational institutions, some significant power issues are at play. The linguistic and literacy conventions held up as the ‘norm’ in education are upheld by class-based power relations. An interesting example of this is how academic literacy and other communicative conventions are seldom made explicit in classrooms and lecture halls. Although as Delpit (1997) notes, having access to the discourse of power may not necessarily guarantee educational or economic success, not having access to these mandated language and literacy practices will almost certainly guarantee failure.

The middle and upper classes are unequivocally privileged as ‘insiders’ to the prevailing Discourse and literacy practices of schooling and academia. They have achieved – and they maintain - this hegemonic status by ensuring that educational institutions adopt their discursive practices as ‘standard’ whilst simultaneously and effectively disguising their nature as class-based resources for encoding middle-class interpretations of experience and social interactions. This automatically acts to devalue and marginalise those social groups whose Discourse histories, language usage and literacy practices are different, or who have difficulty in accessing these language and literacy practices (Bernstein 1996; Lankshear, Gee et al. 1997). Hence non-middle class Discourses - their ‘ways of being in the world’, and their ‘ways with words’ (discourses) are disprivileged when compared to those of the predominantly white and middle class mainstream.

Linking language and literacy to learning theory and pedagogy is absolutely fundamental if we are in any way serious about giving non-mainstream students access to the D/discourses of power and to social and cultural capital, and therefore equitable access to and participation in higher education and professional career opportunities (Gee, Hull et al. 1996; Lankshear, Snyder et al. 2000). If this was important before, it is even more so now as marginalised social groups enter ‘New Times’ where fundamental economic, political and cultural changes, exemplified by ‘fast capitalism’ and the ‘New Work Order’ may impede even further their efforts to achieve full social and economic participation. This brave new world of global, hi-tech capitalism with its increasingly pervasive application of ever more sophisticated Information
and Communication Technologies (ICT) also embraces a ‘New Communicative Order’ which demands high-level technological, knowledge creation and communicative skills, or what Lankshear calls ‘elite literacies’ which now encompass a much broader range of semiotic systems (Street 1998). Furthermore, in this vast global labour market, high-level skills and credentials are of even great consequence than they have been in the past (Gee, Hull et al. 1996). In this context, making a difference on behalf of marginalised student groups not only requires the development of powerful learning theories and more empowering pedagogical practices, but also a ‘political’ struggle to have them accepted and institutionalised. This extends to the strategic reconstruction of educational message systems that expand the parameters of educational possibilities, and that counter the ‘savage inequalities’ of schooling with its flow-on to the labour market (Kozol 1992, Gee, Hull et al. 1996).

The point is, that in the light of global developments, the convergence between fast capitalism and the Discourse of education means that issues around language, literacy and learning are increasingly central to the construction of new social identities not just for learners, but also for educators. The push for equitable participation has taken on a new urgency, both for traditionally marginalised social groups and for educators committed to social justice.

**Curricular justice**

As Connell (1992; 1993; 1994) points out, hegemonic curriculum and pedagogical strategies are integral to patterns that reproduce inequity in educational outcomes. However, given that there are multiple ways of organising the knowledge content of education, what is needed above all is ‘curricular justice’, a strategic focus on curriculum construction from the viewpoint of the least advantaged.

Although originally based on a rather narrow interpretation of curriculum and a focus on compulsory schooling, it is a concept whose time has come in terms of a wider interpretation and application. The concept needs to be applied to all three educational message systems, and to the higher education sector. Thus, adapted, curricular justice entails three operating principles. First, message systems must be reconstructed so that they represent the interests of the least advantaged. Second, they must be ‘inclusive’ and value and build on the discourses – the ‘ways of being in the world’ and the language and literacy practices - of traditionally marginalised groups. Third, they must be geared to achieve structurally equitable outcomes. Making a difference means reconstructing the educational message systems to redirect the educational trajectories of working class and other minority students. The point is that each particular way of constructing the educational message systems of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment carries particular social effects. They can empower or disempower, authorise or de-authorise, recognise or mis-recognise, privilege and disprivileged different social groups, their knowledge, linguistic practices and identities (Connell 1994).

A focus on curricular justice, as Connell (1994:141) points out, “requires us to think about how to generalise the point of view of the least advantaged as a program for the organization and production of knowledge in general.” Now, educational practices are to be approached, not from the usual perspective of the privileged, but *from the viewpoint of the least advantaged*, thus guaranteeing that this new architecture of learning incorporates curricular justice as a key performance indicator, a central criterion for excellence. This points directly to the strategic reconstruction, not just of the three educational message systems of curriculum, assessment and pedagogical practices, but above all, of the learning theories that provide their foundation and shapes their operationalisation. It is to these issues that we now turn.
Learning theories and pedagogical practices - the equity challenge

Different theoretical traditions frame the construction of knowledge (learning), differently. The range and goals of the three message systems are framed by particular value judgments and theoretical assumptions. Each has its own criteria of what constitutes ‘excellence’ and therefore what informs teaching and learning. If we are serious about promoting effective teaching, then it should be verifiable by way of socially just outcomes. The ultimate criterion for pedagogical excellence would consist of equitable access to and full participation in forms of knowledge and skills that enable all learner populations to participate fully in their society. I now proceed on the basis that the capacity to achieve structurally (as opposed to individual) equitable outcomes constitutes an essential performance indicator in any new architecture of learning.

So, in the context of this equity criterion, how do current learning theories and their educational practices hold up? This is a critical question, as many ‘progressive’ developments in education tend to benefit the already advantaged middle class. Given the ‘New Times’ scenario outlined above, educators, especially in higher education are challenged to initiate truly empowering pedagogical strategies – based on truly empowering learning theories. Here, Biggs’ (1999:12) dismissive claim “that most teachers … are not interested in theories of learning as much as in improving their teaching” embodies two highly significant assumptions. It not only implies that pedagogical practices can operate separately from any theories about learning, but that the theoretical domain is not the domain of teachers. This effectively frames educators as consumers rather than producers of pedagogical praxis and thereby actively undermines serious attempts by those at the coalface of educational disadvantage and disprivilege to achieve more equitable structural outcomes. Contrary to Biggs therefore, if we are serious about effective teaching, we must urgently attend to our understanding of learning. After all, as Wenger (1998:9) aptly notes, “The farther you aim, the more an initial error matters”.

Let us begin by acknowledging that current teaching practices are largely, and - whether explicitly acknowledged or not – inescapably grounded in the dominant psychologist discourse of learning and its epistemological foundations. It is psychologist theorising that underpins what Bernstein (1975) calls the educational message systems of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. Curricular, pedagogical and assessment practices are aligned with a specific set of narrow psychologist or somewhat broader social-psychological assumptions and values about learning. This is evidenced in our very use of the term ‘educational psychology’ when referring to theorising about learning.

Given that education, as a social institution is a site of interclass struggle and negotiation (Apple 2000) we may also pay us to ask whose interests are best served by this generally unquestioning allegiance to psychologist learning theories and their associated pedagogical practices? Which social groups traditionally benefit most, which least, by this arrangement? It is high time that in these New Times, our curriculum, pedagogical and assessment practices draw on genuinely empowering learning theories that enable us to construct inclusive and truly equitable educational message systems.

Educational message systems and the social construction of knowledge

Bernstein’s insights regarding the realisation of formal educational knowledge through three message systems of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment and their role vis-a-vis power and identity are of great significance. For Bernstein (1975; 1990), curriculum, pedagogy and assessment act as three educational ‘message’ systems that communicate a particular ‘knowledge code’ which conveys what counts as valid knowledge in curriculum, valid
knowledge transmission in pedagogy, and the valid realization of this knowledge in assessment. Either way, whether deployed in conventional ways, in which curriculum and pedagogy are highly structured, or in more progressive approaches, where they are much more integrated, they profoundly affect educational power relations, identity formation and academic success.

Currently, conventional practice is to construct what Bernstein (1975) terms a ‘collection’ type educational knowledge code. Here, curriculum content is clearly separated into distinct subject areas, pedagogical control over the transmission and organisation of knowledge by students is limited, and strong boundaries are maintained between school knowledge and the everyday knowledge of learners. The latter is of no concern to upper and middle-class students, whose Discourse-worlds coincide with that of the education system, but it patently disadvantages students from social groups that live in very different Discourse worlds. This highlights key issues of power and identity. With the strong curricular boundaries, strong pedagogical framing and the conspicuous status of learners within the system of streaming and grading comes a strong sense of identity for those who are ‘insiders’ (Bernstein 1975). As well, knowledge, deemed as private property, possesses its own power structure and market situation, and is protected by hierarchical ordering and an individualistic approach to learning. The ultimate mystery of how to construct new knowledge is safely revealed only late in the educational process, and thereby to only the select, well-socialised few who remain in the system. This is aided by assessments that focus on states of knowledge rather than ways of knowing. As Bernstein (1975:98) notes, “The stronger the classification and the framing, the more the educational relationship tends to be hierarchical and ritualised, the educand seen as ignorant, with little status and few rights.”

In these conventional settings, significant groups of students experience socialisation into educational knowledge as socialisation into the impenetrable nature of predominantly middle-class educational knowledge, which actively fosters an identity and experience of non-participation and alienation (Wenger 1998). Many accurately perceive educational knowledge as distinctly foreign to their own, and are quick to pick up on the underlying message or code of the educational ‘message’ systems - that their primary Discourse and aspects of ‘the self’ informed by this Discourse are, for all intents and purposes, largely irrelevant. Many respond by distancing themselves from educational knowledge, and, using a range of tactics (De Certeau 1984) reduce the penetration of the educational-cultural socializing process (Bernstein 1975).

The tragedy is that this “socialization can be deeply wounding, either for those who wish for, but do not achieve, an identity, or for the majority for whom the pursuit of an identity is early made irrelevant” (Wenger 1998:107). Hence, from early on, many learners are socialised into knowledge frames that discourage, or in a highly selective manner, screen the connections between school knowledge and their everyday realities. Thus, current educational practices clearly cater for those whose primary Discourse is similar to the new Discourse to be learned, and those who are able to successfully acculturate themselves (Bourdieu 1994). Here, middle class family socialisation acts as a hidden subsidy. It provides an environment, which, in diverse ways, immensely facilitates school learning. For those for who lack this home subsidisation, and who have not succeeded in negotiating this process successfully, gaining educational knowledge can easily turn into a meaningless, confidence-destroying experience.

This hidden subsidy provides little incentive for middle and upper class educational decision-makers to adopt a more integrated knowledge code and deploy the message systems in ways that support successful learning by students from hitherto disprivileged social groups. This resistance is further reinforced as the blurring of boundaries associated with integrative approaches to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment equates with the blurring of identities bound up with earlier socialisation. As well, the weakening of curricular classifications threatens current monopolies on knowledge as the private property of individuals (Bernstein 1975).
A new architecture of learning built around socially just outcomes requires a fundamentally different strategy. At its very least, it needs to be constructed around, what Bernstein terms, an integration knowledge code, which, with its weak classification and framing foregrounds the present rather than the past, the subjective rather than the objective, and the personal rather than the positional. Thus, integration disrupts the conventional order, its existing authority structures, educational identities and ‘knowledge as property’, and shifts the balance of pedagogical power in favour of learners. In terms of curriculum, it links subjects via their deep structures, which in turn generates a pedagogy that proceeds from deep to surface structures. This makes available to all learners, and early in their educational career, the deep structures of knowledge, including the critical principles for generating new knowledge. Assessment and pedagogy are re-shaped by a much greater emphasis on ways of knowing rather than on attaining states of knowledge. Hence, a change from collection to integrated codes represents a fundamental change in the classification and framing of knowledge, and hence, in the structure and distribution of power, in principles of control, and in existing educational identities. It involves a much more inclusive approach to defining what is valid in the three message systems of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment (Bernstein 1975).

At the same time, because integrated codes entail more relaxed and open learning spaces, learning and identity formation can be equally problematic unless certain measures are taken. The weakly classified spaces of integrated codes have fewer rules pointing to ‘correct’ behaviour and fewer criteria governing the competent use of spaces, so that learning calls for an “ability to both tolerate and enjoy ambiguity at the level of knowledge and social relationships” (Bernstein 1975:108). All of this makes it much more difficult for ‘outsiders’ to know what is expected of them and what counts as appropriate behaviour. This is further aggravated when underpinning principles that give order to the relationships involved are left implied and are not clearly articulated. As a result, learners may take “a very long time to infer the tacit principle, and generate choices in accordance with it. Without knowledge of the principle our user is unlikely to make appropriate choices and such choices may require a long period of socialization” (Bernstein 1975:154). Accordingly, the egalitarian potential of integrated educational knowledge codes can only be realised if the language and discourse of power and its discursive practices are overtly articulated and explicitly taught to ‘outsiders’.

Yet, an integrated approach in which rules and principles are clearly articulated, whilst necessary, is not sufficient. The impact of learning theory, which inevitably informs the operationalisation of the three message systems, as one critical aspect of the educational knowledge code, whether of a collection or integrated type, has not yet been considered. I would argue that continuing the use of the same learning theory merely carry across ways of thinking about learning and teaching that are inadequate to the task of closing the educational achievement gap. I consider that an integrated knowledge code that relies on a psychologist dominated learning theory constitutes a contradiction in terms. Bernstein clearly identifies issues of identity and power embedded in the interpersonal, structural and institutional elements of learning and pedagogy, issues largely absent in the discourse of psychology, and still being somewhat problematically grappled with by social psychological and socio-cultural approaches to learning. I would argue that to be truly effective vis-à-vis curricular justice, an integrated knowledge code also requires an underpinning learning theory capable of dealing with the inherently and primarily social nature of learning and associated issues of identity and power as they arise in interpersonal, structural and institutional realms of learning.

Transforming the message systems for equitable outcomes
It is increasingly evident by now that there is a significant discrepancy between the promises and the premises of conventional psychologically based learning theories and their attendant message systems practices. The problematic nature of conventional educational practices and problematic achievement at a global level in schools and higher education exhibit striking similarities that defy localised explanations. These global patterns of underachievement point to a much deeper and much more significant underlying problem – a problem about how we theorise learning. These global patterns are daily reminders that the learning theories upon which current practices are predominantly based, are inadequate to the task. Educators worldwide are struggling to deliver that which their inadequate theoretical framework will not allow them to achieve. This situation calls on us to re-appraise the accepted psychological learning paradigm, and hence about what really matters in learning and therefore in teaching.

Our understanding of excellence in teaching is clearly predicated on our assumptions about the nature of knowledge and learning. At this historical juncture, our educational institutions and their curricular, pedagogical and assessment strategies are predominantly based on psychological assumptions about learning. Broadly speaking, learning is primarily perceived as an individual process that occurs in students’ heads, as a discrete activity with a distinct beginning and end point, more effective when isolated from the distractions of the world outside, and ultimately, as the result of teaching. Learning is predicated on a deficit model in more ways than one. Not only are the life experiences of many utterly disrespected, but many first and foremost learn what they are not good at! Learning spaces are constructed around competitive, teacher-directed activities, isolated from the distractions of the real world ‘outside’ and in which, at the end of the day, abstract knowledge and individualism is valued above all else. This is obvious in conventional assessment strategies that define collaboration as cheating and frame students as competitive individuals who must demonstrate proficiency in decontextualised knowledge. Consequently, many students experience institutionalised teaching as irrelevant, boring and arduous, and that somehow they are failures at learning (Wenger 1998; Senge 2000). This is certainly much more likely to occur with learners from disprivileged social groups who are outsiders to the Discourse of academia.

This daily struggle by countless students and educators around the globe tells us that the epistemological framework of educational psychology has been tried, tested, and found wanting. What for many disprivileged social groups amounts to a marked poverty of outcomes is directly related to a distinct poverty of theory. When it comes to producing structurally equitable educational outcomes, psychologist learning theories are by their very individualistic and internalising nature not able to deliver socially just outcomes. Conventional psychologically based theories of learning – no matter how much they lean towards the ‘social’ - present an inherently limiting worldview, unable to do justice to the social nature of ‘being in the world’ and therefore of the social nature of learning and its interpersonal, structural and institutional dimensions. The continued structural disprivileging of low socio-economic status (SES) and ‘minority’ groups coupled with the distinct poverty of conventional learning theory propels us to rethink and transform our understanding of how learning can best be organised and enabled so as to close the achievement gap. A transformation on behalf of social justice necessitates a paradigm shift, away from a reliance on the psychological models that have so dominated the educational enterprise. Instead, I propose we draw on a critical, social constructionist epistemological platform, with a more holistic set of assumptions, design elements, strategies and linguistic practices. Psychological insights may be necessary, but as I hope to show, they are not sufficient.

**The poverty of theory: psychologist learning theories and inequitable outcomes**
What theoretical framework can best underpin pedagogical practices capable of achieving curricular justice, and be equally applicable in higher educational settings? A brief review and critique of the major psychological and social-psychological approaches will begin to illuminate my argument for a critical socio-constructionist theoretical framework as an essential prerequisite for achieving structurally equitable outcomes in higher education.

So far, the dominant cognitivist and constructivist theories of learning and their attendant pedagogical practices have been unable to make significant structural improvements on behalf of disprivileged social groups. Given the all too ready acceptance of constructivist theory in underpinning current (and foreseeable) message systems practices in conventional, but especially in computer-based learning environments, one can logically expect little to change in terms of inequalities in educational outcomes. To begin with, cognitive psychology and its perspective on the nature of cognition has inspired few rich theories concerned with managing the processes of learning (Crook 1994). Learning and meaning-making are conceptualised as predominantly internal psychological events. Its all about inserting the necessary knowledge and skills into the heads of students. Here, the structuring of learning is about harmonizing with human information processing strategies – where students tend to be passively situated as ‘hapless processors of well-packaged knowledge’ (Crook 1994:60). In this paradigm, instruction is either the simple transmission of information or about the individual construction of cognitive competence. At a more sophisticated level, it may recognise social context, but always related to individual cognition as its ultimate reference point. In the end, human interactions are perceived as abstract bearers of cognitive structures and processes, and language as an abstract and generalised semiotic system mediating actions and thought (Minick 1993).

The adoption of constructivism as the current theory of choice, a choice especially prevalent in computer-based learning, certainly marks an improvement on earlier more teacher-centred approaches. It has undoubtedly proved to be ideally suited to support the new electronic technologies and the self-contained settings they promote. Although some practitioners embrace broader, socio-cultural perspectives as their foundation for practice, constructivism has nevertheless inherited all the limitations of its psychological foundations (Crook 1994).

However, constructivism at least begins to recognise – if in a rather minimalist sense - that heads are attached to socio-culturally situated bodies! Constructivism focuses on the shaping of learning environments suitable for self-contained discovery – pupil centred settings for self-directed exploration for the building of new understandings. “Pupil centred theorizing distracts our attention from the interpersonal dimension of learning: how it is supported by the interventions of other people” [Crook, 1994 #2:69]. The notion that achievement in learning is fundamentally collaborative is not an option for this theoretical position. Constructivism dwells on individual student activity – encouraging designs for learning in which that activity may be creative, even if it includes some collaborative practices. Hence, constructivism, whilst beginning to point in the right direction still offers a psychological description of knowledge, as its theories focus on individual knowledge acquisition. Even social constructivism – as a form of macro-constructivism – is still pre-occupied with the way in which social processes influence an individual’s psychological or phenomenological construction of meaning. In this theoretical tradition, work on understanding the social and interpersonal processes that order formal learning has still tended to refer to sociality in an overly generalised and often vague fashion (Schoenfeld 1999) (Hruby 2001). In short, its ultimate backgrounding, if not at times the negation of the fundamentally social nature of human beings and learning, reflects the continued psychological preoccupation with the internal mental processes of individuals. Furthermore, constructivism, though at first glance promising due to its use of structural metaphors, is also seriously deficient as a functional metaphor. A perceptible gap in educational psychology
literature, as Hruby points out, is that the actual constructor is noticeably “absent in most of the metaphor’s prevalent iterations” (Hruby 2001:48). Furthermore, “without an agent of some sort to act as constructor, the whole notion of construction as an analogy for knowledge processes inside the head reduces to a piecemeal version of a transmission model of learning.” (Hruby 2001:48).

In the final analysis, as Schoenfeld (1999) points out, “the cognitive community has failed to make substantial progress on issues of self and identity, of social interactions, of what it means to be a member of a community – and of how all of that relates to who we are, what we perceive, and what we do”. In addition, issues of social justice and equity do not figure prominently, if at all, on their agenda (Crook 1994).

It can be argued that the theoretical limitations inherent even in constructivist approaches continues to prevent their pedagogical practices from making significant inroads into the structural underachievement of students from disprivileged social groups in secondary and higher education. Nevertheless, some innovative theorising in discrete pockets of the educational establishment do point towards a promising breakthrough.

**Socio-cultural epistemology: the beginnings of a break through**

Despite the educational community’s general embrace of constructivism, other educational theorists and practitioners driven by social justice concerns, take a less sanguine view of the conventional/constructivist pedagogical landscape. There is a kind of thinking increasingly prevalent among leading edge educators, and especially language and literacy educators, that recognises the significance of differences in language and literacy practices. These educators perhaps experience more than others, the daily struggle by disprivileged learners and the increasing demands on education systems to satisfy the interests of the ‘New Work Order’, in which many social groups are being even more disadvantaged and disempowered. The pioneering work by Lankshear, Knobel, Gee, Kress, Green, Snyder, and the New London Group, to name but a few, bear testimony to these pressures and to a drive to formulate new designs for learning based on social rather than psychological theorising. Whereas psychological theories focus on the individual-in-action, at least socio-cultural theorists recognise that being human inevitably means being-in-the-world, and therefore being situated in all its cultural and historical possibilities. Interaction, largely with others, in specific, culturally concrete and historically specific settings are the locus and carrier of learning. Critical educators in search for pedagogical transformation in line with social justice tend to opt for a socio-cultural approach. There is an explicit acknowledgement that language, literacy and learning are inherently social (and therefore political and ideological) processes mediated by culture and history. Therefore, since the 1980’s, critical literacy educators (e.g. Lankshear (2000), linguists such as Gee (1996) and Fairclough (1992), and critical educators and educational sociologists, such as Lather (1991) Apple (1993), Delpit (1995) and Shor (1992) have been intent on developing curricula and pedagogies specifically capable of achieving justice for students from minority and other disadvantaged groups. At the same time, although the critical literacy, authentic pedagogy and productive pedagogies approaches tend to focus specifically on the area of school education, their perspectives need to be brought to bear in the tertiary sector, and sooner rather than later.

In this context, a broad socio-cultural perspective at least begins to offer us a most promising insight into the nature of learning. In so doing, it poses a most fundamental challenge to the many ways in which traditional thinking about learning and its embodiment in message systems practices separate the real world from educational institutions and processes. At the same time, despite its promising emphasis on the social and cultural, it too has not quite been able to escape
from the pervasive dominance of psychological theorizing. Despite sociological, anthropological and linguistic influences, it is generally still located within, and bounded by the hegemony of psychological theorising, albeit at the socio-cultural end of the spectrum. Packer (1993), for instance points to a ‘creeping dualism’, a propensity to revert back to individualistic and mentalistic thinking in much socio-cultural literature. Litowitz (1993) too unquestioningly takes learner autonomy and independence as the goals of learning. As Packer (Packer 1993:261) notes, “participation with others is a necessary, but only a temporary phase in achieving autonomy.” It is as if social participation is a temporary bit of scaffolding to be discarded as soon as possible. Furthermore, despite overtures to the social, the evaluation of pedagogical effectiveness is still constructed it in terms of individual beliefs, motivation, attitudes and gains. Much research in this area still focuses on individual learning in which the students are removed from their context. Thus, although people are seen as social in origin, educational outcomes are persistently viewed in terms of learners as autonomous, solitary individuals (Packer 1993). In short, sociocultural theorising is an attempt to escape and reject the simple internalisation theory of learning “but, like the return of the repressed, traces of it linger” (Packer 1993: 264).

On the other hand, if learning is more about changes in activity, in the structure of behaviour, in identity and in a person’s mode of engagement in social practices, then we might begin to ask different questions, such as:

♦ how or to what extent are learners different beings, that is, to what extent have their self-understanding and identity changed;
♦ how or to what extent has their mode of engagement in social practices changed;
♦ how have learners as a group, made social gains, that is changed in terms of social beliefs, values, and practices?

People learn when they are empowered in their social actions with others, when they have become effectively socialised into participating in shared cultural practices. These may include solitary activities, but on the whole they are social practices that entail cooperation (Packer 1993). This perspective is finally, and fully developed in social-constructionist theorising. **Towards a critical socio-constructionist praxis**

Having set the scene, so to speak, and acknowledging the foundational work of a number of promising socio-cultural approaches, I shall now sketch out the essential design features of a new critical socio-constructionist architecture of learning. It is designed to provide some insight into socially just design principles and pedagogical strategies that unites educational institutions and processes with the real world of learners and their social futures, and is capable of achieving ‘curricular justice’. At the same time, it possesses a broad-based coherent, and above all useful theoretical framework.

Let us begin by asking what would happen if we were to stand the existing learning/teaching paradigm on its head and began by taking a distinctly social theoretical perspective? How would such a perspective conceptualise learning and what needs to be put in place to promote it? What would a middle-school classroom, or an undergraduate class on campus or online in a Malaysian – or for that matter an Australian or American university - look like? How would these students and their educators approach, and feel about learning and assessment?

If we operate out of a belief that knowledge, stored as information in the heads of individuals is only a small part of knowing, and that learning and knowing is primarily about active social participation that engage participants in mature, meaningful real-life practices, then, conventional approaches that once looked productive and promising are now much less so (Wenger 1998). This becomes even more pronounced when language and literacy are also seen
as social practices and resources rather than a narrow set of formally defined rules (Street 1998). It now becomes important to find “inventive ways of engaging students in meaningful practices, of providing access to resources that enhance their participation, of opening their horizons so they can put themselves on learning trajectories they can identify with, and of involving them in actions, discussions, and reflections that make a difference to the communities they value” (Wenger 1998:10).

Social constructionism “situates knowledge processes outside the head and cites agents in congress as the wilful constructors of shared understandings and narratives”. In so doing, the construction metaphor “is made whole, the analogy coherent” (Hruby 2001:49). At the same time, constructionism, constituted as it is by three major variants is difficult to define. However, constructionism can be usefully understood via the following features. Firstly, it offers a sociological description of knowledge. It is concerned with the construction of knowledge outside the head, that is, between participants in a social relationship. This focus on the social construction of knowledge places it in conceptual opposition to cognitive constructivist psychology with its focus on mental operations. Constructionism is concerned with “the way knowledge is constructed by, for, and between members of a discursively mediated community” (Hruby 2001:49). As such, it conceptualises this ‘external’ process to be of primary importance in learning. Second, because socially constructed meanings are often taken at face value by members of a discursive community, social constructionism is not only concerned with the construction of particular phenomena but equally so with the way in which lifeworlds (Gee’s capital ‘D’ Discourses) are constituted (Hruby 2001). Also, and interestingly, “work in literacy more generally has been implicitly informed by social constructionist themes, and there are teasing synchronicities between literacy research and social constructionism “ (Hruby 2001). This is exemplified by Gergen (1995), who identifies social constructionism by way of four themes:

1. we come to understand the world not through observation but through linguistic, cultural and historical contingencies;
2. understanding is not driven by nature but emerges out of an active and cooperative activity by persons in relationship;
3. the form which understanding takes does not depend on empirical validity but on the variations inherent in social processes such as communication, negotiation, and conflict;
4. understandings are socially negotiated and are therefore integrated with all other human activities (Hruby 2001).

Furthermore, in social constructionism, much attention is paid to the ways in which cultural constructions are created and transformed, how belief and value systems are modified, as well as on how new modes of pedagogy, academic expression and disciplinary relations are generated (Gergen 1995). At any rate, social constructionism – in all of its variants, provide theoretical frameworks of knowledge construction capable of giving greater precision and focus to pedagogical inquiries. It is also a highly valuable perspective in that it offers the prospect of increasing our understanding of the social and interpersonal processes that govern learning and therefore our pedagogical practices. Furthermore, as the fundamental locus of learning is now squarely located outside the heads of learners, it is thus readily accessible for research by educators (Hruby 2001).

Although we have laid the groundwork for a socio-constructionist approach, why take a critical approach to this theoretical framework?
A critical approach

As Colin Lankshear (1994) correctly points out, the term critical is all too often invoked either as a magic bullet without actually defining what supposedly characterises a critical orientation, or is oversubscribed with meaning so that it can mean anything to anyone. Hence, the importance of clarifying this essentially contested concept.

Firstly, if language, literacy and learning are socially constructed ‘by, for, and between members of a discursively mediated community’, then it follows that they are not only inherently political and ideological, but, as indicated earlier, also integral to the production and maintenance of institutionally structured power relations. They are, as Lankshear (1994:11) stresses “deeply and inescapably bound up with producing, reproducing and maintaining arrangements of power which are unequal”. Moreover, as ideologically laden, they carry partisan meanings. Taking a critical stance therefore entails (a) a recognition of the inherently political and ideological nature of language, literacy and learning, (b) an exploration of how their social practices create and sustain unequal and unjust power relations (Gilbert 1993), and (c) engaging these power relations to transform them and achieve socially just outcomes.

Because the poverty of educational outcomes involves all three message systems, a critical stance must transform all three - curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. Furthermore, as I have tried to demonstrate in this paper, to address these message systems from a psychological perspective only is most inadequate if not counterproductive. The three message systems embedded as they are in a major social institution, constitute sites of contestation, struggle and transformation. Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment are therefore not reducible to cognitive issues and cannot be addressed solely at the level of psychology. Moreover, the poverty of psychological theories of learning become even more pointed when we adopt a critical stance as defined above. Whilst psychological theorising illuminates the realm of the intra-personal, it is unable to enlighten us as to the all-important connections between the political, ideological and hence power dimensions of ‘learning-as-social practices’. A new architecture of learning has to pay attention to the interpersonal, the structural and the institutional dimensions of learning. A comprehensive theory of learning must address in a holistic way, the social nature of the person and their sense of identity vis-à-vis the three educational message systems. This, of necessity calls for a different ontology and epistemology, one based on a socio-historical rather than individual-cognitive paradigm. This is the promise of this emerging, critical, socio-constructionist theory of learning and educational praxis.

References


