

# On the Definition of Learning

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# On defining learning from a social-ontological perspective

*Klaus Nielsen*

The aim of this chapter is, based on Honneth's notion of recognition and Lave and Wenger's ideas about situated learning, to formulate a perspective on processes of learning that includes social interaction as a dynamic and genetic dimension in theories of learning. In this respect, Honneth's notion of struggle for recognition will be central. This ambition will, throughout the chapter, be termed as an aim to define a social-ontological perspective on processes of learning. In relation to the issues raised in this anthology, this chapter will be focusing on *Theory building within the field of learning*.

One of the reasons for trying to develop a social-ontological perspective on learning is to formulate a critical alternative to what can be termed "homo economicus" being the evident and unquestionable gestalt for organizing educational activities today. It goes without saying that the image of homo economicus plays a significant role as the dominant perspective on human change within the educational system today, with a strong focus on the "input/outcome" and evaluations (examinations, tests, and grades) to paraphrase the dominating discourse of the PISA examinations. Homo economicus allows for a view of the person as rational, individualistic, utilitarian, calculative, and instrumental (Houston 2010; Ferguson 2007). Within this context, action is directed toward the achievement of predetermined ends to enhance personal well-being, whether defined in monetary or social terms. As will be outlined below, this means that human actions are understood within a frame of means-end thinking, hence defining issues of learning within a technological frame of reference. Crucially, homo economicus drives forward the neoliberal theme of "individualization" with its stress on the agent's choice and freedom. As I will discuss further, the main problem as I see it with the image of homo economicus is that this perspective naturalizes the idea that social struggle as competition between individuals is the structuring force in the development of society.

This being said, the main aim of this chapter is not directly to formulate a critique of the dominance of *homo economicus* in relation to how the educational system is being organized today.<sup>1</sup> The aim is more to develop a social-ontological frame that will make it possible to formulate an alternative to the image of *homo economicus* in educational thinking and with a special focus on processes of learning. In this pursuit, I will outline Honneth's notion of recognition as a central part of a social-ontological approach to human existence (Honneth 2008). Honneth's analyses of recognition point to the primacy of intersubjectivity in human life, and he grounds an ontology of the human subject in the light of the human subject's radical social, or intersubjective, dependency. The fundamental idea is that the intersubjective element is the condition of possibility, both genetically and conceptually, for all forms of interaction, not just between social agents, but even for social actions by social agents taken individually. In his work, Honneth stresses recognition as a dynamic and genetic dimension in social life and hence a central dimension in a social-ontological approach to issues of learning.

The concept of ontology will be defined as "the consideration of being: what is, what exists, what it means for something—or somebody—to be" (Packer & Goicoechea 2000, p. 227). As will be outlined below, this understanding of ontology is inspired by Heidegger (1988) who argues for the notion of meaning and understanding as being crucial for comprehending the essence of human existence.

A short outline of the chapter is as follows: I will briefly outline how mainstream theories of learning in general contain very little potential for developing a critical stance toward current developments. On the contrary, mainstream learning theories seem to fit nicely into the regime of *homo economicus*. Thereafter, the chapter will outline how the discussion of ontology and the critique of *homo economicus* within learning theory are not new. Within the frames of humanistic psychology, Colaizzi and Rogers took up this discussion in the 1960s and 1970s. However, they formulated an alternative to the notion of *homo economicus* with a strong focus on the individual and the potential the individual has to develop an authentic self through unconditional reinforcement (Rogers & Freiberg 1994). Following this critique and inspired by the analyses of Honneth and Lave and Wenger, I will try to develop an understanding of what a social-ontological perspective

on learning could look like. I will conclude by returning to the notion of homo economicus, to see what kinds of critical questions it will be possible to pose through a social-ontological perspective on learning.

### Learning Theory, Homo Economicus, and Technology

Before turning to the social-ontological dimension, it is important to expand the themes of this chapter to theories of learning. As it will be outlined below, in this context, mainstream learning theory will be defined as cognitive learning theory (information processing psychology) and behavioristic learning theory (for an elaboration, see Nielsen 2008). In this paragraph, it will be argued that mainstream conventional learning theories do not reflect ontological questions explicitly. Rather, they are embedded in means–end thinking and have a strong focus on technology (Nielsen 2008; Kvale 1977). Even though these conventional theories of learning are not constituted directly by the dynamics of homo economicus, it is easy to see how they fit into the present economic regime in educational thinking. I will briefly outline the main ideas of conventional learning theories.

Two different schools of thought are central in conventional learning theories: the empiristic and the rationalistic (Packer 1985). Most mainstream definitions of learning have their roots in these two positions (Omrod 2012). The empiristic position is the principal epistemological school of thought that claims that all knowledge of reality is based on sensory experiences. Rationalism applies the epistemological approach by arguing that individuals obtain knowledge of reality solely through the use of reason (see also Packer 1985, and Merleau-Ponty 1981). The empiristic position in psychology discloses itself in behavioral psychology, while the rationalistic position is primarily formulated as an information processing theory of human cognition.<sup>2</sup> The information processing theory can be considered a frame concept that covers many different research programs, rather than a comprehensive theory. Characteristically, these theories focus on describing how the individual gathers, processes, and produces information about the surrounding world (Miller 1983). Learning from an empiristic point of view is defined as “a relative permanent change in [behavior] due to experience,” while learning from a cognitive point of view is defined as “a relatively permanent change in mental associations” (Packer 1985,

p. 3). The first definition focuses on people's change in observable behavior, while the other focuses on changes in mental associations.

As mentioned above, the image of *homo economicus* is that the person is rational, individualistic, utilitarian, calculative, and instrumental. It will be claimed that these features are easily identified in mainstream learning theory. This is not coincidental. According to Kvale (1976, 1977), conventional learning theories have had huge impacts on how we conceptualize human change. The instrumental approach to learning has manifested itself as a basic assumption in mainstream learning theories claiming that the only way to understand human change is to think in instrumental terms. This means–end instrumentality is, as Kvale formulates it, a technological approach, and it comprises a significant part of modern learning theories:

the theories of learning have had the ideological function of making a technological approach to learning self-evident and dominating... However, the latent ideological function of this research has not been trivial – namely of letting a technological approach to fellow human subjects appear as the only possible and valid scientific psychology. (Kvale 1977, p. 106–107)

In this seminal work, Kvale claims that the only thing mainstream theories of learning add to educational practice is a specific technological approach to our understanding of how human subjects change. If we take a close look at the educational debate today, I believe it is easy to recognize the technological approach Kvale is identifying. Furthermore, if we turn to mainstream learning theories looking for a social dimension, we will often look in vain. The social dimension (the importance of the other) is highly neglected or kept to a minimum. It is the individual who is the unquestioned analytical unit (Lave & Wenger 1991). For example, if you take four standard textbooks about learning theory (see Anderson 1999; Deese & Hulse 1975; Driscoll 2005; Omrod 2012), you will find that the social dimension is scarcely mentioned.<sup>3</sup> Following this line of critique, it can be argued that conventional modern learning theories lack a reflection on the ontological questions of human existence. The relationship between human ontology and learning will be discussed further in the next paragraph.



## Returning to the Critical Ontological Discussion About Learning

The concept of ontology is closely related to the German philosopher Heidegger, who in *Being and Time* develops a profound analysis of what it means to be a human being (Heidegger 1988). In his analysis of the characteristics of human's existence, or being-in-the-world, as Heidegger terms it, he outlines the ontological dimension in his analysis of human existence. Put a bit simplistically, focusing on the ontological question allows for an analysis of the distinctive and necessary characteristics of human existence. According to Heidegger, "understanding of Being is itself a definite characteristic of Dasein's Being. Dasein is ontically distinctive in that it is ontological" (Heidegger 1988, p. 32).<sup>4</sup> The ontological understanding of the human being has to do with the fact that we, as human beings, are always in the process of understanding ourselves. The problem that Heidegger raises is related to Western philosophy and thinking in general. According to Heidegger, Western thinkers tend to forget that we as human beings are being-in-the-world first and foremost, before we start asking questions about how we know the world. Heidegger is launching a critique of the epistemological tradition in Western thinking (founded by Descartes) as only being concerned with epistemological questions, questions about knowledge of the world. Heidegger's claim is that Western thinking should concern itself with ontological questions instead (Dreyfus 1997, p. 3). Based on his analysis of human's being-in-the-world and its ontological dimensions, Heidegger develops a critical stance, especially in relation to the cognitive sciences, toward reifying and alienating human existence (for an elaboration, see Dreyfus 1995).

If we return to learning theory, Heidegger in particular, but also Kierkegaard, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty's analyses of the ontological dimension of human existence, made a great impact on the formulation of humanistic psychology in the 1960s. In the tradition of the growing field of humanistic psychology, Rogers, May, and Colaizzi criticized mainstream learning theory for leading to superficial learning, dehumanization, and alienation. Following Heidegger's general critique of Western thinking, they argued that behaviorism and cognitive trends in modern learning theory neglected human existence and questions of ontology. Fundamentally, the critique raised by humanistic psychology concerning learning theory has two dimensions. Firstly, Rogers and

Colaizzi particularly criticize cognitive psychology (information processing psychology) for not providing a proper learning theory when it comes to identifying what constitutes change in human existence. Colaizzi is especially precise in his critique, arguing that cognitive psychology does not provide us with a genuine understanding of human learning. Rather, he argues, cognitive psychology provides us with an understanding of how human beings remember delimited symbolic material for a short time in order to reproduce it at a specific time and at a specific place, within a specific institutional order. In this sense, cognitive psychology does not provide us with a genuine learning theory that makes it possible to understand how we as human beings learn in relation to our existence:

For all of us there are certain life lessons which we read or hear spoken hundreds of times before they finally click in. Until they do click in, we haven't really learned them, regardless of how glibly we can verbalize them. Prior to the point where they become significantly interwoven in our existence, they are merely bits of information that we have acquired (1978, p. 127).

Secondly, according to Colaizzi, there is a hidden agenda in making cognitive psychology the dominant learning theory in education-institutional life. This hidden agenda is that cognitive psychology helps socialize students into social conformism, teaching them to forget about their own existence. As Colaizzi claims,

In fact, most of the time I do not act, feel, perceive, think, or experience as essentially my own person, my authentic selfness, is typically lost to me insofar as I lose myself in self-alienated anonymity and inasmuch as I become dissolved in what phenomenologists call 'the they' (Colaizzi 1978, p. 131; see also Kvale 1977).

The "they" is a clear reference to Heidegger's "Das Man" which, according to Colaizzi, pinpoints the essence of social conformism, teaching students to focus on how one (das Man) is acting in a given situation rather focusing on how they as existing beings feel in the concrete situation and acting according to their own existential needs.

Based on these considerations, both Colaizzi and Rogers develop conceptual differentiations in which they try to identify, on one hand,

processes of learning that have a significant impact on how persons genuinely change in a personal and existential sense and, on the other hand, processes of learning that are merely a matter of learning in a cognitive sense. Colaizzi and Rogers denote learning processes with an impact on students' existence as genuine learning and experiential learning (Colaizzi 1978; Rogers & Freiberg 1994). The more cognitive learning processes described by mainstream learning theory, on the other hand, they term information acquisition (Colaizzi 1978) and cognitive learning processes.

There are, however, a number of problems in the way that both Colaizzi and Rogers approach the ontological perspective when it comes to issues of learning. It goes without saying that humanistic psychology has made a significant contribution to learning theories, as it highlights the importance of the personal existential dimension as a key component in learning. Questions about meaning, in this view, are crucial to processes of learning. However, one of the problems, one could interject, is whether humanistic psychology poses an alternative to the individualization introduced with the image of *homo economicus* mentioned above. Both Rogers and Colaizzi uncritically see a decontextualized individual as the locus of analysis when they wish to disclose how meaningful learning unfolds. Only when the individual is part of a nonjudgmental environment does genuine and meaningful learning become possible. Social arrangements of any other kind seem only to repress the person's genuine learning process and, in that sense, the gaze of the other is seen as objectifying.<sup>5</sup> In later years, the strong focus that humanistic psychology has on individual self-realization has been critiqued for, in reality, developing a kind of egocentrism (Brinkmann 2005) or developing a concealed way of manipulating subjects in institutional contexts (Nielsen 2005).<sup>6</sup> If we want to take the notion of ontology in relation to learning seriously, we need to approach the social dimension in another way than that suggested by the human psychologists.

### Introduction to a Social-Ontological Perspective

In the following section, I will outline Honneth's notion of a social-ontological perspective. The aim of this paragraph is to outline the dynamic and genetic dimension that Honneth suggests is a crucial part

of social life and hence a central dimension in a social-ontological approach to learning. As will be elaborated below, the central concept in this context is Honneth's understanding of recognition. The overall idea is to consider how processes of recognition are related to human change and processes of learning.<sup>7</sup> This will be done in the next paragraph.

The question about social ontology as formulated by Honneth is inspired by a Hegelian and Marxist tradition in which the subject's existence is not given by the subject itself, as assumed by humanistic psychologists. For Hegel, the individual self is in no sense an immediately given element of consciousness; rather, the individual becomes a subject through being in relationships with others (Hegel 1998). It is solely through our activities in a social frame that we learn to think of ourselves as individuals in the first place (Solomon 1983; Packer & Goicoechea 2000). It is in this context that the idea of recognition becomes important. The idea of recognition as central in human relations is part of a long philosophical tradition. In the works of Hobbes, Rousseau, Kant, and Fichte, there is an acknowledgment of the need for respect and honor in life. Hegel, however, was the first theorist to give recognition in social life its proper place. For him, the act of recognizing and being recognized led to self-awareness. By understanding the other, one's own self-understanding was enlarged. This process reflected an anthropological association between self-consciousness and intersubjectivity, the isolated individual and reciprocity within community, an individual's perspective and a "fusion of 'horizons'" with the other (Gadamer 1975; Houston 2010).

In "The Struggle for Recognition" (1996), Honneth took these ideas as his starting point in order to construct a critical theory of recognition. According to Honneth, the notion of recognition points to the primacy of intersubjectivity in human life, and he grounds an ontology of the human subject in the light of the human subject's radical social, or intersubjective, dependency.<sup>8</sup> The strong focus on the intersubjective element is fundamental to Honneth and also the condition of possibility for all forms of interactions not just between persons, but even for social actions by persons taken individually (Deranty 2009). In this context, recognition can be defined as the process of affirmation as someone by someone, in the form of being loved or cared about, being granted equal rights and being treated as an equal, or being approved of and

appreciated for who one is or what one does (Carleheden, Heidegren, & Willig 2012). In this sense, recognition, for Honneth (2008; Honneth & Margalit 2001), suggests a precognitive affirmation of the social-affective bond between members of social life. In other words, before “cognizing” the identities, traits, and preferences of a person, we have to “recognize” their status as autonomous and agentic (Houston 2010). The intersubjectivistic model developed by Honneth contrasts and critiques what Honneth terms an atomistic and solipsistic perspective on the subject formulated by a Western tradition of thinking (e.g., Machiavelli and Hobbes) to which “the being of the individual is the first and the highest” (Honneth 1996, p. 12). This tradition seems to forget or neglect the communal ground underpinning individuation. Individuation is never simply a pure separation. To some extent, Honneth is formulating a critique of an early version of what we have described as *homo economicus* above.

It is important not to identify recognition in Honneth’s description with psychological processes alone. There is both a functional and a normative dimension in Honneth’s understanding of recognition as pivotal for social life (Deranty 2009).

The idea of recognition has, first of all, a functional perspective: it explains the central problem that social theory is concerned with, the problem of the coordination of individual actions (Deranty 2009). Inspired by Mead (1997), Honneth argues that the perceiver must be able to change his or her perspective in relation to the same object so that one perspective can be connected with another, and the different perspectives united into one object (Honneth 1996). This ability is well accounted for by the capacity to “take the role of the other.” If I am able to take the perspective of the other in social actions, I can project myself into his or her “decentered” perspective on an object, and I can understand why the other is acting as he or she is and act accordingly myself (Honneth 1996). Just as different perspectives are unified in successful communication, the perspectives on the object are unified in successful perception. In other words, human perception is dependent on skills that are learned as a result of social interaction. Communication becomes synonymous with intersubjectivity pitched at a more fundamental level than language (Deranty 2009). According to Honneth, it is important not to identify the fundamental structure of intersubjectivity and communication with speech alone: “it is,

ontogenetically speaking, beyond all doubt that the acquisition of the ability to identify one's objectual-instrumental body as properly one's own clearly precedes the 'practical acquisition of an understanding of the system of personal pronouns'"(Honneth & Joas 1988, p. 84). It is precisely the processes by which human agents are able to see themselves from the perspective of the other, which also explains how the reproduction of social life is possible (Deranty 2009; Honneth 1996). This is a fundamental intuition that the basic processes of social life are in fact made up of recognitive interactions. According to Honneth, all social phenomena need to be approached from a social-ontological perspective because it is that perspective, as Mead demonstrated (1997), which provides the proper explanation of social interactions as coordination of individual actions.

The functional aspect of recognition is closely related to the normative dimension, which constitutes the second dimension of recognition according to Honneth. The processes explaining the possibility of social coordination are the same processes that account for the conditions for personal autonomy (Honneth 1996; Deranty 2009). The normative conclusion that Honneth draws from Mead's theory of social integration is that, since the subject can achieve an identity through relations of reciprocal recognition, those relations in turn have not only a functional dimension but also a normative one. In other words, the recognitive interactional processes provide the subject the capacity to achieve an identity. In this perspective the notion of "self-realization" becomes important. It is important to understand self-realization as something other than the superficial understanding in which self-realization is the full flourishing of an otherwise already established self, as suggested by the humanistic psychology described above. Self-realization in this context refers to the social-ontological possibilities of subjective identity formation. In this sense, "processes of recognition" refers precisely to the conditions that enable a subject to develop a minimal sense of his or her own value; a "self-value" that is the most basic requirement for any action with an amount of autonomy.<sup>9</sup> According to Honneth, "the only way in which individuals are constituted as persons is by learning to refer to themselves from the perspective of an approving or encouraging other, as beings with certain positive traits and abilities" (1996, p. 173). At a very basic level, the normative demands for recognition are therefore not secondary demands stemming from preconstituted

selves, but demands for the realization of conditions without which there can be absolutely no autonomy because there would be no self to exercise autonomy (Deranty 2009; Honneth 1996). Honneth is arguing that there is a fundamental moral and normative dimension in social life based on mutual recognition. As mentioned above, processes of recognition are closely related to a sense of self-value. This means that issues of value and normativity are also part of the essence of processes of recognition in general. In this respect, Honneth's perception of normativity is that it is a constructive dimension in both social and individual life. Social life is based on a kind of precognitive notion of recognition that fundamentally understands others as having the same needs and the same fragility that we have. Accordingly, we can never approach ourselves or the world in any neutral, objective way. Rather, the normative moral approach is always a part of our approach (Fraser & Honneth 2003). If I am recognized for who I am and what I am doing, it is tacitly assumed that I do the same with other participants in social practice (Houston 2010).

When Honneth is approaching issues of recognition, he goes beyond close relations of love and friendship to include legally institutionalized relations of universal respect for the autonomy and dignity of persons, their networks of solidarity, and their shared values, within which the particular worth of members of a community can be acknowledged (Honneth, 1996). In this sense, Honneth is not only concerned with analyzing issues of recognition in close, intimate relations but also as central component in social life in general. In Honneth's work, he claims that three distinct interactional spheres of mutual recognition (and consequently interaction of disrespect) can be mapped out: love, rights, and solidarity. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to account for all of these dimensions of the concept of recognition. However, it is important to add that the notion of solidarity seems to be central in this chapter when addressing issues of learning. "Solidarity" is the term Honneth uses for the cultural climate in which the acquisition of self-esteem has become broadly possible (becoming a part of social practice). In Honneth's view, one can properly speak of "solidarity" only in cases where shared concerns or values are at play.

Honneth emphasizes that when he is addressing recognition as a central concept he is also concerned with notions of struggle in



relationship to recognition. It can be argued that social conflicts are central to Honneth's conceptualization of recognition. However, according to Honneth, social domination and social conflicts should not be understood in terms of conflicts of interest, but more as struggles over moral matters in relation to processes of recognition. As mentioned above, Honneth is critical of the conception of man as utilitarian (man as solipsistic); hence, social conflicts cannot be understood in terms of competition over material opportunities but more in terms of processes of recognition, social contempt, and disrespect (Honneth 1996). In this respect, Honneth is developing a set of categories that can be used to analyze processes, social conflicts, and individual pathologies in terms of processes of recognition, social contempt, and disrespect.

Above, there has been a short account of the general premises of a social-ontological approach to human existence. In the following sections, I will take a closer look at issues of learning from a social-ontological perspective.

### A Social-Ontological Approach to Learning

In what follows, I will pursue in detail more how we could understand learning from a social-ontological perspective. In this pursuit, Honneth's social-ontological outline will be supplemented by the insights developed from a situated perspective on learning (Lave 1992; Lave & Wenger 1991; Lave & Packer 2008). In Lave and Wenger's work on situated learning, and later in Lave and Packer's "Towards A Social Ontology of Learning" (2008), there is great sensitivity to the issue of understanding learning from a social-ontological perspective. This is underlined in the following quote by Lave: "Learning, viewed as a socially situated activity, must be grounded in a social ontology that conceives of the person as an acting being, engaged in activity in the world" (Lave 1992).

One of the central points is that processes of recognition are in themselves, as defined above, an essential part of the learning processes. When Honneth writes of processes of recognition that "the only way in which individuals are constituted as persons is by learning to refer to themselves from the perspective of an approving or encouraging other, as beings with certain positive traits and abilities" (p. 173), it is hard not to see these processes as a matter involving learning. However, it is important to underline, as also indicated in the central idea of situated



learning (Lave & Wenger 1991), that learning is always a part of the subject's participation in social life and not something in itself.

The point is that while Honneth is talking about recognition, Lave and Wenger are adding the learning dimension more systematically. When Honneth writes about recognition in a transformative sense, he mainly addresses it from a developmental-psychological perspective; however, Lave and Wenger add that recognition understood as processes of learning must be understood as a recurrent and open-ended process happening in a variety of communities.

Before outlining the learning perspectives, I will briefly outline a couple of central similarities between Honneth and Lave and Wenger in order to legitimize using insights about learning from situated learning.

As in Honneth's understanding of recognition, the notion of coordination and understanding is central in Lave and Wenger's definition of communities of practice as a matter of "participation in a system of actions where the participants share a common understanding of what they are doing, of what it means to their lives and to the community" (p. 98). We are thus all participants in different communities of practice, which frame our lives and make them meaningful. To be a participant in a community of practice is thus the starting point in an understanding of ourselves and the world. Furthermore, and in accordance with Honneth, to become a part of communities of practices is also a matter of developing an identity and autonomy. The original idea Honneth has developed from Hegel, that social integration and the development of personal autonomy are not two antagonistic processes, but two dimensions of the same process, is also pivotal in situated learning. Lave outlines that everyday practice is where "central identity-generating activities take place," (Lave 1992).

Even though there are differences between Honneth and Lave and Wenger, I believe that Lave and Wenger are addressing the importance of recognition in an analytical and indirect manner, and in that sense they are on the same page as Honneth on this issue. When addressing the dynamics of processes of learning, they conclude from their studies of apprenticeship:

Notions like those of "intrinsic rewards" in empirical studies of apprenticeship focus quite narrowly on task knowledge and skill as the activities to be learned. Such knowledge is of course important; but a

deeper sense of the value of participation to the community and the learner lies in becoming part of the community. Thus, making a hat reasonably well is seen as evidence that an apprentice tailor is becoming “a masterful practitioner”, though it may be perceived in a more utilitarian vein in terms of reward or even value. Similarly, telling one’s life story or making a Twelfth Step call confers a sense of belonging. Moving toward full participation in practice involves not just a greater commitment of time, intensified effort, more and broader responsibilities within the community, and more difficult and risky tasks, but, more significantly, an increasing sense of identity as a master practitioner. (Lave & Wenger 1991, p. 111)

In my interpretation of Lave and Wenger’s description of processes of recognition, they have the important insight that processes of recognitions are always embedded in processes of everyday participation. In this case, to become recognized as a master practitioner involves also recognizing the products that the master practitioner is able to produce. Producing a high-quality hat is intertwined with processes of social recognition. It is not two different processes; they are part of the same process.

### More on Learning

Lave and Wenger (1991) are not merely confirming Honneth’s theories, but they are also adding to an understanding of learning from a social-ontological perspective being the central project of this chapter. I will briefly outline some of the fundamental insights they have to offer when addressing issues of learning from a social-ontological perspective.

Firstly, as analyzed by Lave and Wenger (1991), processes of learning are closely related to ongoing participation in various communities of practices. As suggested by Lave and Wenger with their concept of legitimate peripheral participation, processes of learning are nourished by a continuity of what I will interpret as ongoing struggles for recognition (see p. 110–117). The central point, based on studies of learning in apprenticeship and learning in everyday practice, is that learning is closely related to changing social positions, social relations, and tasks often related to a growing social significance of what the individual is doing in relation to the other participants in the

community of practice. In this sense, the understanding of learning related to legitimate peripheral participation allows us to understand learning in two ways. First of all, matters of learning are related to a growing insight into what others are doing and why. Moreover, matters of learning are related to processes of growing social recognition and hence a change in social positions and a change in a person's self-evaluation in a positive direction.

Second, as underlined by both Lave and Wenger (1991) and Honneth (1996), processes of recognition and learning have an identity-constituting dimension. As suggested by Honneth (1996), processes of recognition are closely related to the values dominating the everyday practices people participate in. According to Honneth (1996), this value-dimension manifests itself in a struggle for status or social respect within the communities of practice that people participate in. In Lave and Wenger's outline of legitimate peripheral participation as a central way to understand learning, they describe how it is possible for the participants, through taking part in different parts of practice, to become recognized and in that sense develop a sense of social esteem.

Third, in a social-ontological perspective, learning is part of everyday practice. It is not reserved for specific institutions, and in that sense, processes of learning are not necessarily a part of an educational practice or closely related to processes of teaching. Processes of recognition happen in a variety of contexts (e.g., among family members, friends, peers, colleagues), and this suggests that we need to understand more formalized school activities as part of other activities and not the other around.

Fourth, processes of learning involve both a social and an individual dimension. As suggested by both Lave and Wenger (1991) and Honneth, the social and individual dimensions of human existence are inseparable. This means that we need to understand learning as within the frames of developing a specific identity and at the same time maintaining and changing communities of practices. By focusing on struggles of recognition and identity as a central part of learning processes, both Lave and Wenger and Honneth are calling attention to the importance of reformulating the cognitive-inspired educational agenda, where processes of learning are equivalent to processes of knowledge acquisition.

## The Critical Dimension of a Social-Ontological Learning Theory

Addressing issues of learning from a social-ontological perspective makes it possible to ask critical questions about societal learning practices in general. It is important to be aware of the negativistic approach Honneth is introducing. We can argue that if we take the considerations of a social-ontological approach to learning seriously, we have the opportunity to develop a way of critically approaching situations where mutual recognition is failing. This leads us to identify disrespect and social struggles for recognition when approaching issues of learning.

This means, more precisely, that we can understand problems with learning as more than individual problems. It is possible to analyze them as problems constituted by social practice and lack of mutual recognition. As outlined above, the impetus for writing this chapter was the growing individualization and instrumentalization we are experiencing today and the lack of potential in mainstream learning theory for developing a critical stance to this mindset. Rather, mainstream theories of learning seem to fit nicely, with their focus on means–end thinking, technology, and control, into the regime of *homo economicus*.

If we accept the premises laid out in the social-ontological approach to learning outlined above, it can be argued that mainstream theories of learning do not really add to our understanding of what constitute processes of change in everyday life. Inspired by Kvale's analysis (1977), it can be claimed that mainstream theories of learning lead us to misrecognize where the potential for real change lies. Faced with issues of gender, ethnicity, and social class, there is a strong tendency to turn these issues into distinct problems of learning deficits (Reid & Valle 2004) rather than seeing them as struggles for recognition calling for the presence of an open, pluralistic, evaluative framework within which social esteem is ascribed. One of the ways that a social-ontological perspective to learning would approach the problems that schools are faced with is by analyzing struggles for recognition within the frames of processes of social disrespect and lack of social recognition. Rather than seeing problems as the results of cognitive malfunctions like lack of intelligence, lack of appropriate preschool behavior, and lack of motivation (Reid & Valle 2004), problems should be thematized

within a social-ontological frame as problems of communication and misrecognition.

As mentioned in the introduction, in mainstream theories of learning there is a strong focus on control, input and output variables, and the processing, storing, and retrieving of knowledge, leading to a strong focus on the formal processes of learning. However, little attention is paid to the content or the subject matter of the learning process. By introducing a stronger focus on participation and processes of recognition, it becomes important to address what is being recognized in processes of learning and why. In everyday life, it is often more transparent why students are learning what they are learning and why it might be important. This division between processes of recognition and processes of learning tends to exclude aspects of meaning and understanding, making mainstream theories of learning redundant.

Finally, one of the main problems with the educational organizational structure following the logic of homo economicus is that processes of recognition is kept at a minimum. As mentioned above, there is a strong focus on tests, examinations and grades as central but formalized ways of receiving a technical version of recognition. As indicated by Honneth (1996) recognition is in many cases a very practical endeavor and as suggested by Lave and Wenger (1991) a presupposition for being part of recognitional interactions is to participate in a shared social practice. If we take these considerations seriously when addressing issues of learning, we need to develop possibilities of shared participation in communities of practices as a central presupposition for nourishing processes of recognition.

## Conclusion

Based on situated learning and Honneth's work, I have tried to develop a social-ontological approach to learning in which Honneth's focus on the struggle for recognition was central. I read Honneth and Lave and Wenger's work in line with a tradition from humanistic psychology in which ontology was considered important when addressing issues of learning. In this context, the notion of a social-ontological approach to issues of learning was used to formulate a critique of the tendencies both in the current regime of homo economicus and in the mainstream theories of learning that seem to fit nicely into the regime of homo

economicus, with its strong focus on technology and instrumentality. The main idea of the chapter and the main idea in formulating a social-ontological perspective on how we comprehend processes of learning was to make it possible to formulate a critique of the image of the homo economicus. A few words of reservation are warranted: even though I claim that the situated learning perspective as developed by Lave and Wenger shares concerns with Honneth's work, there are number of differences that I did not have the time or space to elaborate on. Another issue that I would like to make clear is that even though a social-ontological perspective has been central in the last part of the chapter, I have not meant to develop a new kind of dualism in relation to, for example, cognitive processes. Cognitive processes are important parts of our being-in-the-world with other persons and hence needs to be understood as an important part of social ontology. As mentioned above, it becomes problematic when issues of cognition are what define man and when issues of cognition become decontextualized and reified (see Honneth 2008, for an elaboration).

## Notes

- 1 For critiques of homo economicus within educational theory see Read 2009; Olssen & Peters 2005.
- 2 It must be underlined that my presentation of behavioral psychology and information processing theory is a brief summary and does not claim to be theoretically adequate, due to my aim of outlining a theory of learning related to the social-ontological dimension.
- 3 Only Bandura's theory of social learning is often mentioned.
- 4 According to Heidegger, there is a significant difference between the ontical and the ontological: "Ontological inquiry is concerned primarily with Being; ontical inquiry is concerned primarily with entities and the facts about them" (Heidegger 1988, p. 31). In my understanding of Heidegger, an ontical inquiry is one in which we try to understand something (e.g., a human being) as an entity, a product of biological or sociological processes. In one respect, this is not wrong, but it is not the whole story about what it means to be a human being. There is an ontological question focusing on meaning and understanding that is more essential when trying to understand what a human being is.
- 5 For an elaboration of this critique, see Honneth's discussion of Sartre's understanding of recognition (Honneth 1996, p. 156).
- 6 See Dreyfus and Dreyfus's defence of an ontological understanding of learning and their critique of a social-ontological perspective on learning (Dreyfus & Dreyfus 1999, p. 71–74).

- 7 Even though Honneth does not develop a theory of learning, he uses the notion of learning quite frequently throughout his texts.
- 8 Honneth replaces Heidegger's care with Hegel's recognition as the privileged stance in man's relation to self and world (Honneth 2008, p. 36).
- 9 Autonomy is different from processes of individualization (see Honneth 2014, for an elaboration).

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