On the Definition
of Learning

Edited by
Ane Qvortrup, Merete Wiberg,
Gerd Christensen & Mikala Hansbøl

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Contents

Learning from a social practice theoretical perspective

Maj Sofie Rasmussen

Introduction

With an outset in social practice theory (Holland & Lave 2009; Lave 2011) and substantialized by empirical research from *Fryshuset*,[1] the chapter offers an approach to the educational field that allows us to examine learning processes in their constitutive relations between persons, materiality, and social, historical, and political conditions. It is argued that this way of exploring learning may facilitate the conceptualization of expansive mo(ve)ments[2] (Mørck 2014) and the processes of becoming a legitimate member of the varied communities of practice at *Fryshuset* (Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger 2004). Embedded in this conceptualization of learning lies a critique of conventional learning theories, which are understood as theories that enhance behavioral and cognitive dimensions of learning, e.g. empiristic and rationalistic schools of thought (Packer 1985), and seem to originate in dualistic views of the world-subject relationship (Nielsen 1999). These theories will, however, only be shortly touched upon throughout this chapter, since the aim is to discuss, illustrate and suggest how a social practice theoretical approach may contribute to the educational field, rather than giving a complete account of the learning theories that it challenges.[3] One point of criticism worth addressing here, though, is that conventional learning theories seem to ignore the historical, political contexts in and across which learning takes place, thereby separating learning processes from social life. As Lave argues (2011, 152f.):

> "...social life is not reducible to knowledge or even to knowing, but to collective doing, as what being is, as part of the lived-in world. Reducing activity to mental activity – acquiring, transferring, creating, transmitting, internalizing knowledge is not inclusive enough to identify where, how, or with what meaning the stuff we call 'knowledge' is part of social life. Knowledgeability is always part of situated social, historical being".

With this implicit critique of information processing theory and learning transfer, Lave introduces an understanding of learning that emphasizes collective, situational, and social dimensions, where learning 'something' is to change one's social existence towards becoming a member of different communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Before elaborating further on social practice theory, the following section will provide a short presentation of the empirical outset for this chapter, *Fryshuset*.

Fryshuset – different ways of 'doing' school?

Fryshuset, which is often referred to as the largest youth center in the world, was founded in 1984 by Anders Carlberg among others. Initially it was a place where young people met to do sports and music, and gradually different social projects and educational programs were added to the agenda. Today *Fryshuset* runs both a high school and a lower-secondary school (as well as various other educational programs), and is the initiator of two exit programs (*Exit* and *Passus*). Common to both the educational programs and the many social projects is a conviction that in order to enable young people to explore their passions and find their way into society, values such as encouragement, confidence, responsibility and understanding are crucial (see www.fryshuset.se).

At *Fryshuset* the pupils' passionate interests[4] (basketball, dancing, music, skateboarding, and art) are part of the schedule three times a week (approx. 6 hours per week), and according to the head of the school they are considered just as necessary for the pupils' learning and development as the more academic subjects. However, being passionate is not exclusively linked to organized 'non-academic' activities: "reading books may also be a passionate interest" – as the head of the school emphasizes in an interview – but "developing your personality and your social competences is just as important for the students". According to her, this way of doing school and organizing learning environments attracts pupils who have previously experienced school from marginal positions and felt that they did not fit in. A considerable number of them come from socioeconomically disadvantaged families and may not get the necessary support from their parents. To many of these pupils the passionate interests and the

communities around them are what motivate them to come to school and stay there as well:

> "One thing is that even if you're tired in the morning and don't want to go school, you go anyway because you want to skate, and then you stay... You stay and do your schoolwork even though you are not up for it" (Johan, 9th grade).

On the other hand, *Fryshuset* also attracts pupils from more privileged families, who deliberately choose *Fryshuset* because they have the opportunity to start pursuing a dream of becoming e.g. a professional dancer or basketball player while attending school and taking their exams.

As the American professor Ken Robinson points out, today's educational systems are marked by a so-called 'academic inflation' (Robinson 2012), and he requests that the students' creativity and 'non-academic' interests and passions are brought into focus to a much greater extent – both to avoid (further) marginalization of many students and to improve the educational system in general. Offhand, this is what *Fryshuset* is trying to do – but the question remains: how do the students experience this way of doing school, and how does it influence their possibilities for learning and participation across different contexts in and out of school? To explore these questions, this chapter proposes a social practice theoretical framework of learning, which will be elaborated in the following section.

A social practice theory of learning

This paper draws on a social practice theoretical framework (Holland & Lave 2009; Lave 2011) that emphasizes the historical and material productions of persons in changing social practices and integrates concepts from Danish/German critical psychology (e.g. Dreier 2008; Mørck 2006; Holzkamp 1979) and situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger 1991). It originates in a Marxist understanding of 'praxis' (Lave 2011), which implicates that persons are understood as always material and embodied in the local practices in which they participate, and in their relations with other persons, things, and institutional arrangements. From a Marxist perspective, man is, thus, what he *does* (Bernstein

1971), and consequently, knowledge is regarded as inseparable from engagement in practice (Lave 2011, p. 152).

The notion of situated activity points to the assumption of how subjects, objects, and lives are made in relation to each other, and as Lave (2011, p. 152) writes: "..the contexts of people's lives aren't merely containers or backdrops, nor are they simply whatever seems salient to immediate experience".

'Praxis' or 'practice' is to be understood as "the encounter between people as they address and respond to each other while enacting cultural activities under conditions of political-economic and cultural-historical conjuncture" (Holland & Lave 2009, p. 3). In other words, practice is constituted by the actions of persons, who (re)produce and change the practice self-constituently through participation (Dreier 2008). The historically and politically produced relations thus create the conditions for how persons can participate in a specific practice.

Consequently, in a social practice theoretical understanding, learning is closely connected to the learner's participation in changing social practices and cannot be reduced to the accumulation of knowledge or a measurable outcome of teaching. Both the situational and relational character of social life are thus emphasized, and to understand social life – or, more specifically, understand and conceptualize learning – we cannot ignore the political and historical dimensions of these practices. Thus, in order to understand how and under which conditions possibilities for learning are produced in and across contexts within *Fryshuset's* lower-secondary school, it is crucial to examine the school's historical, political-economic, and cultural-institutional position and how this may have changed and changes over time (Lave & Packer 2008). Through the politically and historically produced relations that Lave refers to above, possibilities and limitations for action and participation are created.

In the educational field this means that in order to understand and conceptualize learning we need to bring into focus the conditions under which learning is both made possible and/or limited, i.e. the relations between the institutional arrangements, political agendas, (non-)academic subjects, teachers, leaders, and the students themselves.

Woven into the core of the social practice theory presented here, Danish-German critical psychology (e.g. Dreier 2008; Mørck 2006; Holzkamp 1979) stresses the dialectical and mutually constitutive

relation between the subject and the world. This chapter thus argues that learning is understood within a dialectical framework that does not oppose or separate subject and world, unlike some cognitive learning theories that rest on dualistic accounts and define learning as a matter of achieving better knowledge about the world and transforming knowledge into memory (Nielsen 2008b). Moreover, cognitive approaches tend to primarily study the learner's 'inner landscape', metaphorically speaking, and regard learning as a predominantly epistemological question. According to Nielsen (2006), Descartes' understanding of epistemology influences the way educational arrangements and situations are organized, i.e. on principles of moving from analysis of basic elements of a specific subject matter to a more complex recognition or synthesis. This process of achieving knowledge about the world is problematic, Nielsen argues (ibid. p. 211), since it decontextualizes the problems we encounter in order to reduce complexity.

From a social practice theoretical perspective, learning is studied and analyzed with an outset in the learner's perspectives on participation and (reasons for) action in and across different contexts, a so-called first-person perspective (Holzkamp 1983; Mørck 2006: 257).[5] When conducting empirical research, this means that trajectories of change and the ways in which we shape/are shaped into the persons we are and become through (more or less) participation in changing social practices over time are pivotal. If one accepts this position, the learner's perspectives on possibilities (and limitations) for action and learning, on meaningful mo(ve)ments, and on his or her changing participation in and across different social contexts are crucial in order to study learning at all.

In the following section two cases from my empirical study at *Fryshuset* will be presented in order to ground my theoretical arguments and illustrate what a social practice theoretical understanding of learning may allow us to capture when we move into the educational field. The cases are situated in the skater park and the classroom, respectively, and we follow a group of four male students, who are all skaters.

Empirical cases: The skater park and the classroom

The cases below have been chosen because they illustrate how following students across learning communities within the school allows us to gain insight into how the students' participation changes and, thus,

how different social and material arrangements constitute possibilities and/or limitations in relation to learning and participation. The cases derive from field notes conducted during observations.

Case 1: The skater park

When I enter the skater park, a group of boys from 9th grade are waiting on the staircase and cheering on the 7th graders, who are about to finish their skating lesson. Instead of shouting or clapping, the 9th graders slam their boards onto the concrete floor to make loud noises. As soon as the 7th graders have left the skater park, the 9th graders jump onto their boards. The four boys from 9.X are all there. At first there are 12 boys skating, but eventually a few more arrive. They are all wearing helmets, and most of them are in baggy pants and a loose t-shirt. From the speakers loud jazz music is floating and mixing with the sounds of the skateboards. The skater park is spacious with several ramps and obstacles for the skaters to challenge themselves – but not once do the boys collide or get in each other's way. Watching the four boys from 9.X, I notice how engaged, focused and persistent they all are when practicing a trick on the board. They keep trying, and every time they fall on the ground they jump right up with a smile on their faces to give it another try. For an outsider like me, skating seems to be a rather individual activity at first glance, but I soon come to realize how interdependent the boys are – both in order to navigate among each other in a space which is unpredictable and possibly dangerous, and in order to be able to learn new tricks. (field notes)

Case 2: The classroom

The subject is religion, and the students in 9.X are to work on questions relating to Buddhism. Prior to this class they have read a text about Buddhism, which will be the outset for the task. They are divided into groups by the teacher, and the four skater boys end up in the same group, because they already sit together. A fifth boy, Jason, whose passionate interest is basketball, arrives late and is asked by the teacher to join the skaters. Another group of three girls and a boy starts discussing the task. The other students leave to sit outside the classroom. The teacher follows

them, and the four skater boys start chatting to each other. Facing each other and turning their backs on the fifth boy, they stare at one of their phones, where – judging by the sound – a video is playing. With the textbook on his lap, Jason seems to be reading the text on Buddhism. He looks up at the skater boys several times as if to say, "let's start working on the questions", but he doesn't utter a word, and the four boys never pay him any attention. Not until the teacher arrives do the skater boys look up from the phone and turn to the book, but as soon as she leaves again, they are busy discussing the video. When the class ends they have barely done anything in relation to the task demanded by the teacher. (field notes)

In the following sections, the cases will be used to discuss the theoretical framework presented above in relation to how a social practice theoretical approach may contribute to our understanding of the empirical field when conducting educational research, as well as challenging more conventional theories.

Participation and learning in and across socio-material arrangements

As argued above, persons engage in practices constituted by their social interactions, by structural arrangements, and by material objects (Lave 2011). This means that different arrangements offer different possibilities or conditions for learning and participation for different persons. Thus, the way persons participate may change across contexts, but their participation in one context will always be related to their participation in other contexts in some way. If we look at the two cases, there does not necessarily – at first glance – seem to be a link between how the boys participate in the classroom and the skater park, respectively. However, this assumption changes as I learn more about the skater culture in *Fryshuset*.

The skater teacher explains that when you are a skater, you can barely think of anything else. Skating is "the only thing on your mind", and the switch to e.g. an 'ordinary' lesson can be very difficult, because you are focused on the tricks you just managed (or failed to manage), and the embodied feelings connected to this leave you uneasy and restless. I later learn that this was exactly the case with the boys in the classroom, and that their attention was directed towards skater videos

on YouTube. Their way of participating within the classroom, though it may be regarded as disengagement or laziness from a teacher's point of view, is therefore not necessarily an expression of 'participation in opposition' (Willis 2000) to school or academic subjects, and cannot be understood in isolation from their participation and engagement in the skater park (and other contexts). According to Dreier (2008, p. 90f), the socio-material arrangements that form educational institutions decide what is considered acceptable or appropriate, and consequently influence learning processes within e.g. a classroom:

> "The socio-material arrangements of ordinary classrooms affect the course and dynamics of learning processes in them [...] This arrangement [...] conjures up a special way of engaging with these abstractions that we call 'concentration', and which turns engaging in anything else, even in various contextual connections of the learning issue, into disturbances of the learning process thus arranged"

Having observed the same boys in the skater park, their participation within the classroom is more likely an example of what it means to be passionate about or truly engaged in *something*. As the skater teacher stresses, "skating is an addiction". Considering their participation unambiguously as a 'disturbance' is therefore a rather restrictive understanding that does not recognize or capture the fact that these students are actually engaged in 'something' that is meaningful to them and may be part of important learning trajectories – an understanding where so-called 'school learning' is considered the paradigm case of learning (Dreier 2008), and where learning does not reach beyond the structural arrangements of the classroom.

Exploring this further in practice, it turns out that the skater teacher and the other teachers do not share their different perspectives on the skater students with each other. Moreover, there seems to be a tendency among the academic teachers to categorize the skater students and explain their relatively passive way of participation in other subjects with an outset in what (from the skater teachers' point of view) seems to be a narrow understanding of what it means to be a skater – they are skaters, consequently they are lazy and disengaged. Paying attention to historical dimensions, as argued above, skateboarding is known to be a culture of oppositional character, and the skaters are often looked

upon as outsiders, which may help us to understand the teachers' perspectives. The fact that the students *seem* passive and unfocused from a teacher's perspective only enhances the categorization. At the same time, this understanding of skateboarding as a so-called counterculture (Willis 2000) may prevent us from discovering how being a skater is not necessarily about acting in an anti-school manner and being unwilling to learn – on the contrary, it seems to be linked with high levels of engagement, success, and, as will be argued below, certain academic skills. In other words, the skater park seems to constitute an important but complex learning environment that, on the one hand, allows the students to immerse themselves in and participate actively in something they really enjoy – but on the other hand seems to influence their participation in other subjects, as the empirical examples suggest.

This complexity demands further attention and points to critical issues in the educational field: Which ways of participation are supported and/or limited in the classroom and, in this case, the skater park, respectively – and how/why? How do these different socio-material arrangements enhance or undermine each other in relation to the students' possibilities for learning and participation? Which understandings/categorizations of what it means to an 'appropriate' student are (re)produced across the different contexts, and how does this influence the students' possibilities for participation?

The empirical cases underpin the notion that in order to grasp and understand participation and learning we need to focus our attention on both the differences and the interrelatedness between learning situations which influence possibilities of participation and learning and the way we understand the students' participation. This means paying attention to how such situations are arranged structurally, socially, and materially, and following persons as they move and change within and across them. As Dreier (2008, p. 94) argues, "no context can then be grasped on its own, as an island, but must be analysed as being involved somehow in structural arrangements of social practice".

Learning as expansive mo(ve)ments and social self-understanding

Mørck (2014) introduces the notion of learning as meaningful, expansive mo(ve)ments in and across different social contexts. This

means that learning is analyzed through mo(ve)ments significant to the pupil's processes towards becoming more (or less) of a legitimate member in different communities of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991). A significant or meaningful mo(ve)ment could be the experience of actually 'being able' to contribute to and be recognized as a legitimate member of a community, e.g. the skaters, the basketball team, or the dance group – a position that may change the student's social self-understanding (Holzkamp 2013b) of himself or herself as a 'capable learner' and support learning processes in other contexts. The concept of *expansive learning* (Mørck 2010; Kristensen & Mørck 2014) is inspired by Engeström (1987) and Holzkamp (2013a). Engeström (1987) enhances the collective character of learning, whereas Holzkamp (2013a) distinguishes *expansive learning* from *defensive learning* – the former being in line with the student's interests – i.e. their orientations and personal trajectories (Dreier 1999) – and increasing his or her influence upon personal life conditions/quality, while *defensive learning* involves coping with particular external demands by demonstrating learning results (Holzkamp 2013a). According to Holzkamp (ibid. p. 124), *defensive learning* leaves the student "cut off from the perspective of a joint control over the living conditions" and without personal motives to learn. Holzkamp thereby creates an analytical dichotomy in order to stress that learning cannot be conceived as a direct result of teaching. As Nielsen (2008a, p. 178) puts it: "even the most perfect teacher cannot ensure that expansive learning takes place".

Trajectories of learning

To some degree the two cases illustrate the distinction made by Holzkamp (ibid.). The students' personal trajectories (Dreier 2003) are clearly oriented towards skating (they also skate when not in school), and this influences their way of participation in the classroom and the skater park. In the skater park, the personal motives to learn are evident, though the object of learning, i.e. mastering different moves and tricks, is demanding and at times intangible. I realized this when I decided to learn the most basic skating skills myself, supported by one of the boys, Lukas. Besides the bodily challenges, e.g. keeping your balance, skating requires both mathematical and physical skills to move, turn, and make the board jump – both on the ground and on the ramps.

Furthermore, it takes a great deal of courage and patience. So learning to skate requires the students to engage fully in the processes involved. The more you engage in learning to skate, the more you want to learn, as one of the students underlines: "When I succeed in doing a new trick, I go 'yes, I did it', and then I want more challenge" (Victor, 9.Y). For him, mastering a trick constitutes an expansive moment or movement that not only increases his engagement in learning more and on a higher level – it also *moves* him towards becoming more of a legitimate member of the skater community, towards a feeling of belonging (Rabøl Hansen, 2011). Victor reports that: "The students, we are all friends, so we just skate, and when you miss a trick, the others cheer, and when you succeed, they also cheer, and you get happy". Moving into (and not away from) the community and the mutual support herein seems to influence the students' confidence and increase their independence when they move in and across the different social contexts within (and outside) *Fryshuset*.

Conceptualizing learning as expansive mo(ve)ments does not only contribute to the notion of learning being situated and not an abstract phenomenon – it also allows us to recognize that learning has a direction or a certain *telos,* as Lave puts it (Lave 1997). A direction that is linked to processes of *becoming* a person in the world instead of being oriented towards societally determined educational goals – and to the students' social self-understanding (Holzkamp 2013b), as unfolded in the next section.

Understanding yourself and others

The notion of learning as processes of *becoming*-a-person, for instance in communities of practice, is inspired by Lave & Wenger (1991), and may be linked to Holzkamp's conceptualization of social self-understanding (2013b) as "meaning-making processes of coming to understand oneself and others in relation to participation in and conduct of everyday life" (Kristensen & Mørck 2014, p. 4). As presented in the section on *Fryshuset*, for some students being able to skate within the school plays a crucial role in their understanding of themselves as people who 'stay in school' and engage in school work. As argued above, becoming and being part of the skater community is in line with the students' personal trajectories, and this seems to have a

significant impact on the way the students participate and engage, as the cases illustrate. So far I have argued that the skater students' way of participating in the classroom may be understood in terms of their embodied and cognitive engagement in skating, which to some extent may be considered addictive, according to the skater teacher. In other words, their (lack of) participation in class is 'excused' because they are so engaged in skating and have a hard time shifting their focus away from it. The question still remains, though, whether an understanding of oneself as 'a skater' and being part of the skater culture also connotes being 'disengaged', which tends to be the conclusion drawn by some of the academic teachers. Are the students perhaps reproducing an 'attitude of disengagement' because they are used to being considered lazy or unwilling? Or is their way of participating in the classroom to be understood as part of the process of becoming a skater?

A social practice theory of learning allows us to ask such questions in the empirical field and, thereby, capture how learning is connected not only to a sense of belonging and being part of 'something' meaningful, but also to the students' (social) understanding of themselves as *learners*.

Concluding remarks

Throughout the chapter several questions have been posed. It is not within the scope of this chapter to answer every one of them, though. Instead, the purpose has been to illustrate how a social practice theory of learning may focus our attention in the empirical field, help us question what may seem obvious, and raise our awareness of the 'doings of learners learning' (Lave 2011, p. 89) in different social contexts, instead of focusing on individual, mental processes and teaching. But why is this important?

The chapter argues that the importance of the socio-material arrangements in which learning processes are both limited and made possible seems to be disregarded within conventional learning theories. Moreover, it is argued that an unambiguous focus on mental, decontextualized processes undermines the fact that different contexts offer different possibilities for participation and learning, and it overlooks how educational circumstances are interwoven with other aspects of life, such as the students' personal trajectories. Moving beyond binary distinctions that separate subject and world will allow us

to gain insight into how learning is embedded in social practices, such as skating; and that in order to understand why students participate as they do in one context, the complexity of different learning activities needs to be examined. This has not been done sufficiently in this chapter, though.

Studying students' ways of participation in one context, in this case the skater park, may help us to understand how, why, and under which conditions they participate as they do in the classroom (and vice versa). Their positions, possibilities, and action potency change as they move across contexts, and the structural, socio-material arrangements vary from one context to another as well.

Throughout the chapter, the historical and material production of persons and their embodied participation in socially, historically, and politically structured institutional arrangements has been enhanced in order to stress the situational and relational character of learning and to articulate the dialectical relation between personal learning and social practice. The chapter argues that in order to understand and conceptualize learning, we need to understand how persons move and participate in and across various contexts. The empirical examples illustrate and underpin the importance of studying different socio-material arrangements and their interrelatedness – how do they support and/or undermine each other in relation to the students' participation and learning? The empirical cases moreover focus our attention on a notion of learning as expansive mo(ve)ments that support processes of becoming more (or less) a member of different learning communities. In the example presented above, being able to skate when *in* school and pursue what is most meaningful to them changes the students' understanding of 'school' as a social context in which they belong to different communities and engage in skating as well as staying in school to do school work instead of staying at home.

When moving into the educational field from a social practice theoretical perspective, it is worth stressing the importance of the learners' perspective, i.e. the above-mentioned first-person perspective (Holzkamp 1983). Conventional learning theories seem to ignore this perspective and thereby undermine both the socio-cultural, historical contexts as well as issues of meaning. Moreover, a theory of learning that enhances social and contextual dimensions will allow us to

approach the educational field with a practice-oriented and less school-centric understanding, thereby capturing learning processes not only among dominant groups of social practice but also 'from the margins' (Mørck 2014).

Notes

1   I have conducted participative observations and semi-structured interviews (12 students, 4 teachers, and the head of the school) and engaged in informal conversations with students in 9th grade, teachers, and the head of the school.
2   The concept of mo(ve)ments will be elaborated further.
3   See e.g. Nielsen (1999, 2008b) for a discussion of shortcomings in rationalistic and empiristic conceptions of learning and e.g. Anderson, Reder & Simon (1997) and Anderson, Greeno, Reder & Simon (2000) for further discussions on situated versus cognitive perspectives in learning.
4   The term '*passionate interests*' is *Fryshuset's* translation of the Swedish word 'passion'.
5   The students' first-person perspectives were pursued through observations, informal talks, and semi-structured interviews with both students and teachers.

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