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TEACHER EDUCATION AND CRITICAL INQUIRY: THE USE OF ACTIVITY THEORY IN EXPLORING ALTERNATIVE UNDERSTANDINGS OF LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

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Abstract

This article explores the challenges of espousing a critical pedagogy within the managerial climate that presently shapes teacher education. Current discourses of professionalism are incommensurate with an understanding of the way that literacy practices are grounded in the social worlds in which both school and university students operate. Such discourses construct graduate teachers as the providers of decontextualised literacy skills to school students whose existing communication networks are ignored. We argue that an alternative understanding of professional practice can be developed by focusing on the textual resources university students use to mediate their learning, and by locating their emerging professional identities within the activity systems and meaning-making practices in which they participate.

Introduction

All graduates, regardless of the age or level of students to be taught, will be expected to:

- ∞ *Have knowledge of the role of language and literacy in learning*
- ∞ *Give attention to the teaching of English, especially reading, speaking, listening and writing, including spelling and grammar*
- ∞ *Have knowledge of literacy pedagogy*
- ∞ *Have basic knowledge of how to address the literacy learning needs of second language learners*

Victorian Institute of Teaching, 'Guidelines for Re-accreditation'

This statement is taken from a set of guidelines for the re-accreditation of teacher education programs prepared by the Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT). Such guidelines reflect a managerial culture that has enveloped us all. It is impossible to avoid the language of outcomes, even though as teacher educators we may wish to argue that a truly productive pedagogy is always one which exceeds our expectations (cf. Barnes, 1976). While we may wish to think of ourselves as opening up richer possibilities for critical inquiry and literacy pedagogy than the 'basic knowledge' invoked by this statement, we are still obliged to demonstrate that our students have achieved these outcomes.

Our own institution recently conducted an extensive review to show how our teacher education program met these and other criteria for re-accreditation, when we showcased 'Language and Literacy in Secondary School', a subject in which our students typically develop a more complex knowledge of language and literacy than that suggested by these dot points. But although the skills and knowledge they learn by engaging in this subject do indeed enable them to meet the outcomes specified by the VIT, it is not as though these knowledges simply fold into one another. A tension exists between the knowledge implied by the VIT guidelines and

larger conceptions of language and literacy, shaping our dialogue with students, and requiring us to rethink the possibility of ideological critique and social and educational transformation.

Our aim in this essay is to explore the complexities of espousing a critical pedagogy within a managerial climate involving the specification of outcomes like those listed above. Outcomes ideology is not only imposed on teacher education from the outside but is something we enact ourselves, through a variety of internal managerial processes, whereby students and teachers alike demonstrate their productivity (cf. Reid, 1996, p.13). For Althusser, ideology involves more than the beliefs or values you consciously adopt, but is something you perform through your practices from day to day (Althusser, 1971). People who drive to work in their motorcars, their eyes fixed rigidly ahead as they sit in traffic jams, embody a liberal vision of individual autonomy that makes it difficult to imagine their lives as part of a larger social whole, even as they collectively pollute the atmosphere and keep the wheels of capitalism turning. When children do standardised tests, they and their teachers are likewise enacting a vision of individual autonomy and performance that brackets out the socially situated nature of their learning. Outcomes ideology produces or 'interpellates' (Althusser, 1971) a certain type of subjectivity that is evinced by the activities in which tertiary students participate in the course of completing their university education (doing their units each semester, accruing credit points towards their degree, showing that they have achieved graduate outcomes of the kind listed by the VIT), not simply by the beliefs and values they may espouse. Whilst we might wish to affirm the possibility of social critique, involving the creation of teachers 'who regard teaching as a political activity and embrace social change as part of the job' (Cochran-Smith, 2002), such critique can only be the result of complex mediations, most notably between the way individuals understand their 'actions' and their roles (conscious or otherwise) in larger social 'activities' or structures (cf. Leont'ev, quoted in Engeström et al., 1999, p. 4). But it is no easy task to think about one's practices in a 'fully relational' way (cf. Frow, 1996).

No Heroic Tales

'Language and Literacy in Secondary Schools' is part of a teacher education program which represented a significant departure from the traditional add-on, one year Graduate Diploma of Education that our institution had been offering for many years. Students fresh from secondary school were now able to enrol in a double degree, requiring them to complete a suite of subjects in Education at the same time that they were completing their other academic studies. When the double degree was first introduced, academic staff were required to develop a curriculum that was more comprehensive than the combination of Foundation and Method subjects which usually constitutes a Graduate Diploma. They were thereby given an opportunity to make a significant public statement about the attributes they believed were desirable in beginning teachers. What kinds of professional learning did our students need to experience? Where could we begin our conversation with them? How could we facilitate their transition from the perspective of students to an understanding of the complexities of classrooms as seen by teachers? Should not all beginning teachers have an understanding of the way that language mediates knowledge and social relationships? How could we sensitise them to the increasingly diverse range of textual practices in which people engage in a postmodern world? Could we encourage them to reconceptualise their academic fields as types of literacy? Would they be able to accept the professional challenge of teaching their students to handle the conventions of those genres associated with specific fields of inquiry?

Our response to these last questions was to develop a subject that would require students not only to understand the complexities of language and literacy but to actively engage in a diverse range of textual practices that would stretch their repertoires as language users. Especially helpful, in this respect, were the list of graduate outcomes formulated in *Preparing a*

Profession: Report of the National Standards and Guidelines for Initial Teacher Education Project (popularly known as the Adey Report) (1998), which draws a distinction between what graduates should 'know and understand' about literacy, and the 'high levels of competence in literacy and linguistic awareness' they should develop. The latter category includes a capacity to 'appreciate the ways in which their own understanding of language, literacy and related pedagogy is enhanced through ongoing critical reflection, research and experimentation' (Adey, 1998, pp.13-14), which we used to justify a requirement that students write in a diverse range of genres in order to satisfactorily complete the subject. Rather than asking them to write only traditional academic essays which demonstrated their understanding of the issues with which this subject was concerned, we invited them to interrogate their own experiences of literacy by writing stories about their early 'literacy events' (Heath, 1982) and to experiment with different ways to present a case for addressing the literacy needs of students by writing (say) a speech to a School Council or a feature article for a newspaper. To conclude the subject, they were then required to write an essay in which they synthesised key readings and developed a perspective on the issues with which we were concerned.

'Language and Literacy in Secondary Schools' is a third year subject, and by this stage in their tertiary education students have had a range of experiences of academic writing, as well as plenty of stories to tell about their experiences of secondary schooling and the language and literacy practices of the communities to which they belong. The task of writing a 'bedtime story' about the 'literacy events' of their early childhood (Heath, 1987) constitutes a significant challenge for them, habituated as they are to writing in the accepted genres of their respective disciplines. Most of them have not written stories since they were in secondary school. This very act of dislodgement from their habitual practices as writers stimulates reflection about the demands they make on secondary school students when they request them to use genres with which they might not be familiar (e.g. the ubiquitous science 'report'). The prompt for writing about their early 'literacy events' is Shirley Brice Heath's essay, 'What No Bedtime Story Means', and to wrap up this first piece of work they are required to reflect on how their own experiences of literacy might contrast with the literacy experiences of the communities which Heath describes. This is more than a simple exercise in categorising their own experiences as typically Maintown, Trackton or Roadville, the names that Heath uses to characterise the literacy practices of the communities she studied (a problematical exercise in any case), but an attempt to understand how literacy practices were part of the patterns of socialisation and language they experienced as children, shaping their identities and their engagement with schooling. A sense of the range of responses this exercise has elicited can be gleaned from some of the opening sentences of their stories.

'I grew up in a very typical Australian farming family. My parents worked long hard days on our land and received little rewards in the early years of their marriage and after I was born. I think that this, as well as their own schooling and family upbringing, contributed to their extremely strong, positive views of the value of education ...'

Robyn

'I was born in Shimonoseki, a port city on the bottom tip of Honshu in Japan. Many vessels had anchored in the port to celebrate the debut of a newly built ship on that day... As a young child I enjoyed watching and mimicking my mother write. My elder sister and I sat together with my mother who often wrote letters to her friends in Tokyo, miles away from where we were. The way my mother wrote with her fountain pen on delicate writing paper with vertical lines fascinated us and we pretended that we were also proficient writers by drawing lengthy curvy snakes on our writing books...'

Yoko

‘Wedged between his two eager grandparents, my 18th month old nephew sits on the couch in his favourite truck pajamas, transfixed. Book after book. World after world. Everything is new and exciting. Suddenly, at the turn of the page, his eyes light up and a squeal of delight is heard all through the house. “Doddy! Doddy!” he says, pointing to the picture in front of him. A round of applause. “That’s right!” exclaim Grandma and Grandpa in proud unison. “Clever boy! It’s a doggy, just like our Daisy. And what does the doggy say?” A short pause. Bated breath. “Oif! Oif!” More applause...’

Virginia

‘Scenario One. “Next!” The young girl walked into the room and perched herself up on the bed, ready for the evening reading ritual. Her sister passed her on her way out of the room, grinning proudly. Whoaaa, she must have got through a lot of cards, thought Anna; I better put in an extra special effort for Dad tonight. Now is the moment when Anna senses that the father is beginning “teaching mode” – some serious learning is about to take place. Forget the jokes, silly fart noises and play fighting. Attention, concentration and respect are now required. The father holds up a big red flash card with the black letters marked “C A T”.

Anna

As third year university students, these students have all experienced ‘success’ of a kind that is not readily available to members of communities like Roadville or Trackton (although some of them do indeed have interesting stories to tell about growing up in working class communities or learning English as a second language). The point of the exercise is not for students who have never experienced Roadville or Trackton to undergo some kind of middle class guilt about their Maintown upbringing. By writing such stories, students succeed in making their own early literacy experiences strange to themselves in the best ethnographic manner. Virginia, for example, was able to conclude her narrative by reflecting: ‘The literacy events that I have described, along with the general environment in which I grew up, had a major impact on the way I learnt and also on my attitude and approach to literacy at school. As I have tried to illustrate in the narrative, family played a significant part in my home learning...’ Anna writes: ‘The above literacy scenarios illustrate a variety of childhood reading practices which were crucial in preparing me for school literacy practices. The mere fact that both my parents were teachers meant that they both aimed to teach me the literacy practices which would ensure that I would understand literacy learning procedures in formal education systems’.

It is not as though they have now hit on the ‘truth’ of their early literacy experiences (Anna concludes her reflections by reminding her readers that ‘these fragments of memory are a reconstructed account of her memories from early childhood’). The quality of the generalisations that these students make on the basis of their stories shows that they have begun to see their early literacy experiences differently. They also benefit from making a transition from the specific details that characterise storytelling to the level of generality that is a feature of more analytical writing. When writing their narratives, they are encouraged to think carefully about the point of view from which their story might be told, and the extent to which they might thereby achieve a critical perspective on their early literacy experiences. They are then invited to engage in more general reflections, using language that is more akin to analytical writing.

Our purpose in rehearsing these aspects of ‘Language and Literacy in Secondary School’, however, is not to tell a heroic tale about our success in cultivating an understanding of the complexities of language and literacy in our students. As Swidler points out, teachers often make themselves the heroes of their own adventures – a justifiable way of gaining a perspective on the complexities of their professional practice and affirming the possibility of agency (Swidler, 2003). But while it seems fair to say that our students do indeed move beyond fairly

traditional notions of literacy to a more complex understanding of the ways in which literacy practices shape their lives and the lives of their own future students, we wish to highlight problematical aspects revealed by their engagement in the demands posed by this subject.

For their concluding essay, they are required to articulate what they have learnt by doing this subject – a request which most of them are canny enough to know does not invite a negative response. By this stage in the unit, they have not only read Heath, but also Halliday's 'Relevant Models of Language' (1973) and Gee's 'What is Literacy' (1991), not to mention other articles. They are then required to draw on this material to reconsider their work as secondary teachers. How will they address the language and literacy needs of the students in their own classes? What have they learnt about those needs? The quality of the learning they experience in the course of doing this subject can be gauged from the excerpts from essays.

'Literacy involves much more than learning to read and write. Through this subject I have been exposed to various theories and explanations of what literacy is and how this affects children today. Shirley Brice Heath presents an insightful account of how different communities have different forms of literacy learning during their children's early development. James Paul Gee looks at literacy from a different angle in his article as he develops the idea of gaining literacy skills in different ways, i.e. through acquisition or learning ...'

Elizabeth

'Communication should include not exclude. This may demand a huge pedagogical overhaul on the part of the teacher. Just because I own a primary discourse similar to the "Maintown" experience, in that my childhood was very book-oriented, does not mean that I should expect my students to take meaning from their environment and to communicate in the way I do...'

Tanya

'... the schools I have attended, either as a student or as a student teacher, have differed remarkably in terms of their discourses. In fact, a different "costume and instructions on how to act and talk so as to take on a particular role that others will recognise" has been required for me to "fit in" and feel "at home" ... I worry that teachers enter schools with pre-conceived ideas about how a school will operate, how language will be used and in what context. I certainly did, and it was a rude awakening for me to have to change my dress, to change my language and act in a manner to which members of that particular discourse could relate ...'

Mary

Yet although these reflections show that our students have been on a worthwhile intellectual journey, it is not as though this journey has been without its false turns and byways, or that by the end of the semester their destination is in sight. To draw on Peter Freebody's description of conflicting discourses in literacy education, their journey might be described as a move beyond a common sense view of literacy as simply an 'isolable aspect of human performance' to an understanding of literacy as 'an open-ended variety of capabilities embedded in a range of purposeful social practices' (Freebody, 1997, p.10). Nearly all our students describe themselves as embracing more sophisticated understandings of literacy than those they formerly held. And they often become very critical of the way literacy is constructed by the mass media, including populist rhetoric about declining standards. However, this new 'discourse' (Freebody, 1997) combines with other ways of speaking about language and education that they have brought from other places. It is not uncommon, for example, to find a student arguing the need to affirm the culturally embedded nature of literacy and then extolling the virtues of Bloom's taxonomy or Gardner's Multiple Intelligences. 'If students like those in Trackton', writes one student, 'are presented with a school curriculum that focuses on Verbal Linguistic or Logical

Mathematical Intelligences, their ability to engage in the material will be limited.’ In one breath they embrace the role that language plays in learning and human relationships (a la Vygotsky, Halliday, Barnes) and then commend versions of ‘intelligence’ that are narrowly psychologistic and bereft of any sense of social context. They can affirm the complexities of language and literacy, and then write glowing reports about primary schools that are ‘innoculating’ their students against illiteracy by implementing literacy intervention programs (cf. Freebody, 1997, Luke and Luke, 2002). They are especially impressed by routinised literacy programs like Early Years in Victoria, which succeeds in improving the literacy performances of students while avoiding the issue of their life long engagement with literacy.

We are not saying that such comments completely deconstruct our ‘success’ story. What they suggest is that the journey on which these students have embarked is itself far more complex than a traditional understanding of a liberal education within the context of a tertiary institution.

What Is Literacy?

The contradictory nature of the students’ learning reflects a clash of discourses that shapes our own pedagogy, as well as the research literature on which we draw in this subject. It is not as though anyone can simply stand outside these discourses, rejecting one and embracing the other. Rather, we are confronted by the necessity of struggling with a binary opposition between individualistic, psychologistic notions of literacy and a larger concept of literacy that is grounded in our social practices (Freebody, 1997, p.10). Such a move is bound to be tentative, even clumsy. Although we may criticize the individualistic focus of ‘outcomes’ ideology and the narrowly functional notion of literacy that it promotes, it is hard to think (and act) differently, and to conceptualise our lives in other terms.

We can illustrate this difficulty by pointing to some interesting tensions within the essay by James Gee that we use in this subject, namely ‘What is Literacy?’ (Gee, 1991). The essay is a very generative one, but our students’ reactions to it have sensitized us to problematical aspects of Gee’s own attempts to formulate an alternative to traditional understandings of literacy. What follows does not represent a critique of Gee’s work as a whole, but merely a close reading of one his essays that highlights the complexities with which we all struggle in our attempts to affirm a richer understanding of literacy than common sense notions of decoding text.

Gee’s essay provides a useful vehicle for discussing with students some of the types of argumentation employed by academic writers. Gee’s key strategy is to pose the word ‘literacy’, conjuring up common sensical notions of its meaning, and then to challenge those notions by situating ‘literacy’ within a new analytical framework. He thereby offers a definition of ‘literacy’ that is counterintuitive, the very stuff of academic argument. Our students always enjoy reflecting on the way he manages to problematise everyday notions of literacy by conceptualising literacy as a function of ‘discourse’. We use class time to reflect on the structure of Gee’s essay, and the way he provocatively interrogates generally accepted meanings of words like ‘literacy’ and ‘learning’.

The essay is a challenging one for students, and as teachers we feel pleased when they begin to use the word ‘discourse’ in their classroom discussions. We can sense that they are trying the word out, listening to how it sounds as they speak it. Their engagement with Gee’s argument marks a significant step on their part beyond common sense notions of literacy and their roles as teachers in delivering the ‘outcomes’ that systems specify. Their own experiences of social networks also give them a point of access into Gee’s essay, and they find it useful to reflect on the range of languages they speak in a variety of situations, whether it be working at their local supermarkets, attending church, or talking in the cafeteria. Gee defines ‘discourse’ as ‘a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, and of acting that can be used

to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or “social network” (Gee, 1991, p.402). By and large, students manage to do some very productive work with this notion, especially with respect to differences between school literacy practices and the cultural practices and social networks in which students engage outside school. Yet Gee’s essay is also worth interrogating. Does he really transcend the contradiction he poses between psychologistic understandings of literacy, as something that is simply located inside an individual’s head, and a more distributed notion of literacy as suggested by his understanding of ‘Discourse’?

Our students’ continuing struggle with these conflicting discourses about literacy (Freebody, 1997) provides an interesting frame for a rereading of Gee’s essay, exposing problematical aspects of his own argument. We are not suggesting that our students actually reach a point where they are able to construct such a reading of Gee’s essay. To the contrary, they generally embrace his definition of ‘Discourse’ as an identity kit, drawing useful links between his analysis and the way Heath differentiates between the literacy practices of Trackton, Roadville and Maintown. But although the notion that discourse is an ‘identity key’ which ‘comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act and talk so as to take on a particular role that others will recognise’ resonates with undergraduates - they are typically busy assuming a variety of roles, regularly changing their ‘costumes’ and their ways of talking and acting - it does not begin to capture how an individual’s experiences are shaped by discourses. The idea of ‘taking on’ a discourse seems, after all, to be a special case in comparison with the challenge of grappling with the discourses in which we are located, in relation to which we have exercised no choice. The patterns of socialisation that we experience as children are never simply a matter of wearing an ‘appropriate costume’ or following ‘instructions on how to act and talk’, though we may well become conscious of dressing and acting in certain ways that distinguish us from others. However, such choices have been made for us, not by us. Our early experiences of language and discourse, which constitute the focus of our students’ ‘bedtime stories’, are not a matter of ‘taking on’ an identity, as though we are choosing from an array of goods in a supermarket. Even though we might eventually distance ourselves from the beliefs and practices of our childhood, there is a sense in which everything we experience continues to be shaped by the world we knew as children. The languages we spoke as children echo in our memories, the traces of our early struggles to make connections between words and meaning, language and thought.

That Gee’s understanding of discourse must ultimately be judged to be problematical is shown by the way he lists the following examples: ‘being an American or a Russian, being a man or a woman, being a member of a certain socio-economic class, being a factory worker or a boardroom executive, being a doctor or a hospital patient, being a teacher, an administrator, or student, being a member of a sewing circle, a club, a street gang, a lunchtime social gathering, or a regular at a watering hole’ (p.4). How can being a member of a sewing club be meaningfully compared with belonging to a social class? Sewing clubs may well be typical of membership of a certain social sector, and in that sense a decision to join a sewing club may be socially determined in much the same way as membership of a certain social class. But Gee is not finally attempting to conceive of this array of social practices in connection with one another, as a function of a complex set of structures and relationships. In this respect, it is telling that he puts emphasis on ‘being’ an American, on ‘being’ a man or a woman, on ‘being’ a teacher or administrator, occluding any sense of our struggle to become the things we think we are (or, conversely, to struggle against the things we think we are), as we immerse ourselves in our day to day lives and the complex networks of social relationships around us.

The logical flaw in Gee’s analysis is akin to what Marx characterised as the mode of analysis of ‘the eighteenth-century Robinsonades’ (Marx, 1973, p. 83). Marx’s decisive methodological

break from eighteenth-century economic analyses was to posit material production and the complex network of social relationships in which individuals operate as the unit of analysis, rather than supposing that ‘individuals’ naturally come together to establish society for their mutual benefit:

The more deeply we go back into history, the more does the individual, and hence also the producing individual, appear as dependent, as belonging to a greater whole... Only in the eighteenth-century, in ‘civil society’, do the various forms of social connectedness confront the individual as a mere means towards his private purposes, as external necessity. But the epoch which produces this standpoint, that of the isolated individual, is also precisely that of the hitherto most developed social ... relations. (Marx, 1973, p.4)

Gee’s standpoint remains that of the individual, for whom the ‘social connectedness’ of ‘discourse’ is essentially conceived as an external phenomenon, not something in which the individual is embedded. Despite his affirmation of the ubiquitous nature of ‘Discourse’, he ultimately fails to grapple with the paradox posed by Marx, that the standpoint of the individual is actually ‘produced’ by the most developed form of social relationships that have hitherto existed. Once we begin to conceive ‘individuality’ as a function of the social networks in which individuals participate, we can no longer accept the adequacy of Gee’s list of various discourses to which an individual might belong. ‘Being’ the things he mentions is at best a crude short hand for the complex networks of relationships in which any individual participates.

Gee’s failure to transcend the standpoint of the individual means that he continues to treat social phenomena like language and ‘Discourse’ as essentially external to the individual. This produces what Marx would call ‘unmediated’ concepts (his questionable distinctions between ‘Discourse’ and ‘discourse’, between ‘acquisition’ and ‘learning’) that fail to do justice to the complex determinants of social phenomena (what Marx calls the ‘concrete’) (Marx, 1973, cf. Lukács, 1971, p.10). The logic of his analysis produces a familiar scenario of equipping individuals from certain discourse communities with the skills to access the dominant discourse. Rather than challenging the dominant discourse as it is enacted by school literacy practices, and affirming the rich complexities of the literacy practices and communication networks in which students engage outside school, Gee ultimately affirms the hegemony of the liberal humanistic paradigm in which he operates. Students who have not ‘acquired’ the dominant forms of literacy appear to be destined for remediation programs that might allow them to speak the language of their superiors more fluently. We need far more sophisticated analytical tools than the essentialist definition of ‘discourse’ which Gee formulates in this essay to capture the ways in which individuals actually experience the interface between the literacy practices of their communities or social networks and the mandated literacy practices of schools.

Towards a Transformative Model of Professional Learning

The contradictions and dilemmas described in this paper have prompted us to initiate a research project that will explore alternatives to the seamless and noncontradictory view of professional learning constructed by managerial discourse. The main goal of this project is to explicate the discursive dynamics around students’ conceptions of their professional identities by inviting them to reflect on the role of literacies in their lives and the communication networks in which they operate. We intend to chart the contradictory nature of their emerging sense of professional identity, keeping tensions and movement in play, and resisting the neatly packaged professionalism reflected in the statement about graduate attributes at the start of this paper. We seek to un-frame the curriculum in ways that allow our students to recognise the diverse identities, textual practices and semiotic resources of their own future students and resist seeing

literacy experiences that do not fit the Maintown 'norm' as deficient, as simply a matter for remediation.

'Un-framing' in this project should be understood as a deconstructive strategy that goes beyond the liberal celebration of difference and multiplicity in the classroom. We have already pointed out that our students actually have no difficulty affirming difference and multiplicity. The catch is that this affirmation is still accompanied by a set of 'Maintown' beliefs and values that resist any interrogation of their normative status. By drawing on critical approaches to literacy, the idea is to encourage a commitment to reshape literacy education that provides a space for the voices of marginalised groups of learners to be heard (Luke, 1997). Such a space, however, must first be enacted in our own tertiary classrooms, allowing our students to engage critically with contradictions in their professional learning, permitting a range of different answers rather than a single solution to the problems in literacy education. In this way, we aim to create alternative possibilities for becoming a professional, and especially ones that resist the increasingly universalist and reductionist accounts that seem to appeal to governments and educational institutions.

The construction of consciousness and identities of our students as they complete their tertiary education and step into the professional world of teaching provides a major focus of our research. The kinds of discourses operating in teacher education shape students' positions as they engage in the local activity of participating in our classrooms and accomplishing the written tasks we set. To investigate how people learn through different social practices, Engeström (1987) proposes a unit of analysis that he defines as an 'activity system' – a social practice that includes the rules and norms, division of participation and goals of the community. Furthermore, the relations between community members are mediated by a variety of semiotic resources that pattern their interpersonal communication and meaning making. This analytical framework prompts researchers to investigate different elements of an activity system in order to understand its overall dynamics and patterns of social configuration, which involves the construction of social identities, knowledge, meanings and relations of power in the activity system.

By conceiving of our classroom as an activity system in which a range of networks or activity systems converge, we shall try to reconceptualise the ways in which our students might take up the opportunities for learning presented to them. We do not want this to be an insight that is only available to us, as teacher educators, but one which we share with our students as we jointly reflect on the nature of the university classroom as a space for learning and consider how it might contrast with other spaces for learning and social interaction which they experience. Activity theory opens up the possibility of a social explanation of learning, including an investigation of the way tertiary students 'do' university and the interface between this particular social practice and the other practices and social contexts in which they engage. Such an investigation would also embrace a consideration of the way the demands of the professional world that they are entering (ranging from the list of graduate outcomes to the language and values of the teaching community) mediate their learning in university classrooms. We shall thereby approach a far more complex understanding of how our students might embrace a critical pedagogy.

Conclusion

Rather than assuming that teachers and teacher educators have agency merely by affirming a commitment to social change, it is necessary to accept the challenge of reconceptualising educational settings as complex networks or 'activity systems' (Engeström, 1999) that are shaped in diverse and contradictory ways. Activity theory provides one way of moving beyond an understanding of human behaviour as simply a function of individual desires and actions. A

classical formulation of ‘activity theory’ is the one that we have alluded to by Leont’ev at the beginning of this paper, when he differentiates between an individual’s ‘action’ in contributing to the hunt and the hunt itself as a social ‘activity’

We can say... that the beater’s activity is the hunt, and the frightening of the game his action. (Leont’ev, quoted in Engeström and Miettinen, 1999, p. 4).

But whereas a beater in a primeval collective hunt might have no difficulty in envisaging such an ‘action’ as a contribution to the ‘activity’ of the hunt and the maintenance of a larger community without which individual life is unthinkable, individuals in contemporary society can only begin to understand and experience their ‘actions’ as part of a larger social collective by thinking about their lives in a counter-intuitive way and seeing their actions differently. The value of ‘activity theory’ for us lies precisely in this possibility of understanding individual actions – the textual practices in which our students engage both inside and outside their university classes; all the things they do in their efforts to qualify as teachers, including their part-time jobs and the social networks that sustain them – as part of a larger sets of ‘activities’ and networks of relationships, thereby rethinking the educational site in which we are operating as a space in which a variety of networks meet and clash.

The mode of professional learning that we are proposing is not free from conflicts and uncertainties. We recognise that the discourses of professionalism and liberal ideology will fill our classrooms with authoritative perils of domination and subjection but also with possibilities for community, resistance and emancipatory change. We are envisioning a joint inquiry that involves enunciation of one’s own position and responsiveness to another person’s view and another social position. In this contradictory and simultaneous process of self-other interaction, ‘if the individual is forced ... to make a choice, then that choice is not between meanings but between colliding social positions that are expressed and recognized through these meanings’ (Leont’ev, 1978, p. 64).

By explicating these colliding positions and inviting students to reflect critically on their own perspectives on literacy education, we aim to challenge the systems of ideas that affect their identities, desires and dispositions. In other words, our aim is to investigate a new mode of professional learning as participation in a complex community of difference. At the same time, our project is not just about analysing its social implication for students’ learning but also about its political consequences. By raising students’ awareness of the textual worlds in which they live and their implications for literacy pedagogy as well as about discourses that shape their professional identities, we hope to open up an important aspect of becoming a literacy teacher – as one who would be able to engage collectively with her students in the critical disordering and reassembling of dominant knowledge and meanings, recognising sociocultural diversity in the classroom rather than ignoring or assimilating it.

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