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Learning in Higher Education - The Impact of Relationships

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Whereas traditional learning theories locate explanations of learning and performance within the individual, this research is based instead on the view that learning is a socially mediated process that comes about by participation in the valued practices of a particular context. Furthermore, that participation can be enabled or disabled through processes in the environment which impact upon the student. Taking a view here of pedagogy as being not simply the methods of teaching used, but as an interactive, relational process in which knowledge is mediated between individuals (Walker, 2007,) this research explores pedagogic relationships in Higher Education, and how these help to shape students' learning. The poster will diagrammatically represent the integration of three theoretical perspectives which will be used to challenge traditional notions of learning. It will also illustrate how when used together, these perspectives are capable of providing a framework which can be used for the analysis, explanation and understanding of students' learning in Higher Education.

The Three Theoretical Perspectives

1. Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory

This is used as the core framework into which the other two theoretical perspectives are incorporated. Bronfenbrenner (2001) argued that to understand human development, we have to take into account the interrelated ecological levels in which individuals are situated. These consist of:-

The Microsystem

This represents the setting in which the individual is relating to people at a given time in their life.

The Mesosystem

The interrelations between these relational settings.

The Exosystem

This is composed of the contexts which do not directly involve the developing individual, such as those in the local community, but which nevertheless impact upon their development.

The Macrosystem

The highest level which involves the wider culture and society in which the individual is developing.

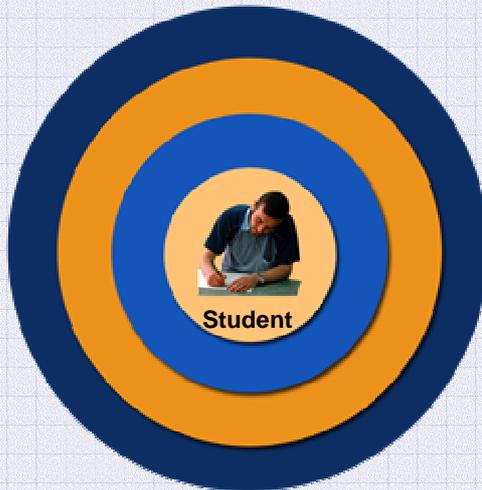
2. Vygotsky's Model of Learning

Vygotsky's notion of scaffolding within the zone of proximal development, which relates to learners having the potential to go beyond what they are able to achieve alone under the guidance of someone who is more capable than themselves, (Vygotsky, 1978,) presents us with a useful way of understanding how learning occurs at a personal level. It is therefore an important addition to the theoretical framework at the microsystem level. However, it could be argued that the more complex factors that impact on the learning relationship are not taken into account with this model, so we also need to incorporate Wenger's Communities of Practice model if we are to fully account for the impact of relationships on learning.

3. Wenger's Communities of Practice (CoP) Model

This will be incorporated into the framework in order to illuminate how participation and therefore learning is impacted upon by the various processes in the students' bioecological systems. Also, as a way of challenging the assumption that classroom-based learning as a decontextualised activity is as effective as learning within a community in which learning is through participation in the valued practices of that community.

Diagram Illustrating the Integration of the Three Theoretical Perspectives.



Student at the Centre of Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological System

Microsystem

Vygotsky's (1978) model of learning is incorporated at this level to help us gain insight into how students learn through their face to face relationships with for example their teachers and fellow students. Wenger's Communities of Practice model is also incorporated here as this will help to illuminate how these microsystem relationships enable or disable participation and therefore learning.

Mesosystem

Wenger's (1998) notion of participation within a Community of Practice is taken into account in the mesosystem in order to explore how participation and therefore learning can be enabled or disabled depending upon the links between students' different relational settings. An example would be links between their university and home life.

Exosystem

The notion of participation in a CoP is also taken into account at this level in order to explore how mediating factors at local community level for example University practices and policies can impact upon the students' relationships in such a way as to either enable or disable their participation and therefore their learning.

Macrosystem

Exploration of this will provide insights into the wider cultural and political imperatives beyond local community level, which impact upon students' relationships, participation and learning. One example may include the effects of the Government Policy of Widening Participation in Higher Education which may mean that there are now greater numbers of students from widely different backgrounds attending university.

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