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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.

References