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Re-Mediating Current Activity for the Future

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COMMENTARY

Re-Mediating Current Activity for the Future

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The growing poverty and inequity in America should create a sense of urgency in researchers to leverage what we know for the public good—to intervene more productively and vigorously in an ever more fragile public educational system and to address the increasing vulnerability of far too many youth in the United States. The current worldwide recession, complicated if not bolstered by antiwelfare, antigovernment, antitax, and anti-immigrant ideologies and sentiments, and a dramatic retrenchment of the civil rights agenda, has become a fertile ground for powerful market-based approaches to solve economic, educational, and social problems. In this context, Mike Rose is a powerful voice in articulating a practical theory of how to organize an educational system that works for all students, as he argues for an approach to human learning that takes seriously the real conditions of labor, in which human intelligence always plays a central role. Mike demands that we think about the hard issues confronting us as a nation, as a common humanity: How do we re-mediate current activity and organize new forms of education that befit a democracy? How do we design for possible futures characterized by expansive forms of learning for low-income students and youth from nondominant communities in the current economic and social climate?

My purpose here is to explore how Rose's central method for designing and studying expansive forms of learning for all students aligns with the foundations of the methodology that we have come to be associated with cultural historical activity theory (CH/AT), although you will not find the terms or the principles in Rose's work. Certainly, as we read his article, we should be enticed into considering the potential our work may hold for community colleges, as well as vocational and remedial programs—contexts populated by students trying to forge new educational trajectories—contexts, as Rose points out, too often organized around reductive forms of learning, pedagogy, and policy. Although Rose's work always has broad appeal, as I discuss

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shortly, it should have particular resonance for scholars employing a CH/AT approach in their work, as his article is rich in providing important insight into many of the relevant issues with which researchers wrestle in their individual case studies, and often with less success than Rose.

For close to 40 years, Mike Rose's work has served as a clarion call for a new vision of education—one organized around a democratic philosophy of education. Within this view, students, particularly students from low-income and working-class families, are afforded schooling experiences that provide genuine opportunities for participating in meaningful and robust learning activity in which powerful forms of literacy and numeracy are necessary outcomes. In his article, Rose lays out the intellectual architecture that has given shape to his work, as he takes us on a kind of archeological dig in which he unearths a history of the ways students from largely working-class communities continue to be underserved in U.S. schools.

Many researchers working in within a CH/AT tradition, especially in the United States, are concerned with the persistence of educational inequities in U.S. schools and the system's inability or unwillingness to address issues of cultural diversity. At the same time, as Cole (1998) has pointed out, we continue to recognize the need to continuously revise cultural-historical theories—theories conceptualized early in the 20th century—that insufficiently account for diversity. One important response to these new demands involves organizing new forms of educational activity in which diversity is a resource for learning rather than a problem to be ignored or legislated and for which reciprocity between the researcher and the community is a fundamental design and ongoing ethical concern (see Cole, 1998; Gutiérrez, 2008; Lee, 2007; Moll, 1997; Vasquez, 2003, for examples). These cultural-historical approaches to designing for development—formative-experimental research informed by the work of Vygotsky and his colleagues—are organized around a set of central tenets that have guided CH/AT-inspired intervention research, including the importance of attending to the ethical and strategic contradictions of intervention research (Cole & Engeström, 2007).

Doing this well, as Rose so adeptly demonstrates, requires getting up close, as we continually visit and revisit the sites, our relations, our assumptions, and how we represent what is learned. Consider, for example, the beginning of Rose's article in which he describes how we "see" the classroom, our vantage point, the way our perceptions and beliefs and even fears around social categories can skew what we see when it comes to ability. Here Rose highlights what those working within a cultural-historical activity theoretical tradition take seriously: the analysis of activity settings themselves. Just as Rose inserts himself for long periods of observation, a cultural-historical approach also directs us to "see" development as part of the activity system, to see the social process happening, and to participate in its development; and to observe these processes across several activity systems.

These fundamental considerations gave rise to one specific type of formative intervention, the social design experiment (Gutiérrez, 2008; Gutierrez & Vossoughi, 2010). We have detailed our approach, mindful of the danger, as Erickson (2006) so eloquently reminded us, of research in which "the local work of daily social action is described by the ethnographer as if it were effortless, taking place in a universe from which social gravity is absent" (p. 243). Such work requires prolonged participation in the practices we study—stepping into the messiness, pressures, and joys that open our interpretative sensibilities about the difficulty of this kind of work—the importance of studying side by side to develop more honest accounts of cultural production that necessarily take us beyond social portraits of actors and social life as either weightless or overdetermined (Erickson, 2006).

Let me return here to Mike Rose, whose work brings these critical points to life, as he works meticulously to capture, with a keen humanity, the social processes fundamental to his accounts of teaching and learning, the kind of work that traces social behavior and processes in order to delve into the real complexity of the lives of students and teachers. In cultural-historical terms, to understand behavior is to understand the history of behavior; to understand human activity involves studying it in an ongoing cultural practice in order to provide a description of the structure and the flow of activity, including what gives meaning to people in the course of activity.

I believe Rose's discussion of welders in the article and his larger body of work on the cognition involved in skilled labor most poignantly illustrate the care and planning he takes to understand the activity settings, the people in it, and the ebb and flow of everyday life, as well as how one's beliefs about learning and learners help give shape to our accounts of the social processes at hand. In doing so, he also has elaborated how the politics of intelligence have been at work in policies and practices of the American remedial education tradition. In his discussion, we hear echoes of his other studies—studies reminiscent of Scribner's seminal work—in which he examines the cognitive demands of everyday work. Drawing on a range of interdisciplinary approaches to study knowledge at work in a range of skilled labor professions, Rose carefully documents intelligence, learning, reasoning, problem solving, and the strategic use of skills in blue-collar and skilled work. In doing so, Rose takes apart notions of intelligence that make implicit judgments about working-class jobs, "classed" views of intelligence, he argues. Through rich accounts of the range of cognitive skills and strategies workers employed—from the importance of memory in waitressing, to the complex mathematical and diagnostic skills used by carpenters, electricians, plumbers, and hairstylists, Rose has detailed the intelligence of working-class, skilled workers, as he exposes the significant limitations of understandings of cognition in work and pushes us to consider a definition of intelligence that befits a democracy. As Rose puts it, a "democratic philosophy [that] would affirm the ability of the common person."

Here I want to highlight two relevant issues that resonate especially with current discussions among those interested in the study of activity through a cultural historical lens—the assumption that intellectual operations can be divided into levels from simple/rote to complex/meaningful and the related assumption that in order to teach "higher forms of learning" one must first master the simple, "basic" level skills in order to acquire the higher order skills.

Rose's discussion of the history of remedial instruction in the United States and remedial writing instruction, in particular, describes the narrowing of ideas found in approaches to instruction like the one just described. Taken as a whole, Rose's approach to writing instruction involves a rejection of the view that there is a "lower, 'Level 1' kind of learning/thinking that precedes higher, 'Level 2' learning/thinking both ontogenetically and in the mastery of school" (Laboratory for Comparative Human Cognition, 1989, p. 75)—approaches that reflect a kind of "cognitive reductionism" (Rose, 1988) in the theories of teaching and learning themselves.

The pernicious effect of this combination has been the focus of this journal for some time. It is perhaps best illustrated by the work of Moll and Diaz (1987), whose study documented how a combination of institutional, ideological, and pedagogical forms worked to constrain the learning of bilingual Spanish-English speakers. Employing a more standard, CHAT-based methodology with the observer-participant account provided by Mike Rose, Moll and Diaz examined the consequences of instruction and its social organization on the reading development of two groups of children who were assessed to be bilingual in spoken English and Spanish.

The researchers observed children in two different classrooms—one with a fully bilingual teacher, the other with a monolingual English-speaking teacher. The children in each of the classes were grouped by reading ability: high, medium, and low. And although the children could speak English, their instruction was designed to “remediate” their reading deficiency with lessons organized around an assumption that they could not read and comprehend English. Through their observations, Moll and Diaz found that the reading instruction in the English language classroom was organized around decoding the text phonetically, with significant attention to repeated practice in word/sound pronunciation. Even children in the highest level reading group had limited opportunity to engage in elaborated talk, as comprehension questions required limited responses from the children.

To understand better how children who could read for meaning in Spanish could be in the early processes of learning to decode in English, Moll and Diaz designed an intervention in which children would read the English texts to themselves but were allowed to discuss the meaning of the texts in Spanish, English, or a combination of the two—a practice common in their own speech community. With attention focused on what children could understand from what they had read, children’s estimated grade level for comprehension significantly increased. The results were considerably different for the same group of children observed in their Spanish language program class. Children across all three reading groups participated in comprehension directed activities. They had learned to read for comprehension (a higher order skill) in Spanish. Such gains in comprehension and making sense of texts should not be surprising, as mature reading and mathematical thinking require *both* top down (Level 2) and bottom-up (Level 1) processes” (Laboratory for Comparative Human Cognition, 1989, p. 75)—the kind of back and forth we see in Moll and Diaz’s intervention as well as in Rose’s writing tutorials. Such work argues what many in this research community believe: a “bottom-up,” “Level 1/Level 2” theory of learning and instruction is wrong in principle and pernicious in practice.

Rose’s work in vocational education elaborates these points, as he details the different ways status and symbolism play into the low status of the vocational course, the people who teach and the students who take the course. Here, the stigmatizing discourse of remediation and repair, rather than a discourse of possibility, indexes long-held assumptions that dichotomize the academic and the vocational, as well as reflect sets of beliefs about the separation of kinds of knowledge that have played out throughout traditional and vocational *education in the United States*.

Some final thoughts. There is much to be learned from the ways Mike Rose seeks to account for the underlying dynamic processes not to be found in macrovariables. Such changes to long-standing paradigms require significant work. In his conclusion, Rose advances several more general propositions that many across theoretical and methodological camps should find compelling. He argues, for example, that the social organization of the academy, namely, our disciplinary structures and methodologies, contributes to the siloing of ideas and methods that can contribute to a narrowing of the ways we think about the teaching, learning, studying, and education of youth. For Rose, the promise of leveraging interdisciplinary approaches to solve complex problems is too significant to ignore.

But we must proceed cautiously into these efforts. Penuel, Fishman, Cheng, and Sabelli (in press) pointed out the limitations found in many interdisciplinary collaborations that inadvertently exacerbate the research and practice divide. These colleagues argued the benefit of networks of collaboration where researchers work jointly and build on their expertise and mutual efforts

to address the kinds of educational problems worthy of a democracy. This requires the kinds of frames and methods highlighted here—the kinds of transformative approaches that make it possible to see learning and learners at work, to see the world differently.

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