

Practice and discourse as the intersection of individual and social in human development

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Abstract:

My goal in this chapter is to show how a focus on everyday practices, including discourse, allows us to understand the interpenetration of individual and social in the course of human development. A practice-based approach does not seek to explain development by reference only to individual factors, without simultaneous consideration of the social context within which the individual is acting, or to social factors, without examining the ways in which the social world is experienced differently by the different individuals inhabiting it. Such an approach is in keeping with the ideas of Vygotsky and Piaget, both of whom (albeit in different ways) eschewed the dichotomy of individual and social (Smith, 1996; Tudge & Scrimsher, 2003; Tudge & Winterhoff, 1993). The difficulties inherent in this more systemic approach, however, stem from the fact that most scholars interested in development have not been trained to think systemically but rather in terms of causal models inspired by the positivist tradition (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

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I would like initially to illustrate the issue by referring to Roger Säljö's recent article (2000), based on his presentation at the 1997 Johann Jacobs Foundation conference on social interaction. The session in which Säljö's talk took place appeared under the heading "How Knowledge Is Transmitted...." In his article, Säljö rejected the use of this implicitly unidirectional formulation that has knowledge being transmitted from one (presumably more competent) individual or group to a (presumably less competent) receiver. Instead, he spoke about *appropriation*, a term that necessarily involves active participation by the learner. That change in terminology was helpful, given that Säljö's aim was to lead us toward an understanding of understanding that is not an individual construct but instead is rooted in social and discursive practices (see also Säljö, 1999).

His argument drew on sociocultural and discourse theory and the work of others in the sociocultural tradition to show that "psychological functioning [is] situationally intimately intertwined with social interaction" (2000, p. 35). Rather than thinking in terms of individual competencies (someone "possesses" some cognitive attribute or some knowledge of a concept), Säljö (2000) argued that learning is primarily about how individuals come to appropriate and use concepts in specific situations (*discursive practices*). Säljö placed himself squarely in opposition to a mentalist view of concepts that has them "residing inside individuals as abstract copies of an outside reality" (2000, pp. 36-37). Säljö's position was that one understands something in a specific context with no guarantee that the same understanding will be in evidence once the context is changed or the thing to be understood is in any way different. This is something that traditional cognitive researchers have had difficulty with for years, the problem of transfer, which is a problem only if we take an approach that has the individual owning some competence.

To this point, Säljö's (2000) argument was clearly in accord with the systemic perspective mentioned earlier. However, he also used wording that implied a more dualistic position and took an almost socially deterministic position, arguing that meaning is "to a significant extent determined by factors that lie outside the mental apparatus of the student" (2000, p. 35). If one takes seriously the position that knowledge does not lie within the skull of the individual but in the spaces between individual and other, it makes little sense to speak of inside the head and outside; it is while engaging in some practice or activity (being in a social situation) that one is able to succeed at some task (perhaps with help) or to show understanding of some concept, with no guarantee that one will be able to have the same success or understanding in a different context.

Elsewhere in the article, by contrast, Säljö seemed to want to retain the view that an individual possesses knowledge or competence. His statement that "Even a student sitting [alone with a book] cannot be conceived as involved in an activity that is entirely private and internal" (2000, p. 35) seems to suggest that the activity is *somewhat* private and internal, rather than being necessarily social, simply because the activity involves at least one social other (the author of the text). Säljö also stated: "The assumption that knowledge forms part of discourses leads to the scrutiny *not only of individual competencies* but also to an interest in the concrete conditions under which people act, and the constraints and affordances that are built into these situations" (2000, p. 38; emphasis added).

It is perhaps not surprising that this apparently dualist position (emphasizing at one time social determinants of cognition and at another time individual competencies) appeared in an article that sought to take a constitutive approach to cognition. The relations between individual and social are complex, and even among those who take what has been termed a *socio-genetic* perspective, there is debate about whether the epistemic individual, the active, thinking, planning individual, exists at all. Lightfoot and Cox (1997), reviewing recent writing on this topic, distinguished between different ways of conceptualizing the boundaries between self and other:

By one version, the child is understood to be part of a larger social or cultural whole; by the other, the child is seen as an ensemble of social relations. The first of these encourages a dissolution of boundaries, whereas the other insists on their centrality. (p. 7)

My view is that we do not want to lose sight of the individual, with his or her unique perspectives; but at the same time, we must acknowledge that individuals are socially created. We are all well aware of our own particular ways of making sense of the world. These ways are unique to us, our *personal culture* in Valsiner's (1989) term. As I have written elsewhere (Tudge, 1997), in one sense it is clear that I am writing this chapter (no one else has ever written exactly what appears before you) and that the ideas being expressed "are at one and the same time my own and a social product - the ideas of others, half-forgotten, combined, transformed, and reconstructed in their own peculiar way by me" (p. 129). Moreover, they are ideas that were highly influenced by Säljö's (2000) article or at least my interpretation of it. The trick is to understand that these ideas are at one and the same time individual *and* social, an interpenetration of individual and social, which is essentially the argument that Säljö is making. As Säljö expressed it:

I will not . . . regard understanding as an internal . . . psychological quality characteristic of a particular class of experiences. Even though I myself truly enjoy the feeling of understanding, I will consider the psychological dimension as a derivative of my participation in collective social practices. (2000, p. 36)

Does this mean, echoing Packer (1993), that, although individuals are social *in origin*, they are independent, autonomous beings as a result of their prior social experiences? I think not, for with every engagement in any practice (including reading a book in solitude or thinking), the individual is actively playing a part in a social world.

In the remainder of this chapter, I present some of the ways in which I would take Säljö's (2000) argument a little further, first placing his article into a broader metatheoretical framework and, second, moving away from a focus on discourse to activities more generally.

As Winegar (1997) has argued, it is helpful to place the theories that we find useful into their broader metatheoretical framework. As Säljö (2000) has pointed out, there is a crucial distinction between idealist and realist positions, on the one hand, and situated practices, on the other. The distinction is, I think, redolent of a broader shift that has been taking place in developmental psychology over the past few years, away from an individualistic and unidirectional approach to developmental issues. Increasingly, scholars are taking an approach to development that is more systemic, co-constructive, and dialectical, an approach that stresses the interrelatedness of social

and individual aspects of development. This approach is by no means new; echoes are found in the writings of Baldwin, Dewey, Janet, Lewin, Mead, Piaget, Vygotsky, and others writing a century ago and into the 1930s (Cole & Engeström, 1993; Tudge, Gray, & Hogan, 1997; Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991). The ideas may not be new, but perhaps the time is right for them to be taken seriously.

This is the argument that has been made by Guba and Lincoln (1994) in their discussion of competing metatheoretical paradigms. They contrasted positivist and postpositivist paradigms with the postmodern paradigms of critical theory and constructivism. Distinctions between them can be drawn in terms of ontology (the form and nature of reality), epistemology (the relation between the knower or would-be knower and what can be known), and methodology. The first two paradigms can be characterized by their essentially realist (naive or critical) ontological position, whereas the two postmodern paradigms may be characterized by a view of reality that is shaped both historically and at the local situated level. In terms of epistemology, the positivist and postpositivist positions reflect a dualist position in which the investigator and “subject” are separable entities, although this separation may be obtainable only through strict experimental control. By contrast, proponents of the postmodern paradigms argue that the relation is transactional, with no separation between investigator and participant in the study. As might be expected from these epistemological stances, positivist methodology relies on experimental and manipulative methods, whereas postmodern methodology involves dialogue and a dialectical stance (at least if the methodology is related to the underlying theoretical assumptions, something that is not always the case).

Another way in which it is possible to take Säljö's (2000) argument a little further is to place his ideas in the broader context of situated practice rather than simply in that of discourse, which, in Säljö's article, was involved in the process of trying to find out what someone knows in the course of interviews. This is not to argue that discourse is unimportant - far from it - but rather to point out that this type of interview may be an unusual type of practice in which to engage. As Säljö pointed out, children who are perfectly well aware of the number of days they go to school in a week can still be fooled by the nature and context of a question about days in a week. Similarly (using another example that Säljö incorporated into his paper), ice hockey players know precisely how hard to hit the puck to ensure that it begins to slow down before officials halt play for icing, and yet they may have great difficulty with a question that requires thinking about force and friction. Their understanding of these concepts may thus be more related to their everyday use of skills in one context (a specific type of practice) than to discourse. What may be more beneficial than interviewing participants in our studies about some concept or activity would be observing them and having them talk about the same things in the context of the relevant activity itself. Of course, this involves far more trouble for psychologists, which is why so many choose to engage in lab research or to interview in a context far removed from the setting in which the relevant activity typically takes place. Ethnographic studies of discourse, or of language development, allow us to see the ways in which children come to appropriate the concepts that are relevant in their cultural groups in the course of engaging in relevant activities and participating in discourse (see, e.g., Goodwin, 1990; Heath, 1983; Ochs, 1988; Schieffelin, 1990). Greater familiarity with and exposure to concepts or skills in a variety of contexts and practices may help children to appropriate them, to make them “their own” in the sense that they are able to show their understanding of the concept or their competent, skillful performance in a

variety of different contexts (see also the study by Schoultz, Säljö, & Wyndhamn, 2001, of how children required to use an artifact, a globe, can successfully master conceptual structures that they otherwise could not). This does not imply, of course, that there will be no contexts in which the child fails to show understanding.

In fact, if we are truly interested in understanding the process of understanding, maybe we should move beyond situated discourse and focus instead on practices, practices that often feature language (interpersonal or intrapersonal). The work of Jean Lave (1988; Lave & Wenger, 1991) illustrates nicely the interpenetration of individual and social in the context of engaging in everyday activities, as does the research of those who have examined the ways in which mathematics is learned in school and on the streets (Nunes, Schliemann, & Carraher, 1993; Saxe, 1991) and the work of Cole and his colleagues in the area of reading (Cole & Engeström, 1993).

Other authors in this volume make very similar arguments about the necessity to study activities. Not surprisingly, given her earlier work (e.g., Heath, 1983), Shirley Brice Heath (this volume) is particularly interested in analyzing the discourse of the adolescents who participated in the youth-based organizations that she has studied. As one of her informants pointed out, however, “When you do something where you create, it builds something inside you that never really goes away” (p. 49). Analysis of discourse may well be an effective way to understand how adolescents become drawn into, change, and are changed by an activity, but it is by *engaging* in that activity (not simply by talking about such engagement) that one changes and is most changed. Discourse is relevant to change, of course, and Heath provides nice examples of the ways in which her adolescent participants use language to help refine their understandings of the rules of the organization, the roles that they are learning to fulfill, and so on. Nonetheless, participation in the activities in every way, including linguistically, is key. Discourse without practice would signify little.

Karsten Hundeide’s work (this volume) dealing with counterculture youth movements, rather than with the more socially acceptable groups that Heath studies, illustrates the same basic point: that discourse is but one aspect of a broader range of activities in which people engage in the process of becoming a part of the group. Hundeide discusses the roles played by actions that “express and confirm the recruit’s status as an insider and often conflict with one’s previous values. These actions may involve taking some drug, participating in some criminal action against the recruit’s previous code of morality, or simply taking on the style and extreme uniform of a youth movement and thus appearing in public with the other participants.”

My own recent research (Tudge, Hogan, & Etz, 1999a; Tudge et al., 1999b; Tudge & Putnam, 1997) is also focused on the ways in which individuals appropriate an understanding of their culture’s concepts, skills, and practices in the course of participating in their everyday activities. This work does not relate to adolescents but rather to young children as they move from the preschool years and enter formal schooling. The points that I wish to make are generally applicable, however, and not relevant only to young children’s development.

I would argue that the best way in which to understand this process is to observe it in action, focusing on the types of commonplace activities in which people often engage. I illustrate this with some details from my research. My colleagues and I have collected a great deal of

observational data (20 hours per child, spread over the course of 1 week in order to encompass a complete waking day) on preschoolers in a single medium-sized city in each of various countries, including the United States, Russia, Estonia, Finland, Korea, and Kenya. The children were observed wherever they were situated: at home, with friends or relatives, in a preschool center, and so on. We focused on the activities going on around the children (those that were potentially available to them), the activities in which the children engaged, how those activities started and how the children became involved, partners in those activities, and the roles taken by participants in the activities in which the children were involved. Those who were around the children (i.e., teachers, parents, friends, and others who played important roles in their lives) made activities available to their children in various ways. They engaged in those activities themselves (e.g., cleaning house, watching television, reading a newspaper, playing) and encouraged or discouraged their children from engaging in those activities. They made available to their children objects that they wished their children to engage with (e.g., books, television, toys, at least in industrialized, wealthy societies) and talked to their children about things they deemed interesting and important. At the same time, the children themselves were actively involved in the process of participation in the activities that were available, trying to engage in some activities that those around tried to discourage them from, and initiating new activities and trying to recruit others to join in with them.

Because the project is designed to be longitudinal, with data collected again once the children have entered school, our first publications have focused on those activities that may be most apropos to school-related competencies. These activities are lessons that relate to literacy or numeracy (academic lessons); lessons about how to do things or about the workings of the natural world (skill/nature lessons); looking at a book or using school-relevant materials, but without an explicit lesson being involved (play with academic objects); and being involved in conversation with one or more adults (conversation). In each of the cities, children whose parents are well educated by the standards of the society and whose occupations are professional (i.e., middle class) engage more in these types of activities than do children whose parents do not have higher education and whose jobs are not professional (i.e., working class). It could be that the reason for this differential involvement is simply that the middle-class parents think that it is more important for their children to engage in these activities than do working-class parents. If this is so, the former make such activities more available to their children (a unidirectional, culturally transmitted view of the process of development). It is particularly striking, however, that at least some differences in engagement between middle-class and working-class children result from the former being more likely to initiate those activities themselves. In other words, the children actively involve themselves in activities that those around them deem important.

What are some of the consequences of inhabiting social systems that encourage different types of activities? I am trying to argue not that, by engaging in lessons or talking with adults, children simply learn more, but that they come to understand that these activities are considered important by significant others in their lives. They come to have meaning beyond the specific lesson that is or is not being learned in the course of interaction. What is being appropriated by the children is revealed in their willingness to initiate similar types of experiences, asking questions, or trying to engage adults in conversation. To put this in clearer focus, it is worthwhile to look at a different type of lesson that we coded: interpersonal lessons, or lessons about how to behave well with others. Our U.S. data show that middle-class children (particularly boys) engaged in more

academic lessons, whereas working-class children (particularly girls) engaged in more interpersonal lessons. When looking at these gender differences, the inferences that can be drawn are striking: Middle-class boys inhabit a social world in which things academic are viewed as important (by adults and children alike), whereas working-class girls are learning that what is important is knowing how to behave appropriately with others. Subsequent encounters with the social world are then influenced by what these children have come to see as appropriate and what they have made their own through their earlier participation in practices with others.

In some sense, of course, this is the essence of the sociocultural approach: to show that, through engagement in activities, children come to be drawn into the social world and to learn, through participation with others who are more competent, the skills and concepts deemed relevant and important in that culture. However, this point is complicated by the fact that cultures are not homogeneous entities. It is one thing to argue that different cultural groups value different competencies, whether for all children or further differentiated for boys and girls within the group. But the situation is more complex when the cultural groups can be thought of as subcultures within a larger culture. In such a case, one subculture's competencies may well occupy a more privileged position than do others. For example, in the United States at present, academic competence is valued more highly than interpersonal competence. What are the long-term consequences of engaging in and initiating these types of academically relevant activities, as opposed to spending more time learning interpersonal lessons? The data suggest (Tudge, Otero, Hogan, & Etz, 2003) that there is a moderate relation between these types of academically related activities and teachers' perceptions of their academic competence approximately 4 years later, when the children are ages 7 and 8, both in terms of initiation of these activities ($r = .24$) and for engagement in them ($r = .40$). It is necessary to point out that these children are for the most part in different schools and have different teachers, so the teachers are not comparing middle-class and working-class children within the same classroom. The story is thus more complex than simply that middle-class children in the United States engage in more of these activities and are viewed as more academically competent by their teachers than are working-class children.

At this point, it may seem that I have focused too much on practice in general and excluded discourse as one example of practice. There is more of a connection, however, than might be apparent. Of the four activities (academic lessons, skill/nature lessons, play with academic objects, and conversation with adults) that I have discussed so far, one was far more related to teachers' perceptions of academic competence than were the others: namely, conversation with one or more adults. The correlation between preschoolers' initiation of conversation with an adult and perceived competence 4 years later at school was a remarkable .67, and engagement in conversation was also highly correlated ($r = .59$). Moreover, the one activity that was not at all predictive of later academic competence was play with academic objects. Of the four activities of interest, this was the only one that did not necessarily involve some discourse. It is thus apparent that, through participation with others in everyday activities (particularly discursive activities), individuals come to be perceived as competent. Those perceived to be more competent in any domain are likely to be treated differently (often better) from those perceived to be less competent, thereby continuing to illustrate the interrelations of psychological functioning and social interaction, as Säljö (2000) argued in his article.

It is worth emphasizing that these processes are by no means limited to children's development. Adolescents and adults, like children, engage in myriad activities in which discourse may play a large role, a small role, or no role at all. By engaging in activities, often in conjunction with others, we all (no matter what age) become more competent at those activities. We do so sometimes because we engage with others who are more competent. Examples include children engaging with an adult in work or play, as well as adolescents becoming involved in a youth organization with others who are already members. However, we also become more competent as we engage with others who are less competent; for example, professors often understand concepts at a higher level after teaching them to students. It would thus be a mistake to think that such interactions are simply *scaffolding*, or a more competent partner providing the necessary assistance to enable the less competent partner to learn or become more skilled. The process is dynamic and dialectical, not unidirectional. What is done and said by any one person in any interaction depends in part on what the other is doing and saying. What each of the participants appropriates from the interaction is different, because the sense or meaning of the interaction is different for each and is understood differently because of prior experiences and understandings. As teachers, we know that, no matter what concept we try to "transmit," we can guarantee that there will be as many new understandings as there are students, each of whom will transform what is said in light of his or her previous understanding of the concept. There can thus be no simple transmission from one to the other: Instead there is a transactional relationship in which what each appropriates from the interaction is socially constructed and individually transformed.

The more that individuals engage in different practices, discursive or otherwise, with different people in different settings, the more they come to be seen as being competent at those practices. Indeed, we may consider people to be competent or to have understanding when they can display it in a variety of settings rather than in just one specific setting. Competence or understanding is then deemed an individual attribute: What has been appropriated from multiple engagements in practice is part of the individual's personal culture and will be part of what the individual brings to subsequent encounters with the social world. Competence or understanding is thus simultaneously entirely individual and entirely social.

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