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Anne Edwards & Carmen D’arcy

University of Birmingham, UK

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Relational Agency and Disposition in Sociocultural Accounts of Learning to Teach

ANNE EDWARDS & CARMEN D’ARCY, University of Birmingham, UK

ABSTRACT We draw on two studies of student teachers as they learn about learning while interacting with pupils. We argue that the affective notion of relational agency needs to become more central to understanding pedagogy if we are to prepare learners for the demands of the knowledge age. Here relational agency is defined as a capacity to engage with the dispositions of others in order to interpret and act on the object of our actions in enhanced ways. The social practices of settings in which these dispositions for collaborative engagement are enacted are examined using the conceptual tools of sociocultural psychology and activity theory. Implications for both the learning of pupils and of student teachers are discussed.

All the higher functions originate as actual relations between human individuals. (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57)

Pedagogy and disposition

Sociocultural accounts of teaching and learning tend to emphasize the role of teachers as mediators of what is valued in society. Mediations occur in interactions with learners to induct them into the practices and values of the society or societies in which they are participating (Hedegaard, 2002). When this interpretation of teaching and learning is transferred into schooling, we can see teaching as the induction of children and young people into the knowledge that has been validated in school curricula with an emphasis on agreed and assessable learning outcomes. We shall argue in this article that as enlightened as this view of teaching is, it needs to be developed in order to take more fully into account the motivations and engagement of pupils with what is there to be learnt.

We propose that this development calls for versions of pedagogy (teaching and learning) which aim at strengthening pupils’ capabilities for learning (Bereiter, 2002) through enhancing their dispositions to engage with and transform features of their worlds. Here we are seeing learning as the expansion of understandings and the transforming of the ways in which the world is conceptualized. These transformations may be material, such as a practical solution to a problem-solving task, or they may be a matter of recognizing the complexity of the task, i.e. revealing more of the meanings inherent in a task. In activity theory terms (see Daniels, in this issue), we
are suggesting that learning is a matter of transforming the object of activity through acting on it and seeing it differently. We are also suggesting that such transformations involve an ability to recognize how available resources can support one’s action on the object (Clark, 1997). These resources may be tools, both material and conceptual, and they may be other people.

We understand disposition as a capacity to engage, which is embedded in social practices which enable that engagement (Dreier, 1999). This conceptualization of disposition requires attention to the social practices of the classroom. Teaching therefore includes the production and management of social processes geared at enhancing the dispositions of learners to participate knowledgeably in the practices of a curriculum subject. One part of teaching therefore involves focusing on the practices of being, for example, a historian or a linguist. This aspect of teachers’ work can also be seen as focusing on pupil engagement with what Schwab labelled the syntactic and substantive elements of the curriculum (Westbury & Wilkof, 1978) or, for the Vygotskian, what are ‘subject matter concepts’ (Hedegaard, 2002), i.e. the key concepts and ways of thinking associated with a curriculum subject. However, we suggest that teaching also demands an understanding of how learners are propelled by social practices towards such engagement. Here we recognize the limitations of the social practices of many classrooms for learners. For example, how they enable learners to avoid providing evidence of not knowing (Lineham & McCarthy, 2001).

We are, of course, not the first to attempt to tackle motivation and engagement in terms of social practices. Van Oers and Hännikäinen (2001) describe the concept of ‘togetherness’ in which they draw on Vygotskian concerns with affect. They argue for more attention to be paid to group processes in the study of learning in the early years of education and particularly to how intersubjectivity, as mutual understanding, is created and maintained. Making the connection between social activity, motivation and learning they remind us that, for Vygotsky, the interactive nature of learning is present in both the intermental plane and the intramental. However, their analysis focuses on group belonging and not on how a disposition to engage is generated and sustained in interaction with an other.

Goldstein (1999) focuses less on broader sets of social practices which may enhance participation and more on that nature of the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Calling on the work of Noddings on the ethics of care (Noddings, 1984), she augments what she describes as current understandings of the ZPD as an interpsychological dimension with an understanding of it as an interrelational one. Here the emphasis is on teachers’ connections with learners’ standpoints and engrossment in and receptivity to learners’ positions in order to struggle jointly to make sense. However, Goldstein’s analysis focuses on the nature of interactions within the ZPD. In the present article we attempt to relate the ZPD to the social practices of the classroom and begin to tease out how relational aspects of the ZPD may be seen to assist learning in schools.

We also find support for our attention to the relational from Hicks (2000) who suggests that moral projects are curiously absent from discussions of social learning. For Hicks, in such projects self is placed in relation to the intentions of others. She argues that a shift in emphasis to a stronger recognition of the moral elements involved in recognizing others’ sense-making and goals can enrich existing dialogic accounts of learning. This notion of self-in-relation also resonates with Taylor’s (1991) concern with responsible engagement with others, with Shotter (1993) in his
call for relational ethics and Benhabib (1991) on discursive rationality. For all three the relational is a way of stepping back from the abyss of relativism while avoiding the mechanistic limitations of some forms of causal reasoning which have led to individualization, disconnection and social fragmentation (Beck & Beck-Gersheim, 2001; Sennett, 1998). Arguably by engaging with the motives of others, and in Bruner’s (1996) terms considering how those relate to cultural ‘proprieties’, learners become included in practices which support the well-being of others and ultimately of themselves. This is an argument which echoes Noddings on the ethics of care.

Pupils who engage both with the curriculum and the cultural proprieties of society, we suggest, need teachers who regard social processes and learners’ positions as key features of knowledge sharing and its production in classrooms. This suggestion makes considerable demands on teachers and on schools. Sociocultural analyses of schools (e.g. Edwards et al., 2002) indicate that a capacity to enter and engage with the ZPDs of learners is more likely to be found in schools where teachers are expected to do more than simply deliver a curriculum. Valsiner (1998), for example, has usefully examined the interconnection between the scope for freedom of action within a ZPD and the social contexts in which the learning zone is located. Such freedom of action is not simply evident within the ZPD but can be seen in the possibilities for action available to teachers as professionals. Elsewhere this relationship between affordances for action and action taken has been discussed as a teacher’s capacity for deliberative agency or the wherewithal to interpret classrooms as complex environments and to be able to respond to those interpretations and transform the objects of their activities (Edwards et al., 2002). Agentic teachers, the argument goes, are empowered to work responsively in classrooms and such agency is created and sustained in the social practices of the schools in which they work.

So far we have been discussing teaching as a complex professional practice which consists of more than the ability to represent a curriculum. We have suggested that attention to learners’ dispositions and the affective or motivational aspects of learning has recently been underplayed and have hinted that the intellectual tool kit offered by sociocultural and activity theory may help us achieve some purchase on disposition and pedagogy.

We will illustrate our analysis of these themes with evidence from two studies of student teachers in England. We have selected these examples because an examination of the formation of professional identities brings into relief salient dimensions of professional practice and how they are created. One study is located in elementary schools and the other focuses on student teachers who are preparing to teach modern foreign languages in secondary schools. The context of tightly regulated English Initial Teacher Training (ITT) programmes and their emphasis on the polished performance of individual teachers is common across both studies and arguably inhibits the development of an interactive knowledge producing pedagogy (Edwards, 2001).

**Relational agency, disposition and learning**

However, before examining the classroom examples we need to clarify relational agency and its implications for approaches to learning in classrooms. Relational agency is not simply a matter of collaborative action on an object. Rather it is a capacity to recognize and use the support of others in order to transform the object. It is an ability to seek out and use others as resources for action and equally to be
able to respond to the need for support from others. Relational agency is therefore based on a fluid and open-ended notion of the ZPD. In our analyses of evidence from the studies, we are working with the idea of the ZPD as a set of interactions which is on-going in a social setting i.e. not simply a contrived interaction aimed at achieving one learning outcome. Our definition therefore resonates with Engeström’s interpretation of an activity system as an open-ended learning zone (Engeström, 1987). However, we pay more attention to the micro-relations to be found between learners than did Engeström in that study. The ZPDs we were seeking were to be embedded in the social practices of educational settings, geared towards joint action on objects and open to multiple participants. We acknowledged that they might be difficult to discern and that teachers, student teachers and pupils may need to develop capabilities to work relationally within such a shifting and fluid ZPD.

While our studies focused on educational settings, our understanding of the ZPD has wider utility. In and outside the classroom these ZPDs may be short lived as in the fleeting linkages of knotworking (Engeström et al., 1999) and they may be found as easily in dislocated and shifting networks (Castells, 2000) as in established communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Given our capacity to inhabit multiple activity systems, we suggest that what matters most is our ability to recognize and engage in these relationships in order to enhance our interpretations of the objects, of our actions and of the resources that might support those actions wherever they might be.

Relational agency almost inevitably expands the object of our activities. By engaging with the dispositions of others within a ZPD, learners gain new insights into the phenomena they are tackling. They can draw on the histories and interpretations of others in their sense-making and are not riskily isolated. They can safely make their own understandings semi-public within the relationship and so subject them to scrutiny. Bereiter and Scardamalia (1996), usefully talk of the improvable object in terms of the ideas which children develop collaboratively and with which they engage with their worlds.

There are important considerations here for how teachers manage learners and organize learning environments. But there are also implications for how we train teachers to work with pupils so that they too are encouraged to expand the object of their enquiries and develop dispositions to engage with the unpredictability of learners. In England the emphasis in ITT has been on a constrained form of individual agency among teachers which limits almost to extinction their capacities for deliberative and responsive teaching in school-based work (Edwards & Protheroe, 2003). Cultural processes such as national testing of the individual performance of pupils on an agreed and overloaded curriculum, public performance league tables for schools and detailed personal performance standards on which student teachers are assessed have reduced learning to teach to an ability to follow a lesson plan. Both teachers and pupils are rendered powerless in processes of curriculum delivery.

**Some findings from research in educational settings**

The two studies we shall discuss briefly offer examples of firstly the powerlessness of student teachers as curriculum deliverers and its impact on attempts at developing social practices aimed at relational agency. In the second study we see how power relationships embedded in the social practices of the setting can be shifted so that
pupils and student teachers explore together the potential of joint action on communicative competence as the object of the activity.

The first example comes from a study of school-based ITT in primary schools. The study is written up in detail elsewhere (Edwards & Protheroe, 2004). It involved entry and exit questionnaires with 125 student teachers on two 1 year postgraduate training programmes and intensive work (observations, interviews and recorded conversations) with a case study sample of 12 students from those programmes and with their school-based mentors over their training year. The extracts here are from student teachers during their final teaching practice placement in schools.

We are suggesting that relational agency in pupils is likely to be enhanced by teachers who also experience it. Immediately after each of our 47 observations of student teachers teaching, we asked them how they had helped a pupil or pupils to learn in the lesson we had just seen. We found that just one of the case study students thought about how pupils could mutually support each other. But it was so rare a finding that it did not register strongly enough to allow us to include it in our data-driven categorizations of how student teachers thought about children’s learning. This student teacher was also exceptional in the way in which she recalled conversations with her teacher-mentor when discussing her thinking about pupil learning.

But even for this student teacher the mutual support and joint learning among pupils that she wanted to encourage was constrained by the need for curriculum coverage and individual pupil performance. That is, a capacity for relational agency was not the experienced object of her activity as a teacher. Here she is talking about a maths lesson with a class of 8-year-olds, after having spoken at length about how she and her teacher-mentor encouraged children to help each other. The pupils were working with some problems she had written on the chalk-board.

\[I\text{ was trying to do it as a race, just to pick up the speed of the lesson a bit. It was a bit of a slow start and I felt some of them decided that they couldn’t do it and weren’t really trying enough. So I decided to do it as a race just to buck up the speed … I knew it was children who could easily cope with the work, but they just need to buck up really. So I did it as a race to try to make them think about it and partly to work in pairs because they were working together to win their points and that worked quite well. I think they were explaining to each other so I was happy with that.}\]

In her response we see speed and curriculum coverage as features of current classrooms practices (Edwards & Protheroe, in press) shaping the way that helping behaviour was organized to assist pupils’ individual performance against curriculum targets. But even this was a rare finding. More often than not we found answers to our probing of how the children’s learning had been supported focused on children’s performance on highly structured work sheets where classroom practices were geared at outputs. In these responses the emphases on curriculum coverage rather than learning and disposition was clear.

The next extract from another student teacher is typical and again telling. She had just been teaching maths to a class of 10-year-olds by doing a whole class demonstration and then distributing worksheets. The extract shows her isolation from her teacher-mentor, how her teaching was driven by the Intended Learning Outcomes
A. Edwards & C. D’Arcy

(ILO) which had been agreed that term and her attention to curriculum delivery rather than to encouraging the resourceful actions of children.

Student teacher: We’ve done a list of ILOs to be covered this half term. Really just a matter of seeing what was the next thing they needed to know really. And just to tackle a couple of those ILOs each time.

Interviewer: Were you working from what the teacher’s already done or from what you know the children know?

Student teacher: I did actually look through their books to see what they had done and I knew what it was that they had covered (in the ILOs).

Interviewer: What about the resources?

Student teacher: I haven’t really. There are maths resources over there … I haven’t really used anything up to now.

Interviewer: What about the text books you had?

Student teacher: Yes I looked through the text books. I’m not sure exactly which units they’ve done. So I’ve had to have quite a few back ups in case they turn round and say we’ve done that one.

Interviewer: It says on your plan that you differentiated at two levels on the worksheet—but you had three groups?

Student teacher: I’d already done one worksheet for everyone. I decided that it was probably too hard for the bottom two groups. So I changed it a little bit—I wrote out the layout for long multiplication for them.

The last extract was typical of so many of the student teachers who were struggling to deliver the schools’ curricula in relative isolation. This isolation is currently built into ITT programmes which focus on how well student teachers can teach alone. In England there is an apprenticeship model of teaching which attends more to public performance as a teacher than to the learning that is required for responsive teaching. Student teachers very rarely teach alongside more experienced teachers and learn from their modelling and explanations of practice (Edwards, 2001; Edwards & Protheroe, in press).

A sociocultural reading of the study is that the student teachers as learners were not being supported by a well-worked-out notion of the ZPD as a site for supported action and learning. They were not accessing their mentors’ dispositions in explorations of the pedagogical possibilities inherent in classroom tasks and children as learners. They were not experiencing relational agency in their own training and were not encouraging it in pupils. The social practices of ITT seem in danger of creating teachers who will find it difficult to do more than deliver a curriculum to time.

The second study demonstrates how a radical shift in social practices can impact on pupils’ dispositions to engage. Here we observe how student teachers training to become modern foreign language specialists became aware of their own and others’ capabilities and needs and through these refreshed perceptions begin to see new scope for interaction in a changed ZPD.

The study involved inviting 31 Year 9 (14-year-old) bilingual pupils, from six schools, to the university to teach their home language to student teachers and other
Relational Agency and Disposition of Learning to Teach

university staff. The pupils’ languages were Arabic, Bengali, Bosnian, Chinese, Créole, Kurdish, Punjabi, Serbian, Somali, Thai and Urdu. The situation was comparable to that of a classroom in so far as there were teachers and learners who were working towards the shared object of a degree of communicative competence. But the traditional power dynamics of the classroom were disturbed and we hoped that a fresh learning zone had been created where there was more freedom of movement for learners and teachers and new pathways of participation available.

The rules were that the pupils would teach and the student teachers would be the learners. In order to engage the learners and enable them to achieve some communicative competence, the pupils had some tools at their disposal. These were flashcards made with help from foreign language teachers in their schools and advice from them on strategies including repetition, chorusing and graded questions. Teaching was therefore seen as joint action between pupils and student teachers on the shared object of the learners’ communicative competence, using some fairly traditional pedagogic tools.

Participants’ impressions were gathered through observations made in the session, semi-structured interviews with six pupils before and after the event and written reviews of the event provided by 27 student teachers. In this report we are focusing on the responses of the pupils and the student teachers.

All the pupils experienced some surprise during the 3 hour session. There was some surprise at the learners’ difficulties in retaining the new language and pleasure at their interest in the pupils’ cultures. One pupil captured the importance of that interest as follows. They now ‘know [the pupils’] life, how it is’ Another pupil explained ‘It made me feel special—like getting someone else to understand your language, how you speak instead of them teaching you’. Particularly they appreciated feeling ‘like adults’. The dependency revealed by the learners provoked some self reflection among the pupils. Their changed relationship with the adults appeared to shift the way in which they were able to act on the object of language acquisition and therefore how they were positioning themselves as effective actors within pedagogic discourses. New pathways of participation had been set up which enabled them to think reflectively about themselves as users and learners of language.

As the pupils became more aware of the contribution they could make to the adults’ communicative competence, their efforts to help the learners became more interactive and responsive. For example, the pupils extended their repertoire of pedagogic tools. They found new ways to help the learners to repeat detached syllables of difficult words, such as mouthing the beginning of words. They also improvised new artefacts to scaffold performance by writing down words, drawing pictures, showing parts of words and then hiding them. Arguably, they revealed strategies of joint action on the improvable object of communicative competence which they also believed were of value to learners.

The student teachers did learn about pupils as well as gaining some new language skills. They all subsequently reported that they had to work hard in order to learn the new languages ‘The brain reaches saturation point and it’s no use pushing the learner for the content’s sake’. They experienced the vulnerability that learners can feel in the classroom ‘It showed us the mistakes we make, e.g. asking pupils to repeat long sentences after hearing them once,[...] Thinking that some language is simple when it is not’ and felt ‘quite vulnerable and desperate not to make a mistake in front of others’.

They also reported a more holistic view of the pupils recognizing that, in normal
circumstances, they do not see ‘that the pupils are so interesting’ and that ‘seeing children outside the classroom showed some traits of their personalities not yet suspected’. These comments do suggest that the student teachers still had a long way to travel if they were to perceive teaching as an engagement with the dispositions of learners for joint action on the curriculum. But they were at least on the road towards acknowledging the affective dimensions of teaching and the beginnings of an ethics of care. In this regard it would seem that the student teachers had a great deal to learn from the pupils.

We have been proposing that we need to attend more to affective aspects of pedagogy than is often the case in classrooms. We have suggested that the concept of relational agency, embedded within the idea of a classroom as an open ended learning zone is a useful way forward. Its particular strength lies in the emphasis it places in the need for learners to develop the capacity to both seek and give support in joint action on the object of activity to expand mutual understandings of the object.

There are issues here for both pupils and student teachers as learners. In the first example we indicated that ITT could usefully employ the concept of relational agency to enhance the apprenticeship model in use in English school-based training so that student teachers might learn from and in joint action with their teacher-mentors. In the second example we have looked more closely at the socio-emotional relationships between pupils and teachers which are rarely revealed in performance oriented classrooms.

In both examples we are endorsing Goldstein’s call for an enhanced interrelational understanding of the ZPD (Goldstein, 1999) and are suggesting that increased attention to the affective in both ITT and classroom pedagogy needs to be supported by attention to the practices of educational settings. Here we have drawn on Dreyer’s notion of pathways of participation (Dreier, 1999) to see dispositions to engage as socially supported pathways of participation in the social practices of classrooms.

We have, in brief, attempted to point towards the limitations of current social practices in classrooms and the pedagogical insights to be gained from a planned disruption of these. Perhaps the most powerful of these insights has been the capabilities of the pupils and their own capacities for joint action.

Correspondence: Anne Edwards, School of Education, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham B15 2TT, UK. E-mail: L.A.Edwards@bham.ac.uk

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