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Review

Recasting transfer as a socio-personal process of adaptable learning

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ABSTRACT

Transfer is usually cast as an educational, rather than learning, problem. Yet, seeking to adapt what individuals know from one circumstance to another is a process more helpfully associated with learning, than a hybrid one called transfer. Adaptability comprises individuals construing what they experience, then aligning and reconciling with what they know, and enacting responses. This learning process is mediated by societal and cultural contributions shaping tasks, their goals and solutions and also by individuals' capacities and interest, as shaped by their ontogenies (i.e. socially derived life histories). Labelling this process 'transfer' arises from concerns about educational institutions' key rationale: that what is learnt through them should be applicable elsewhere. However, expectations of educational provisions generating wholesale adaptable learning (i.e. transferable knowledge) are unrealistic because this learning is mediated by culturally, societally and situationally derived facts and personal factors. To moderate expectations and inform practice, transfer of knowledge needs to be understood as human thinking and acting mediated both internally (intra-psychologically) as well as inter-psychologically (from social and brute suggestions beyond the individual). Consequently, a socio-personal conception of adaptability is advanced here to illuminate this process. Through intra- as well inter-psychological mediation, it comprises individuals construing what is experienced, reconciliation with what they know and constructing new knowledge or adaptability.

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1. The promise of transfer: Expectations and education

What passes as transfer has long been discussed within accounts of cognition and learning, albeit by other names (e.g. adaptability, problem-solving, equilibrium, viability, robustness). The term transfer is most frequently discussed within the educational literature and in relation to the development of adaptable learning by students in all levels of education

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(Lobato, 2006). These concerns are not surprising as developing adaptable learning – knowledge applicable to circumstances beyond those where it is learnt – is central to the educational project and purpose of educational institutions. Unlike other sites of learning (e.g. homes, workplaces, community settings), these institutions' primary purpose is promoting learning for application elsewhere. Whether referring to societal inclusion, developing specific capacities or preparation for working life, the educational project is premised on the expectation that what is learnt in these institutions should be adaptable. Such an aim also brings expectations that this learning should be superior to that from other settings (Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011). Nation states, parents and students invest heavily in the educational project and, increasingly, largely premised on expectations that it delivers adaptable learning capable of securing important social and economic goals. Tertiary educational programs preparing students for specific occupations, for instance, are now expected to develop 'job ready' graduates able to move smoothly into effective practice (Sheffield, UK: Department of Innovation Universities, 2008; Universities Australia, 2008). Yet, while students can be prepared for specific occupations, without knowing the situational requirements of practice, such transitions cannot be guaranteed (Billett, 2001). Tertiary students are now being provided with experiences in workplace settings to make the task of transfer 'near' (i.e. close to what is known) rather than 'far' (i.e. quite different from what is known), to use one of Royer (1979) classifications. Consequently, the term transfer has been and continues to be associated primarily with institutional facts (social settings) including fulfilling the growing expectations of educational systems and institutions, and teaching. Less emphasis is being placed on it as a learning process and identifying ways of securing alignments and reconciliations of these experiences for learners (Billett, 2009b).

Yet, such expectations are highly conflicted and unreasonable. They are associated with developing capacities to be adaptable in quite specific ways to diverse circumstances and activities that are often distinct from and unknown in the circumstances where learning is held to arise. For reasons beyond the control of these institutions and those teaching in them, much of this learning cannot readily adapt. Not the least of these reasons are that these institutions' activities and interactions from which students learn are abstracted or distinct from those targeted for their application (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Lave & Wenger, 1991), and that students' interests and capacities also mediate adaptability. Indeed, school experiences per se may provide no more adaptable learning than experiences in other settings (Rogoff & Gauvain, 1984). Even capacities expected to be widely applicable, such as maths and language, are not always or readily applied, because either the tasks appear novel to learners, or they fail to make associations with what they know (Carragher, Carragher, & Schliemann, 1985; Lave, 1988; Raizen, 1991; Smagorinsky & Smith, 1992). However, educators and their institutions may be reluctant to concede that much of their students' learning is unlikely to be applicable elsewhere. Such admissions undercut the rationale for their existence and standing. Indeed, as these expectations increase they become more difficult to moderate and attempts to do so risk being taken as excuses of failing organizations and teachers. In addition, much of what is written about transfer refers to propositional learning: knowledge that can be declared (e.g. facts, concepts and propositions). For instance, Shumway (1982:132, cited in Prawat, 1989) described transfer of learning as "the application of known concepts to new situations". Yet, adaptability goes beyond considerations of the propositional learning privileged in educational discourses, and extends to procedural and dispositional learning essential for performing occupational roles, for instance. Hence, the transfer problem is a profound one for educational institutions and systems, and their discourse.

In discussing the transfer problem and offering a socio-personal account of adaptable learning, a case is made here founded on two key premises. First, transfer needs understanding as a problem of learning, not education. Second, adaptability needs to be understood as being socio-personal: that is, mediated both internally (i.e. intra-psychologically) as well as inter-psychologically (from suggestions beyond individuals). The case is made through reviewing evolving accounts of transfer (i.e. Beach 1999; Pea 1987; Royer 1979) and navigating between the orthodoxies and emphases of accounts privileging cognitive (Mestre, 2005) and collective situational factors (Tuomi-Grohn & Engestrom, 2003). Instead, adaptability is held to be mediated relationally and interdependently by: (i) individuals' epistemologies and cognitive experiences, that are socially-shaped through ontogenies (i.e. personal histories) and (ii) historical, cultural and situational contributions comprising activities manifested in the circumstances where this learning arises (Billett, 2006) and it is targeted. In advancing this case, the origins and salience to education provisions of the term transfer are discussed first. Then, the process of adaptability or transfer¹ is proposed as comprising individuals construing what is experienced, aligned and reconciled with what is known and then constructing a response, which is mediated inter- and intra-psychologically. Construal refers to individuals' perception and action when recognizing, comprehending, and attempting to categorize what is experienced. Reconciliation refers to perception and action associated with aligning what is experienced with what individuals know. The process of construction comprises individuals generating and enacting responses from the reconciliation process; that is, selecting how they should progress, including what investment in effort is worthwhile. Fundamentally, they comprise perception and action mediated by socio-personal factors.

2. Education and transfer

There are few topics more central to the educative process than the transfer of learning (Royer, 1979: 53).

The concept of transfer has become an artifact of education systems and institutions. Until the advent of mass compulsory and tertiary education, most people learnt most of what they needed within the settings where it was practiced. Hence, issue

¹ The terms transfer and adaptability are used interchangeably here. The author prefers adaptability but as other authors use the term transfer, that term is used when referring to their work.

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