



## Organizational learning and program renewal in teacher education: A socio-cultural theory of learning, innovation and change

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### ABSTRACT

Pressures for change in the field of teacher education are escalating significantly as part of systemic education reform initiatives in a broad spectrum of economically developed and developing nations. Considering these pressures, it is surprising that relatively little theoretical or empirical analysis of learning and change processes within teacher education programs has been undertaken. In this paper, we illustrate some ways in which contemporary socio-cultural learning theory may be used as a lens for addressing these issues. Using a theoretical framework developed by Harré [Harré, R. (1984). *Personal being: A theory for individual psychology*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press], we show how processes of individual and collective learning led to changes in a teacher education program observed over an eighteen month period of time. Important innovations in program practice were generally found to have their sources in the creative work of individual faculty. However program level changes required negotiation of new ideas and practices within small groups of faculty, and with the larger collective of the program. We conclude that the Harré model, and the socio-cultural learning theories from which it is derived, may offer a useful theoretical framework for interpreting complex social processes underlying organizational renewal, innovation, and change.

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Escalating pressures for change are evident across a broad spectrum of vocational and professional education fields, as knowledge and education are increasingly viewed as critical resources in competition for power and position in a globalizing world economy (Billett, 2006a; Boreham, 2002). Since teacher quality is widely viewed as one of the most important factors affecting educational outcomes, the effectiveness of teacher preparation programs has become a focal point of concern in many national policy contexts (Blackmore, 2002; Tessema, 2007; Young, Hall, & Clark, 2007). Agendas for change vary dramatically, from those related to equity, social justice and diversity (Gay, 2002; Cochran-Smith, 2004) to those which advocate wholesale abandonment of university-based programs of teacher education (Podgursky, 2004). Perhaps the only truly solid ground of agreement across these agendas is the need for change.

Of course, critiques and related admonitions for change in teacher education are hardly a new phenomenon (Conant, 1963; Sarason, 1993). For example, Goodlad and his colleagues (Goodlad, Soder, & Sirotnik, 1990) documented a variety of pervasive and systemic problems in a national sample of teacher education programs. These included disconnection from the general academic life of the university, fractionated and incoherent curricula, weak and ambivalent relationships with the public school system, and chronic inadequacies in funding. Contemporary critiques raise many of the same issues (Levine, 2006). However, what is new in contemporary public talk about teacher education is the level of political attention

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these programs are receiving, as the wave of high stakes accountability policies which have dominated primary and secondary education for the past decade enters the arenas of higher education and teacher preparation (Bales, 2006; Leveille, 2005).

In the context of both contemporary and historical pressures, it is surprising that the process of change itself has received relatively little theoretical or empirical study in the field of teacher education. The relatively few existing reports of systematic organizational change efforts provide valuable demonstrations that substantive programmatic change may be achieved in some cases (Cochran-Smith et al., 1999; Akmal & Miller, 2003). However, the essentially descriptive and atheoretical nature of these accounts means that they contribute in only a limited way to development of a knowledge base about organizational change in these programs. There is a clear and pressing need for more systematic theoretical and empirical work that contributes to our understanding of processes of organizational change in teacher education, and which might be used as a foundation for program renewal efforts.

This kind of work could be usefully situated in a variety of research traditions focused on educational change, including those drawn from the fields of sociology (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), political science (McDonnell & Elmore, 1987), or organization science (Huber, 1991). Our purpose here is to propose a theoretical framework for examining programmatic renewal and change in teacher education derived from another perspective—that of contemporary socio-cultural learning theory (Boreham & Morgan, 2004; Brown & Duguid, 1991). We draw on ethnographic data collected in one teacher education program undergoing significant reform to illustrate how this framework may be used to understand individual and collective learning processes as they contribute to organizational change.

## 1. Educational renewal and change as problems of learning

The notion of treating the challenges of education reform and program renewal as problems of learning has considerable appeal (Hubbard, Mehan, & Stein, 2006; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993). This lens foregrounds the agency of faculty and faculty leaders as primary “authors” of the change process, and positions both the disciplinary knowledge and the local practical knowledge of faculty as resources for innovation (Brown & Duguid, 1991). It also raises a variety of substantive questions about the nature of learning processes related to organizational change (Argyris & Schön, 1996): How is learning to be understood in relation to program innovation, renewal, and change? If both individual and collective learning processes are important, how are these related to one another? How can individual and organizational learning processes be designed, guided and supported in ways that contribute to program renewal?

Although these kinds of questions have received little attention in the field of teacher education, interests in connections between learning and organizational change have an extensive history in other fields (Argyris & Schön, 1978; March & Simon, 1958; Senge, 1990; Weick & Westly, 1996). Indeed, the notion that organizations can “learn”, or that it is possible to create such a thing as a “learning organization” has been one of the most popular, and popularized, notions in the fields of business and education over the past two decades (Senge, 1990). Although a comprehensive review of research in this area is beyond the scope of our purposes here (see Easterby-Smith, 1997; Gherardi & Nicolini, 2001; Huber, 1991; Levitt & March, 1988), several tensions which have been thematic to this literature are relevant to the present discussion. We examine three of these tensions below, and situate our present investigation in each.

The first has to do with what has been characterized “normative” vs. “empirical” perspectives on organizational learning and change (Argyris & Schön, 1996; Easterby-Smith, Snell, & Gherardi, 1998; Robinson, 2001). Normative approaches are conceptualized as focusing primarily on strategies and prescriptions for organizational improvement—generally taking up questions related to the goal of creating “the learning organization” (Garvin, 1993; Senge, 1990). Empirical approaches are conceptualized as those focused on description and analysis of organizational learning processes—including some perspectives which are agnostic about the value of such learning (Vince, 2001), or even skeptical regarding its empirical substance (Fenwick, 2001; Simon, 1991). While noting the general divergence of the normative and empirical literatures on organizational learning, Robinson (2001) has observed that there also are examples of empirical work, including the seminal work of Argyris and Schön (1978, 1996), which have been designed expressly for the purposes of organizational improvement. Consistent with this approach, our efforts in the present paper represent an attempt to utilize empirical description of learning processes within an organization as a resource for strategic organizational change and improvement of practice.

A second thematic tension in the literature on organizational learning has to do with varying conceptualizations of the role of the individual and the collective(s) as these contribute to processes of learning, development and change at the organizational level (Lehesvirta, 2004). In one sense, questions related to the nature and direction of influences between the individual and society may be recognized as the familiar ground of a great deal of contemporary social theory (Bahktin, 1981; Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bourdieu, 1977; Giddens, 1984; Vygotsky, 1978). In the literature on organizational learning, interests in the relationship between individual and collective processes of learning and change have been expressed in the following kinds of questions: in what sense do ‘organizations’ learn?; to what extent, and through what processes, does individual learning affect the organization?; to what extent, and through what processes, do the characteristics of organizations affect individual learning? In considering these questions, we have taken note of a significant convergence of perspectives grounded in sociology (Giddens, 1984; Sewell, 1992), anthropology (Lave, 1988) and psychology (Vygotsky, 1978) toward models which conceptualize the relationship between individual and collective learning and change as transactional and co-evolutionary, in the sense that changes in one constitute resources and conditions for

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