

Socio-cultural learning

In this short talk, we are going to consider what is socio-cultural learning and how the concept can be used in our area of exploring marginalisation.

You might imagine that socio-cultural learning is learning about society and learning about cultures. Indeed, this is the way that it is seen by some people who use the term. However the term 'socio-cultural learning' has a different meaning – it is not about the content or the subject of the learning, it is about how the learning happens, the process of the learning. It is this meaning of the term that we will use in this project when we talk about co-created learning.

The term socio-cultural learning goes back to the ideas of a Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky who died in 1934. His work and his ideas gradually became known only fifty years later but soon became very influential in how people think about learning. The key idea in sociocultural learning theory is that learning is a social process and that social interaction is an important aspect of the process of learning. This is a very different idea from some traditional ways of seeing learning. First, let us think about a traditional view of learning. We might think of a situation where a student would go to a lecture or a class and they would listen to an expert, a lecturer or a teacher, who would tell them about a topic. The expert would explain and the student would listen and take notes and then go to read more about the topic. The expert would pass knowledge onto the learner and the expert would be in control of the knowledge, what it was and how it was passed on. This was how it was when I was at school or at university but it is not how this project will work. We are going to use a different way of thinking about knowledge, a different way of creating knowledge and a different way of passing on knowledge.

Our project will use methods that are drawn from sociocultural learning theory. We are going to consider a different way of learning that is based on interaction between people. First, we are going to use talking and sharing experiences as the starting point of our learning. By the way, you will notice that I say 'our learning' not 'your' learning. That is because in this way of thinking about learning, we are all part of the learning process – all of us – students, tutors from university, the participants that we will work with – all of us are developing our learning through this project. That is what we mean by 'co-creation' – it means that we are all part of the process of actually creating knowledge. So, people like me and my colleagues really do want to learn from you as well as to share our thoughts and ideas. So, how do we do that? Well, sociocultural learning theory believes that sharing experiences and ideas with others is crucial because it is this sharing of ideas and experiences that leads to individual learning. Vygotsky suggested that learning happens between people and then this continues with learning inside the individual.

Secondly, the work of Vygotsky has led to what is called ZPD – the Zone of Proximal Development. These are difficult words but this is a really influential concept in learning So, what does it actually mean? Well, the idea is that an individual will learn more effectively given the support of other people who are more knowledgeable or more experienced. The zone in the concept refers to the space between what the individual knows on their own and what could be known with the help of others. This zone is the place where the more knowledgeable other people can scaffold the learner's development of knowledge or skills. So, for example, when you learn to do something new, such as ride a bike, you could just learn on your own, maybe after watching other people and trying to work out how they do it. It is possible to do so, but it would probably take a lot of effort and time ... and a lot of falling off the bike. Most of us learnt to ride in a different way – most of us had some guidance and support from someone who could already ride a bike. But what did they do? Did they just tell us how to do it? No, they told us, they showed us, they watched us and gave us advice, they supported us by showing us how to do it in small steps. Maybe first by going in a straight line, then later by showing us how to go round a corner, or how to stop without falling off. They guided us, they didn't just teach us. And there was more – they probably supported us as we learnt. They encouraged us, they told us what we were doing well (and what we needed to improve on), sometimes they gave us reassurance, or encouraged us to keep on trying when things got tough, maybe they even pushed us to try harder. They didn't just 'teach us' they also helped our learning – it was like the scaffold that builders put up when they build a large building – and in sociocultural learning we also talk about scaffolding the learning. So, we would like you to think about learning now. We would like you to think of something that you have learnt – but not at school, not in a classroom. Maybe it could be something about how to live – such as how to treat other people, or what it means to be a friend. Or, if that is too deep, what about how to be part of a group such as a sports team. Maybe you can even think of a

situation where you have introduced someone else to an activity or a group. What is it that you need to 'know' about this group and how to 'be' in this group? What

So, share your ideas with another member of this project. What are the things to be learnt about this activity or this group?

Is it about how to do the activity or is it more than that? Is it just about doing something or is there more to it than that? What different types of things have to be learnt?

Maybe you can think of a time when someone didn't do it right – maybe they were like me when I was seven and didn't realise that in the choir that I was singing with, everyone had to wear a white shirt (and I turned up in a blue one!) Or maybe it was something more difficult to understand – such as that the big kids could make suggestions about what to sing, but not the small kids. How can people learn things like this – without making the mistake and being laughed at by the others?

And finally, who are the 'more experienced or more knowledgeable others' in the situation that you are thinking about? And how do they help with learning?

So, socio-cultural learning is about how we can learn about something. It says that sometimes learning is more than reading a book or listening to a lecture or watching a video on YouTube. It is about learning as being a social process that happens within and between people – it is the communication between people that is a very important part of learning. In this way of seeing things, learning is collaborative – it means that we work together in our learning. We work with others, not just our fellow students but also with others with more experience or knowledge – and this can be other students, people we work with or know, and with members of the project team.

And to do so, we need to talk ... and listen And discuss And explore ideas And to support others in our learning. And that is why we will ask you to talk with others and to listen to others so much in this project instead of just reading or listening to us. In this project, we are all learners, we are all learning and we all have valuable things to say from our lives and our experiences.