

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

ANNE-NELLY PERRET-CLERMONT, CLOTILDE PONTECORO, LAUREN B. RESNICK, TANIA ZITTOUN, and BARBARA BURGE, *Joining Society: Social Interaction and Learning in Adolescence and Youth*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2004, xvii + 327 p. Index

This volume presents the contribution of 23 scholars invited to a 1997 conference whose overarching theme was how “social interactions provide opportunities for young people to learn life skills” (xvi). The first part of the book describes a number of different “gray zone” youth based organizations (YBOs), ranging from anti social neo Nazi gangs to pro social, nationally affiliated sports groups. They address the questions of how learning takes place in such organizations, what attracts young people to these organizations, and why they seem to accept comfortably rules in gray zone organizations that frequently are more stringent than those imposed by parents and schools. The main intent of these contributions is to document the extensive appropriation of competence that occurs in YBOs and to document the characteristics of YBOs that facilitate such appropriation. These include such things as clear and immediate goals, strict rules and schedules, rituals and routine, identity markers, and a chance to break with the baggage of the past.

Theoretical/conceptual contributions follow that explore how learning, understanding, and competency develops. The authors seem to agree on the following description of the learning task: Competency develops in social transactions between self and other(s) in which emotional, cognitive, and definitions of self are intimately interlinked. In these transactions, the participants exercise personal agency and their actions reciprocally influence each other. Competence accrues in social accomplishments of tasks, and is therefore multifaceted rather than built up of unitary increments of isolated skills. The efficacy of the transactions depends primarily on three factors. First is the meaning that the activities have for the young person, and the representation each has of the meaning for the other(s). Conversation about, and reflection on, the activities engaged in are crucial to developing higher order cognitive skills and are the hallmarks of learning to learn. Second is the relationship of the activity/competence to the person’s identity/lifestyle—does it enhance or detract from their desired identity to be accepted and defined as competent in that group. Third, the interaction has to occur in a “safe space”, a space in which risks can be taken in which alternative and contradictory representations of meaning can be entertained. Such safe spaces usually presuppose a positive bond between self and other(s).

From this sketch we see the influence of symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology, and especially of scholars such as G.H. Mead, Berger and Luckman, and Vygotsky. This intellectual tradition also implies a rejection of certain other approaches to understanding acquisition of knowledge. All of the contributors reject a conduit or pipeline model, with a sender, receiver, and medium. But this rejection also implies rejecting a variety of practices, some of which are problematic. For example, at least implicitly the contributors reject standardized testing of skill achievements, such as those done in comparative assessments of reading, mathematics and science achievement. This is problematic in that results on such tests have predictive utility in how well students do in post secondary educational institutions.

The underlying message is that schools must incorporate more of the features that make YBOs attractive to young people. Yet here is also the rub: there are solid barriers to schools becoming more like other YBOs.

The content of the subject matter is inherently more abstract, particularly in the higher grades; it inherently is geared to a more distant future reward—preparation for transitions into the labour market; attendance is not voluntary; it is situated in a complex network of bureaucratic and political jurisdictions that constrain teachers and students alike. The contributors pay scant attention to how schools could be made more congruent with their view of young people's appropriation of competencies and knowledge in the face of the structural constraints under which schools operate. A more productive approach for social policy would focus attention more on the out of school hours, since only about one quarter of youth's waking hours is spent in school.

Certain chapters of this edited book would be of interest to scholars and graduate students in education, social work, and the social sciences, as well as educators and those active in youth policy. Finally, the last section of the book on school to work issues in specific countries, although insightful with respect to measurement issues in comparative research, simply does not fit well with the rest of the book.

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