

FROM THE EDITORS: MAKING MEANING OF MEANING MAKING

Meaning making has received a lot of attention in adult education recently, and the three articles in this issue provide some varied examples of how meaning making has been “made meaning of” in our scholarship. The authors of each article approach meaning making from rather different conceptual starting points that vary in the extent that the social dimensions of meaning making are acknowledged or elaborated in their analyses. We would like to point out some similarities and differences in the assumptions underlying each approach, with the goal of encouraging more substantial consideration of the merits and implications of how we make meaning of meaning making. We will devote the most space to Kasworm’s article, because this article provided the primary impetus for our discussion of this topic.

In our opening article, “Adult Meaning Making in the Undergraduate Classroom,” Carol Kasworm investigates how adult undergraduates make meaning of their undergraduate learning experiences, including their beliefs about knowledge and the relationships among knowledge in different settings. Based on interview data with adult undergraduates, Kasworm delineates five “knowledge voices,” a metaphor for different patterns of beliefs about knowledge and learning that were articulated by the interviewees. Kasworm’s findings are interesting and potentially useful as a means of thinking about differences in adult students’ orientations toward postsecondary education and its relevance to their lives outside the classroom in the workplace, family, and community.

Kasworm’s discussion of the study’s theoretical framework in the initial version of this article prompted reviewers to comment that there was not complete congruence between Kasworm’s representation of the study’s conceptual framework and the actual approach to analysis and findings. More specifically, they objected to Kasworm’s characterization of her research as based on a social constructivist view of knowledge and learning. Acting on the advice of the reviewers, Kasworm modified her discussion to be more consistent with the report of findings, although she still refers to theorists who espouse social constructivist views of learning that go beyond what she attempts to do in her analyses.

So what would social constructivist perspectives imply, and why doesn’t Kasworm’s analysis reflect such perspectives? She does ask the interviewees about the nature of knowledge in different social settings, and she also inquires into the

factors that the interviewees describe as influences on their meaning making, such as the classroom context. However, Kasworm's analysis implicitly reflects a dichotomy of the knower and context that is challenged by social constructivism. As Kasworm acknowledges in her concluding comments, her study does not explore the origins or formation of the beliefs expressed by her interviewees. If we were to apply a social constructivist view of meaning making to her study, we would examine how these individual adult students' beliefs and actions are constituted by, as well as reconstitute, certain belief systems inherent in the adults' sociocultural groups, social practices, and the organization of social settings. In other words, we need to view the mind as social (Gee, 1999).

Indeed, it is not difficult to see the influence of such belief systems in the knowledge voices described by Kasworm. For example, the distinction made between "academic" and "practical" knowledge by many of her interviewees reflects a broader dichotomy of mind and body and of theory and action that is a pervasive cultural model in Western society, with strong social and historical roots. From a social constructivist perspective, questions of particular interest would address how individuals are active in negotiating meanings that are similar to as well different from such dominant cultural models, including how their social positions, related to constructs such as race, class, and gender, affect these negotiated meanings. Social constructivist theories assume that individuals occupy multiple social positions and identities and thus can hold conflicting perspectives. Furthermore, we would wish to inquire into how institutions such as the universities and colleges that these students attended are involved in this negotiation of meanings. As a particularly obvious example, one of our local technical colleges has adopted the slogan "Education that works" in their promotional material—a not very subtle jab at the university's presumed emphasis on education that "doesn't work" in the world beyond the ivory tower.

In our second article, "Being Called Awake": The Role of Transformative Learning in the Lives of Environmental Activists," Jessica Kovan and John Dirkx also adopt an approach that emphasizes individual rather than social dimensions of meaning making. The authors point out that theories of transformative learning have been criticized for a lack of attention to sociocultural influences on meaning making and to the emotional, imaginative, spiritual aspects of such learning. Their inquiry focuses on the latter, and the authors explicitly acknowledge that they are adopting a psychosocial perspective rather than one that gives primacy to the social or cultural. Using a conceptual framework drawn from depth psychology, the work of Carl Jung, and in particular the construct of individuation, Kovan and Dirkx offer a compelling discussion of how these individuals engage in an ongoing struggle to sustain passion and commitment for their work as activists.

The psychosocial framework adopted by these authors provides a useful contrast to a social constructivist stance. Kovan and Dirkx identify, in a limited way,

certain connections between individual and social meaning making, for example, in how the activists struggled against a culturally defined separation of “head” and “heart” in finding direction for their lives or embraced a spiritual view of the self as interconnected with “all of life.” However, the construct of individuation at the heart of Kovan and Dirkx’s analyses suggests an interpretive framework that precludes a more extensive social analysis. Individuation is predicated on assumptions about the individual and self that are at odds with a social constructivist perspective. For example, struggles related to meaning making are characterized as struggles of individuals to achieve a sense of self-knowledge and coherence, whereas from a social constructivist perspective, struggles over meaning making are inherently social in that they reflect the hegemony of different belief systems and different social groups. The constructivist view of meaning making reflected in Kovan and Dirkx’s analysis is still individualistic in its concept of a self that is ultimately in relation to rather than constituted by the social.

In contrast to the first two articles, the social construction of meanings, in this case of “Whiteness,” is central to Elaine Manglitz’s analysis of the literature on White privilege in adult education. In the scholarship she reviews, Whiteness, rather than being an objective, biological attribute, is a social construct with meanings that have changed historically as various groups have gained access to social privilege. Manglitz’s work is useful both for its synthesis of literature on Whiteness and its implications for adult education and for offering an example of how meaning making occurs on a social as well as individual dimension. However, this literature has certain weaknesses not fully addressed by Manglitz. One limitation is the common association of Whiteness with a wide range of oppressive belief systems, such as the value placed in Western culture on rationality and individualism or the concept of a meritocracy. Whiteness thus becomes equated with anything deemed oppressive, an equation that obviates the use of the construct and can lead to simplistic understandings of the complex and ambiguous relationships among various beliefs and practices. From a social constructivist perspective, beliefs, identities, and practices are continuously improvised, as people “individually and collectively, are not just products of our culture, not just respondents to the situation, but also and critically appropriators of cultural artifacts that we and others produce” (Holland, Lachiotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998, p. 17).

The challenges of embracing new theoretical perspectives such as social constructivism are significant. To understand the mind as social does not mean simply expanding an analysis based on psychological, “in-the-head” views of learning and knowledge. It requires a radical revisioning of existing theories and assumptions—a transformation of perspective—that can be quite difficult to attain. Indeed, the paradox at the heart of social constructivism can be understood as the challenge we face as scholars in our efforts to move beyond existing theory: “The accumulation and mastery of a cultural tool kit and its use in overcoming the dependency on a

particular culture is one of the basic contradictions of human development” (Shepel, 1995, p. 428). We hope that adult education scholars will view this contradiction as an opportunity.

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