

Towards a Situated Learning Theory for Careers Education and Guidance

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Over many years, a range of learning theories has sought to inform career education, development and guidance practice. In other fields of education, situated theories of learning (particularly those espoused by Vygotsky, 1978 and other neo-Vygotskian writers) have come to the fore, but their impact on the field of career learning has been insignificant by comparison. This article examines career learning theories published to date and puts forward the beginnings of a situated view of career learning, which emerged following a study carried out with sixth-form students making their university choices. Key concepts in a situated approach are defined and their application to career learning is discussed. The work concludes with some pointers to the application of Vygotskian ideologies to career learning.

Introduction

For many years the professional fields of careers education, development and guidance have all been informed by theories of learning. An examination of theoretical approaches shows that psychological and sociological debates have been ongoing, and the degree to which an individual has control over their future, or has their future mapped out for them according to societal norms, is still a hotly contested question. Writers from the psychological school, arguing that individuals are agents in control of their own destiny, face criticisms on the grounds of naivety; and those from the sociological school, arguing that individuals have little choice, but simply do what society allows, face criticisms on the grounds of negativity and pessimism. As a result many writers have put forward theories appertaining to the 'six of one and half a dozen of the other' school of thought, in an attempt to take both points of view into account.

In response to debates around change, writers have put forward career learning theories which discuss the need for individuals to adapt to change and learn about career in an ongoing way. Such theories can also be seen to fall into either the psychological camp, with an emphasis on the individual working out a way forward (symbol processing), or the sociological camp, where individuals learn from and adapt to what goes on around them (social learning).

In other fields of study in education, such debates about learning are enhanced by perspectives from a situated view, which seek to integrate the individual and society, and here the work of Vygotsky (1978) has been particularly influential. Such perspectives, although mentioned in literature, have been sorely lacking in the career education, development and guidance field. In order to address this issue, a study into the career learning of a group of sixth form students was carried out, which sought to explore the possible application of a situated approach, and in particular the work of Vygotsky, to career learning.

Career learning theories so far published

Three different perspectives on career learning have been developed in recent years (Law, 1996; Krumboltz, 1979; Hodkinson et al, 1996), each having different theoretical origins, but all seeking to discuss how individuals learn in order to make career decisions in an ever-changing world.

First, most practitioners in the UK will be familiar with Law's (1996) career learning theory. This approach stems from a symbol processing approach to learning and is described as a largely psychological process where individuals work things through in their minds whilst interacting with their community. This involves a process of sensing, sifting, focusing and understanding, most of

which goes on inside the head of the learner; but Law acknowledges that 'dealing with points of view' does mean 'career learning cannot occur in a social vacuum', and that individuals interact with their community in order to reach conclusions about the way forward.

A second approach is Krumboltz's (1979) learning theory of career counselling, the origins of which lie in the work of Bandura, which, as Herr (1989) points out 'has its roots in reinforcement theory and classical behaviourism'. According to this approach, an individual's personality and behaviour arise primarily from their unique experience, rather than from their innate characteristics. Two types of

learning experience are identified by Krumboltz; *instrumental*, where individuals learn from their own experience and behaviour and in response to feedback from others, and *associative*, where they learn from observing others. Mitchell and Krumboltz (1996) argue that learning involves the cognitive analysis of 'positively and negatively reinforcing events' and that these events are influenced by factors in the environment, many of which are beyond the control of the individual. Society can be seen as dictating to individuals, with individuals responding towards positively reinforced events and against negatively reinforced ones.

The third approach to career learning is described by Hodkinson *et al.* (1996) and Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000) in their writing on the concept of the learning career. The work is written from a social constructivist perspective, where learning is described as 'a profoundly social and cultural phenomenon, not simply a cognitive process'. The learning career is described as 'a career of events, activities and meanings, and the making and remaking of meanings through those activities and events, and it is a career of relationships'. The study found that young people constructed their career in an ongoing way through both activities and the relationships they had with those around them. The work emerged following a longitudinal study of young people in further education, and it is argued that young people show varying dispositions to learning which are affected positively, in terms of enabling progress and negatively in terms of inhibiting it by matters of identity and situation. Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000) relate these dispositions to Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus: a portfolio of dispositions to all aspects of life, largely tacitly held, which strongly influence actions in any situation - familiar or novel' and argue that people make varying amounts of progress in relation to their learning career, because of their habitus.

A new situated approach and some key concepts

In order to consider what a situated view of learning may have to offer to perspectives on career learning, and in particular, the possible application of the work of Vygotsky to career learning, three key aspects were explored. These were the zone of proximal development (hereafter ZPD), the ways in which the experienced person helps the learner to learn within the ZPD (termed scaffolding in Wood [1988] and guided participation in Rogoff [1990]) and the cultural context in which learning takes place. The concepts involved are defined below.

The ZPD

In his own research with children Vygotsky identified two developmental levels: the actual developmental level of the child based on achievement tests and the level of potential development as shown through assisted problem solving. Vygotsky (1978) defined the ZPD as 'the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential

development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers'. The ZPD is described by Wood (1998) as 'the "gap" that exists for an individual (child or adult) between what he is able to do alone and what he can achieve with help from one more knowledgeable or skilled than himself', and is an indication of learning potential. Put simply, the ZPD can be defined as the difference between what a student can achieve alone, and what they can achieve with a skilled helper (personal adviser or careers adviser).

Within the ZPD, 'activity' on the part of the learner is at the heart of the learning process, and this activity, undertaken in a social setting in interactions with a skilled helper, enables the learner to construct new knowledge. Vygotsky saw this relationship in the ZPD as a partnership where the learner becomes more independent as time goes on and the overall goal of learning in the ZPD is to enable the learner to acquire more skills and knowledge and ultimately achieve things alone. In order to reach this point, new knowledge needs to be internalised on the part of the learner, and activity theory emanating from the work of Vygotsky and others suggests that active involvement on the part of the learner is necessary to enable this to happen.

Scaffolding

In the context of the ZPD, learning is an interpersonal, dynamic social event (Santrock, 1998) where people construct meaning via a process of social interaction, and a key concept involved in this process is scaffolding. As the helper works with the learner, focusing on those things that the learner can do with help, the helper scaffolds new concepts onto the learner's existing knowledge and understanding, thereby taking the learner from what they know already, to what they need to learn next. Wood (1988) describes scaffolding as focusing the attention of the learner on 'relevant and timely aspects of the task ... highlighting things they need to take account of. It also breaks the task down into a sequence of smaller tasks'. Scaffolding is interpersonal in nature, and enables the learner to 'achieve heights that they cannot scale alone'. The study explored activities within the guidance process that could be described as scaffolding in order to seek to define it in this context.

Guided participation

The term guided participation is used by Rogoff (1990) to describe activity within the ZPD and, as the word participation suggests, 'is intended to stress shared activity with communication'. Rogoff's work focuses on very young children and she views them as apprentices in thinking, who are 'active in their efforts to learn from observing and participating with peers and more skilled members of their society, developing skills to handle culturally defined problems with available tools, and building from these givens to construct new solutions within the context of socio-cultural activity'. All of this activity is carried out with a focus on problem solving, which 'emphasises the active nature of thinking', and this shared activity comes in the

following forms. Guided participation builds bridges between things that are familiar to the learner from their present understanding and level of skills to reach across to new understanding and skills. It also involves arranging and structuring the learner's participation, in order to both support and challenge the learner, regulating the level of difficulty of the tasks, so that the learner is enabled to move forward in their development and learn new things in a safe yet challenging environment. This support can then be withdrawn as the learner masters things for themselves and becomes independent. Rogoff views guided participation as a wider term than scaffolding as it takes place in a whole variety of different contexts which are not necessarily viewed as being directly related to teaching and learning. Data from the study was analysed in order to seek to interpret the concept of guided participation in a career guidance context.

The cultural context of learning

Vygotsky (1978) argued that learning processes take place via cultural signs and tools which mediate between the stimulus and response. His work is therefore built on the premise that an individual's intellectual development cannot be understood without reference to the society in which they are embedded (Rogoff, 1990), and is, thereby, a situated view of learning. In Vygotsky's work, the individual and their society cannot be viewed separately but are integrated to an extent where they become inseparable. As Rogoff, (1990) asserts, 'the child and the social world are mutually involved to an extent that precludes regarding them as independently definable'. In other words, the individual self grows and develops in its cultural milieu, becoming infused with culture in such a way as to make the self inseparable from its society. In Vygotsky's (1978) work, the mind develops *in* society, via processes of communication, which are mediated through the operation of cultural signs and tools, and the ZPD 'provides the setting in which the social and the individual are brought together' (Daniels, 1996).

In Vygotsky's work, culture is not seen as static, but as operating on two levels. At one level, culture shapes the minds of individuals (Bruner, 1996), and at another level individuals transform culture as they pass it on from one generation to the next (Rogoff, 1990). Culture is, therefore, constantly changing as societies progress and develop. In this study the possible impact of cultural signs and tools on the career guidance process was explored as students articulated some of the reasons for their choices and perceptions.

The case study

In order to seek to examine the possible application of Vygotsky's work to career guidance, a case study of the career learning of a group of students in a sixth form college was carried out. Students were interviewed before their guidance interview (the pre-interview), regarding their position at that time and what they hoped to learn from it. Their

guidance interviews were observed and recorded, and students were interviewed immediately afterwards (the post-interview), regarding both what they felt they had learned and how. All the verbal data was then analysed in order to try to establish evidence for the ZPD and the other associated concepts discussed above. All students in the study were in Year 13 and in the process of making applications for higher education.

Findings

Much of the data gathered in the study confirmed the potentially useful application of the concept of the ZPD in a career guidance context. It was clear from comparisons of data from the pre- and post-interviews, that students had made progress in their thinking about career, and that this had been facilitated by the careers adviser in a number of ways. All students expressed ways in which they had learned more about their university choice by collaborating with the careers adviser, whom they saw as someone 'more knowledgeable or skilled' than they were (Wood, 1998).

In the study, the career learning observed was certainly interactive, and the careers adviser spent much time discussing many aspects of university choice with the students. These discussions prompted students to ask questions, reflect on their current position and think about a range of possible scenarios. All of this helped the students to gain an enhanced understanding of probability assessment, risk management and strategic planning which served to enable them to put themselves in the best possible position to succeed in gaining a university place of their choice. Without such knowledgeable and skilled help their chances of success may well have been less although this was not tested out as part of the study.

The application of the ZPD concept also gives some unique insights into the focus of work with learners, which must be within their ZPD and thereby within their grasp. Many guidance practitioners can experience frustration when clients return following previous interviews having made little progress in thinking and action. An understanding of the ZPD on the part of careers advisers should help them to question and assess the learning potential of the client, and as a result to focus on those things that are achievable within the ZPD and not things that are either beyond it, or already grasped (Bokarie, 2002).

There was much evidence in the data to suggest the useful application of the term scaffolding to describe activity undertaken within the ZPD and students spoke of things that they now felt they were equipped to do having had their career guidance interview which they could not do before. Examples of these are active research, the assessment of probabilities, risk management and strategic planning. It is also clear that learning was taking place at two levels. Not only did students speak of being clearer about their choices, but they also understood more about how to think about them constructively and to their best advantage. In

this way, they appeared to be learning how to learn, and to be engaging in a process of metacognition as they began to learn how to manage their own career.

The study revealed some potentially useful insights into the concept of guided participation in a career guidance context. The interviews observed were clear examples of such shared activity, with the students and the careers adviser sharing a process of examining university choices from a whole variety of different perspectives. This shared activity was particularly evident in the active research observed which appeared to enable students to problem-solve the whole area of university choice. The careers adviser also helped the students to build bridges between things that were familiar that they knew and understood already, and to reach across to new understanding and skills in making university choices.

Evidence from the study appeared to point to the likely impact of cultural signs and tools on the career guidance process. Many students spoke of 'a good university' and this notion appeared both to be communicated and reinforced by the language (spoken and written) used by various parties involved in the process. These messages were communicated via the language of many people involved (e.g. students, teachers, employers, etc.) and through other media (e.g. prospectuses, books, websites, etc.) The study showed that the speech of both students and the careers adviser, and other media (e.g. prospectuses) are infused with cultural messages.

These cultural messages related to both internal and external aspects of development. Cultural messages regarding such things as 'my possible job prospects' (tools) and 'my worth as an individual' (signs) were communicated through the notion of a good university. Not only does the notion of a good university affect what an individual might achieve in the future, it also affects the way in which they think about themselves and their level of self-esteem. Hence, students in the study aimed to achieve places at universities that they perceived to be good, sometimes even in the face of apparently difficult odds.

The beginnings of a new situated career learning theory

As a result of the study, a new theory of career learning from a situated perspective is beginning to emerge, and some key points are summarised here.

- The essence of the ZPD is that people can achieve more with the help of someone more skilled and knowledgeable, than they can alone. Working with clients in the ZPD offers new insights into the concept of client-centredness. The study points to the need for guidance practitioners to focus on working with clients within their ZPDs, which can be seen as a new facet of working in a client-centred way. Working in the ZPD involves focusing on those things where the client can do with help, that is, not things they can do already, nor
- things that are far beyond their current reach. This entails asking the client to work on things that will challenge them and will be within their reach and scope of interest.
- Career learning in the ZPD is both active and interactive with students engaged in problem solving processes.
- Career learning within the ZPD must have the overall goal of enabling the learner to become independent. This has clear links with the notion of empowerment and could be particularly useful when examining the ways in which guidance practitioners can work in order to encourage independence on the part of clients. Career learning within the ZPD fosters and indeed actively encourages independence gained through purposeful activity in problem-solving with support.
- A situated view of career learning means that the individual can no longer be separated from their context, as the one cannot exist without the other. The integration of self in society brings both individual and societal perspectives to the fore where individual needs and wishes are fused together with cultural norms and practices through the media of signs and tools.
- If culture is growing and changing, people can be formed by culture, and can also choose to have an impact on it, rather than simply feeling that they are victims of the status quo. By working with clients in the ZPD, guidance practitioners can expect to play a part in enabling individuals to break through barriers and bring about cultural change through emancipatory career guidance practice.

Further research and questions to be addressed

It is accepted that whilst a case study can be a useful vehicle for gathering in-depth data regarding phenomena in a particular context, the findings should not then simply be applied to people more generally. However, it seems fair to assume that how students learn in the guidance process, in the particular sixth-form college in question, could tell us something about how other students in similar circumstances might learn. As Yin (1994) argues 'case studies are ... generalisable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes'. The insights gained into the career learning of the students in the study have been used in formulating the beginnings of a career learning theory based on Vygotsky's work, which can now be tested in, and applied to, other career learning situations. This points to the need for further research into career learning in different settings and with different clients. Anyone interested in exploring the ideas presented here and the opportunities for further research is welcome to contact the author for a discussion.

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