Expansive and restricted learning: Pervasive binaries?

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Abstract

In this article, we question the value of using the concepts of expansive and restricted learning as analytical tools for understanding learning in everyday practice. From a delineation of how these dual concepts are developed in both Holzkamp and Engeström's theoretical work, we derive the claim that the duality embedded in the use of these concepts tends to reduce our sensitivity to the complexity and the contradiction embedded in everyday life. Consequently, we suggest that future investigations need to examine critically how dichotomized concepts are produced as part of social practice.

Several current theoretical approaches to issues of learning present themselves as binary oppositions. Examples include surface and deep learning (Biggs, 1993), experiential and cognitive learning (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994), authentic and inauthentic learning (Colaizzi, 1978), and restrictive and expansive learning (Engeström, 1987; Holzkamp, 1993). In this paper, we will take a closer look at restricted and expansive learning as an example of a strong binary opposition that is formulated within the framework of cultural historical activity theory and critical psychology respectively. We will show how this oppositional pair plays an even more significant role in discussions about learning and education today (see, e.g., Daniels, 2004; Engeström & Sannino, 2010; Fenwick, 2004; FitzSimons, 2003; Foot, 2001; Haigh, 2007; Hill, Capper, Wilson, Whatman, & Wong, 2007; Konkola, Tuomi-Gröhn, Lambert, & Ludvigsen, 2007; Pereira-Querol & Seppänen, 2009; Rasmussen & Ludvigsen, 2009; Tsui & Law, 2007).

In the first section, we take a critical stance towards the binary opposition contained in the concepts of *restricted* and *expansive* learning. These concepts

are grounded in theory surrounding Marxist notions of praxis as the origin of human consciousness and needs (e.g., Bernstein 1971; Sève, 1975). Inspired by Lave (2011), we will be argued that dialectic thinking is central in a Marxist understanding of praxis. This means that we need to focus on how social practice is produced and, as part of this question, ask how dichotomies are constituted in everyday life. In other words, we should focus on "(…) asking how each is part of the production of the other" (Lave, 2011, p. 36) rather than seeing dichotomies as consisting of differences. Ultimately, we should be cautious in using these dichotomies as analytical tools for evaluating practice.

The danger we see is that the analysis of practice, as it is guided by notions of expansive and restricted learning, risks neglecting issues of contradictions and social struggles when it uses two distinct ready-made categories, one of which is "bad" and the other "good." Though we acknowledge the intent of critiquing practice, we fear that the employment of strong and persuasive dualistic categories, like categories of restrictive and expansive learning, risks neglecting the examination of the production and reproduction of those very categories in social practice. The questions we would like to ask are as follows: 1. What is the logic on which the binary opposition between restricted and expansive learning is founded? 2. What are the consequences when we use binary logic to understand specific practice? We acknowledge both Holzkamp and Engeström's ambitions of critically challenging and changing social practice, but wish to discuss whether the conceptual tools they offer are up to the task. We have chosen Holzkamp and Engeström because both researchers use these categories in their academic work and because both are prominent scholars within, or drawing from, the tradition of cultural-historical activity theory.

In recent years, a growing sensitivity has developed to the kinds of theoretical and conceptual tools used by researchers within the social sciences (Herzfeld, 2004; Terrio, 1999). It has been argued that these concepts or theories are themselves the results of a cultural development and need to be critically analyzed as such (Fabian, 2014). Culture is seen through theories and concepts, and we would like to argue that it is problematic to think about educational culture through strong binaries like restricted and expansive learning. Holzkamp (1993) and Engeström (1991, 1998, 2003, 2008) developed their concepts of restrictive and expansive learning based on concepts that claim to be *universal* when they are applied to processes of change rather than seeing them as part of historical social practice. In the case of Holzkamp, the notion of inner *motivation* seems to be a universal entity of the individual, while in Engeström's theory, *consciousness* is seen as an unproblematic universal unit of analysis, that legitimizes the division between what counts as restrictive (reproductive) learning and what counts as expansive learning. We will argue that these

concepts are not universal entities the researcher can use to legitimize the binary opposition between restrictive and expansive learning. Rather, they are part of a particular intellectual history (for a historical analysis, see Danziger, 1997). As outlined by Stallybrass and White (1986), Western intellectual history is in itself a product of a particular development closely related to the binaries between societies understood as either modern or traditional. According to Stallybrass and White (1986), modern intellectual history is dominated by strong binaries; symbolic polarities of high and low, official and popular, grotesque and classical, are examples of strong dichotomies (pp. 16–17). Stallybrass and White (1986) suggest that dualist theories separate subject and social world (individual metaphysics and the mechanisms of the social world) and that the two fundamental categories do not partake of one another, but instead are polar opposites. The consequence of this perspective is the neglect of their interdependence in turn suppresses their connections. Binary logic comes from and sustains a social hierarchy that involves the denial of any relationship between high and low (Lave, 2011, p. 166). The central argument in this paper is that, in a Marxist frame of understanding, the focus on dialectic thinking, social contradictions, historical analysis of social practice, and notions of social production provide us with the task of analyzing, rather than essentializing, dichotomies as a part of a political economy. A number of dichotomies will be outlined in this paper; however, due to space limitations, we will focus primarily on the dichotomy of expansive and restrictive learning.

In the following section, we will take closer look at the logic models that Holzkamp and Engeström, respectively, apply, when they legitimize the binary division between restrictive and expansive learning.

About restricted and expansive learning in Holzkamp's perspective

One of the central persons addressing the binary of learning as either restricted (defensive) or expansive is the German critical psychologist Klaus Holzkamp. We argue that the dichotomies Holzkamp develops between expansive and restrictive learning are closely related to a particular critique of an institutional educational practice, where schools tend to monopolize a particular understanding of how learning is happening (see Haug, 2009, for a critique). Holzkamp developed a theoretical redefinition of how to understand psychology as a modern science, and it is in that context that we should understand his work about learning. Holzkamp reworked and theoretically extended central ideas in Leontjev's understanding of psychology (Holzkamp, 1983; Tolman, 2009). One part of this work addressed the phylogenetic development of humans as a

premise for understanding human subjectivity. What is distinctively human, according to both Holzkamp and Leontjev, is the ability of humans to systematically produce and use tools (Holzkamp, 1983). The evolution of this ability is the premise for human society, for potentials for division of labour, for using language and developing higher processes of cognition, and, in phylogenetic development, transforming human existence from being dependent on nature to being dependent on society. As a consequence of this development, it is no longer possible for the individual to exist outside of society, the governing processes are no longer processes of evolution, but of collective and individual history. This means that the individual's relation to the world is mediated by societal meaning structures (social organisation, physical objects, traditions, beliefs, attitudes, etc.), and this premise has important implications for how Holzkamp understands subjectivity. Being part of society provides the subject with possibilities or "action potence" (Handlungsfähigkeit) (Holzkamp, 1983). In trying to understand the subject, Holzkamp focusses on how societal practice presents itself as consisting of possibilities for the individual. Hence, the actions of the subjects are founded on the presuppositions made available by a particular societal-historical context. In Holzkamp's perspective, the subject is always guided by what the person expects as contributing most to his or her life. Holzkamp's psychology is, as one of his central concepts denotes, a psychology from the standpoint of the subject. Holzkamp argues that the world is always first and foremost experienced and understood from each person's own standpoint and perspective (Holzkamp, 1991). It is from the development of the standpoint of subject that Holzkamp develops a critical stance to other parts of psychology (e.g., behaviourism, psychoanalysis, and cognitive psychology), claiming that these psychological positions tend to understand human subjectivity as an object rather than as subjects. It is important to emphasize that Holzkamp claims that his understanding of subjectivity is not a solipsistic understanding of the individual; rather, subjectivity should be understood as being social. It is based on this insistence on subjectivity that we turn to Holzkamp's understanding of learning.

The problem Holzkamp addresses, and which causes him to apply the binary opposition of restrictive versus expansive learning, is what he calls "the learning problem." According to Holzkamp (1993), the learning problem is "(…) the many contradictions, dilemmas, and problems in everyday life that do not require learning but can be resolved by direct action; they are, in this sense, non-specific action problems or coping problems" (p. 122). In Holzkamp's perspective, we solve problems in everyday life; however, we do not think of these kinds of activities as learning. The issue is that in particular institutions (e.g., schools), we use the concept of learning when we solve problems; however,

when we are outside of school, and actively solving problems, we are just being active and coping with problems confronting us, and essentially not using the concept of learning for these activities. What Holzkamp tries to do is develop a concept that can legitimize learning activities outside of school as being different from school learning activities, while still being called learning (and thus being valued as such): "From this, it follows that practical problems calling for action which might entail learning problems need not to be other-directed, as, for instance, by school" (p. 123). According to Holzkamp, essentially, there are two types of learning. One type of learning is related to the activities in school and is characterized by being other-directed. This kind of learning does not necessarily lead to enhancing a person's action potential—that is, the potential for the person to maintain or gain influence over the conditions of his or her own life. As emphasized by Haug (2009), Holzkamp is strongly critical of schooling and suggests that they actually hinder expansive learning. The student might just be learning for the sake of passing an examination or getting better grades— institutionalized "other-directed" activities that do not necessarily lead the person to expand his or her action potential. However, identifying this kind of "other-directed" institutionalized learning opens the door to potentially identifying another kind of learning, in which the person is learning based on the person's own interests. In addressing the learning question, Holzkamp puts it like this:

> To answer these questions, I will return to our categorical differentiation of motivation and (internalized) coercion […] and point to the fact that, in principle, there are two possible forms or types of reasons for learning, depending on the degree to which it promises the potential to expand my influence over the conditions of my life and thus enhance its subjective quality, or whether it merely serves to avert further restrictions and threats to these possibilities. (Holzkamp, 1993, p. 123)

The division between restrictive and expansive learning has its roots in a differentiation between a person's activities being governed by his or her own motives or his or her activities being governed by threat or coercion (e.g., through the threat of receiving low grades or failing examinations). This leads Holzkamp to differentiate between what he calls defensive and expansive learning. He talks about expansive learning as "the *inner* coherence between the enriched access to the world through learning, the increased influence upon the conditions of my life and its enhanced subjective quality" (Holzkamp, 1993, p. 123; emphasis added). Holzkamp emphasizes that he is talking about a kind of "motivated learning" grounded in an interest in increasing a person's influence upon the conditions of his or her life situation. However, in some cases, the person is "feeling compelled to learn even though there are no motivational

reasons for my learning activities (…)" and "(…) that the person is cut off from the perspective of a joint control over the living conditions, thrown back on myself, controlled by immediate threats and needs. In this case, the reasons for my actions are not expansive but *defensive*" (Holzkamp, 1993, p. 124). Holzkamp's differentiation between expansive and restrictive (defensive) learning is essentially legitimized by another set of binary oppositions between a person's "inner coherence" based on the notion of motivation on the one hand and on the other hand, feeling compelled, coerced by immediate threats coming from the social world. Essentially, what legitimizes the binary opposition of restrictive and expansive learning is another set of binary oppositions between the *individual* person and those *social* circumstances that, to the subject, appear not to have the potential to enlarge the influence on one's own existence, that is, between the person's *internal* motivation and a set of *external, coercive* circumstances. In Holzkamp's version, a sort of doubling of a duality appears: There is the good and bad *internal* state (motivation as either driven by meaningfulness or internalized coercion) and a good and bad *external* state of affairs (the "ecology of the person" on the one hand and "coercive social practices" on the other). Somehow, the latter (for instance, school practices) are not part of 'the world' that learning is the enriching relation to. In the process of criticizing the problems related to school practices, Holzkamp essentializes these normatively. Teaching (school) becomes normatively problematic rather than one of the processes that are simply part of a person's everyday life and must be conducted. Holtkamp's strong critique of schooling as an institution for disciplining students turns his understanding of expansive and restrictive learning into what Haug calls an "absolutization of self-activities in learning" (Haug, 2009, p. 250). Self-activity is a key component in processes of learning, Haug emphasizes by using the notion of "absolutization of self-activities in learning," while Holzkamp's understanding of expansive learning, on the other hand, rejects all kinds of pedagogic activities that encourage, help, support, prevent, or guide processes of learning. The strong dichotomous division of learning "(…) misses the opportunity to think of learning as a social process, and 'growing up and into' society as a laborious task (…)" (Haug, 2009, p. 252).

About restricted and expansive learning in Engeström's perspective

Another central cultural historical theorist who uses binary oppositions is the Finnish researcher Yrjö Engeström. Engeström uses a slightly different vocabulary than Holzkamp. Whereas Holzkamp's development of expansive learning and restrictive learning came out of a critique of schooling, Engeström's

dichotomies are closely related to the theoretical interpretation of systemic/communication theory (Bateson) which Engeström uses to develop his model of learning. Engeström does not use the notions of restrictive and expansive learning; instead, he differentiates between reproductive and expansive learning (Engeström & Sannino, 2010). Engeström distinguishes between learning that *merely* reproduces the social world (as mostly described in theories of cognitive psychology and situated learning) and expansive learning processes, where participants learn something new (Engeström, 1987). Engeström and Sannino (2010) define expansive learning processes as processes where "(…) learners learn something that is not yet there. In other words, the learners construct a new object and concept for their collective activity and implement this new object and concept in practice." (p. 2) According to Engeström and Sannino (2010), expansive learning processes are qualitatively different from learning processes defined by cognitive psychology and theories of situated learning, which are dominated by a conservative bias:

> In fact, from the point of view of expansive learning, both acquisition-based and participation-based approaches share much of the same conservative bias. Both have little to say about transformation and creation of culture. Both acquisition-based and participation-based approaches, the latter especially in the original legitimate-peripheral-participation framework (Lave & Wenger, 1991), depict learning primarily as one-way movement from incompetence to competence, with little serious analysis devoted to horizontal movement and hybridization (p. 2).

Fundamentally, Engeström's idea of expansive learning is closely related to his synthesis of a number of concepts from the CHAT tradition revolving around an interpretation of Bateson's (1972) analysis of different levels of learning. If we first take a closer look at what Engeström uses from the tradition of activity theory, we see that he includes a number of concepts from multiple sources. Engeström's conceptual basis for expansive learning is founded on, among others, Leontj'ev's (1978) concept of activity, Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development, Leontj'ev's (1981) use of object orientation, Il'enkov's (1977, 1982) analysis of transforming contradictions, Davydov's (1988, 1990) focus on the concrete, Vygotky's (1987, 1997) notion of mediation of action by means of cultural tools and signs, and last, but not least, Bakhtin's (1998) idea of multi-voicedness, or heteroglossia (for an elaboration, see Engeström & Sannino, 2010). However, if we want to get a more fundamental grip on how the strong binary between reproduction and the production of the new comes into play in Engeström's approach to expansive learning, we need to understand how Engeström is inspired by Bateson's analysis of various levels of learning

(Bateson, 1972). According to Engeström, "Bateson's Learning III is basically the same as expansive learning activity" (Engeström & Sannino, 2010, p. 5).

Engeström's dissertation from 1987 provides important insights into how Engeström legitimizes the binary opposition between reproductive and expansive learning. It is essentially based on a specific understanding of consciousness. Based on Bateson's four levels of learning, Engeström (1987) argues the following:

> In Learning I, the object presents itself as mere immediate resistance, not consciously separated from the subject and instrument by the learner. In Learning II, the object is conceived of as a problem, demanding specific efforts. The subject is no more a nonconscious agent but an individual under constant self-assessment stemming from the success or failure of his attempts at the solution. (p. 151)

In Engeström's differentiation between learning I and learning II, he introduces the notion of consciousness. However, in Bateson's original work about levels of learning, processes of *communication* are central, not processes of *consciousness*. When Engeström defines the conservative dimension of the learning process, he basically does so by the degree of consciousness. At the learning 1 level, Engeström speaks of learners as being *nonconscious* of the situation of which they are a part. In this sense, there is no reflection about what might be a problem. Hence, there is no sense of conscious learning. At the learning 2 level, the learner is becoming conscious of having a problem and may try to solve the problem. The learner is conscious that there are two potential outcomes: either solving the problem (success) or not solving the problem (failure). At this level, the person is not conscious of the context, but merely conscious of the problem and the potential outcomes of the problem with which he or she is faced. Again, the person is not conscious of the problems he or she has and how the context is part of the problem; hence, the person does not have any opportunity to change the situation. However, what characterizes learning 3 level is that the person becomes more conscious of the situation.

> In Learning III, the subject becomes conscious and gains an imaginative and thus potentially also a practical mastery of whole systems of activity in terms of the past, the present and the future. (Engeström, 1987, p. 154)

The close relation to consciousness remains central to Engeström, whereas for Bateson, the concern is about differences in what constitutes *change*. It is important to emphasize that what characterizes Engeström's use of Bateson's levels of learning is closely related to levels of consciousness. It is the difference

between being nonconscious/partly conscious on the hand and fully conscious on the other hand that legitimizes the binary of reproductive and expansive learning. Engeström is well aware that the notion of consciousness ties his way of thinking to a very individualized perspective. To counter this potential individualism, Engeström introduces concepts from CHAT, mentioned above which turn the dichotomy of reproductive and expansive learning in a more collective direction. Leont'ev's notion of activity systems in particular serves this purpose:

> Learning III as the outcome and form of typically human development is basically collective in nature. The collective Learning III is perhaps not so dramatic as its individual manifestations. But the real production and application of world outlooks, restructuring of complex activity systems, is not conceivable in individual and drastically sudden terms alone. In periods of exceptional upheavals, such as revolutions, the collective and the individual, the profound and the sudden, the action and the activity, seem to merge, even to the point where the individual seems to take the leading role. But these are temporary phenomena. The bread and butter of human development is collective Learning III, gradual in form but profound in substantial effects. (Engeström & Sannino, 2010, p. 5)

However, even though Engeström pushes his division between reproductive and expansive learning to a more collective level by using Leont'ev's notion of activity systems, essentially, the binary opposition is still based on cultural assumptions about consciousness and the evolution of time. As outlined by Fabian (2014), our notion of evolutionary time plays a crucial, yet often unnoticed, role in modern Western epistemology (p. 16). According to Fabian (2014), evolutionary time develops a social order embedded in the way that we imagine time sequences, locations, persons, and activities. Essentially, the notion of evolutionary time is that of a continuous movement from the fragmented and the primitive to the coherent and the civilized (Fabian, 2014, pp. 14–18). Our understanding of evolutionary time presents us with a scheme that legitimizes central concepts to our epistemological self-understanding such as development, acculturation, civilization, and modernity (Fabian, 2014). Engeström's legitimization of the binary of reproductive and expansive learning is a typical manifestation of evolutionary time, along the lines of a Marxist perspective on history where contradictions and processes of social struggle prevail. It is founded on an idea about the person moving from being nonconscious/partly conscious (reproductive) to being conscious. It is a classical and strong binary related to a Western mindset that revolves around consciousness, which is also found in distinctions between the native and the civilized, the woman and the man, the child and the adult, the uneducated and the scholar.

Discussion

Working with strong binary oppositions as restrictive and expansive as those analyzed above presents a number of problems. One of the main problems seems to be that the concepts we are using to analyze practice claim to be universal; however, they may instead be a mirror of the contradictions and conflicts in social practice. In Holzkamp's case, it is the institutional division between what is happening in school and beyond school that is mirrored in the concept of restricted and expansive learning. This mirroring of a particular social practice does not in itself reflect how the opposition between restricted and expansive learning has been produced by social practice, nor does it offer ways to understand the relation between, in this case, school and everyday life. Instead, they are thoroughly separated from each other. The same goes for Engeström, who, in a paradoxical way, reproduces a classic culturally embedded binary opposition between being nonconscious, unconscious, or partly conscious on the one hand and being conscious on the other.

Binaries are not a neutral tool for analyzing practice. Binary oppositions are strongly value-laden, where one binary (e.g., expansive) is attractive to realize while the other binary (e.g., restricted) is that from which we seek to distance ourselves from. In the case of Holzkamp and Engeström, different kinds of practice seem to be *a priori* problematic. In Holzkamp's case, it is the institutional "other-driven" kind of learning often equivalent with school learning that is taken to be problematic, while in Engeström's case it is the nonconscious/unconscious.

Rather than taking dichotomies as a given, we need to address them analytically. Binaries are situated and constructed categories, trajectories of which warrant investigation in terms of how they were constituted, regulated, embodied, and contested rather than being taken as always already present. What is actually the work of institutions, socioeconomic struggles, etc., presents itself as an immutable trans-historical division, as ideology that needs questioning and researching. A valuable way of thinking about ideology is to think of it as the way discursive traffic and exchanges between different domains are structured and controlled (Holzkamp, 1993, p. 195).

Lave and Packer (2008) comment that "recent attempts to develop social theories of learning assume, often unreflectively, that the lived experience so addressed is 'everyday' in character" (p. 17). This is how we understand Holzkamp's division of defensive learning and expansive learning. It is this same assumption, we believe, that Holzkamp and Engeström tap into (even if Holzkamp had another division between routines of everyday life and "real life") (see Hybholt, 2015, for a discussion).

In Engeström's case, two separate (though connected) dualisms are apparent. On the one hand, there is the already mentioned division of action conducted with or without consciousness. On the other hand, there is the division between the social formation of practice (level III) and the retention of Bateson's individual focus on the other levels of change. As an aside, again, the more neutral logic of sets that Bateson uses to question the concepts of change become much closer to a normative hierarchy in Engeström's work, with the upper, consciousness-laden tiers as the better and more refined levels.

It might be worth mentioning that in Bateson's version, Learning III remains individual, albeit limited to humans, while Learning IV is thought of as evolutionary in nature. Learning III is about changes in the results of Learning II. If Learning II is thought of, in developmental terms, to refer to the development of the habits that characterize a person as that person, Learning III is a change in that personality; the concept of "self will no longer function as a nodal argument in the punctuation of experience" (Bateson, 1973, p. 275) and "something of the sort does, from time to time, occur in psychotherapy, religious conversion, and in other sequences in which there is profound reorganization of character" (Bateson, 1973, p. 273). Not only does Engeström (1987) question the rarity of Learning III (1987, p. 148), but he replaces this still-individual level with an intersubjective one. It is unclear why he keeps the other classes but changes this one, and it is unclear why it is not rather Learning IV, if any, that should be replaced, or moved to a Learning V category. This seems to replace a discussion of *logical* categories and their embeddedness with a discussion of the *ontological* content of the various categories. How is it, for instance, that it is Learning III that is intersubjective/societal when Vygotsky (who is a central inspiration for Engeström) was of the opinion that the child is maximally social and only later develops individuality—that even the most basic interactions (Learning I) are already socially infused.

Our contention is that, to some extent, Holzkamp and Engeström—despite their intentions—reproduce a "spatial" understanding of action. For Holzkamp, it takes the form of an intrinsic connection between school and administrable plannable content and control. These dualities (of the school context and of the notion of consciousness) are reminiscent of discussions of reification. School, in Holzkamp's case, ceases to be a context of competing interests and concerns, but comes to embody only the idea of learning as plannable. School is reified; it becomes alien from the everyday concerns of students and perhaps parents and teachers. It is contrasted with the seemingly non-reified everyday life of these same persons. Thus, Holzkamp, as quickly as he shows the problem of learning, identifies the institutionalized practice as wholly governed by this problem. The

counterpart becomes the "true" image of what constitutes "real" and "good" learning.

When discussing the concept of reification, Honneth (2005) argues that reification is best understood as a forgetting. It is the non-attention paid to the fact that all practices—and all actions in them—always already stem from collective concerns of some kind. It may very well be that (much of) school practice is "reified" in the sense of "forgetting" the intersubjective, collective activity (Tätigkeit) that has given rise to it.

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