

# Understanding learning in social movements: a theory of collective learning

DEBORAH W. KILGORE  
Texas, USA

This article introduces a theory of collective learning, which I argue is more appropriate than individualized theories for the study of individuals and groups engaged in collective action to defend or promote a shared social vision. This theory is unique among the relatively few theories of group learning, because it more specifically describes the relationship between individual and group development and because it significantly addresses social justice. In particular, I use Wells' extension of Vygotsky's zone of proximal development to describe the interplay among individuals in a group and I use Melucci's new social movement theory to conceptualize the interplay among groups in conflict. Development and learning occur throughout this framework, and can be observed using certain individual and group analytical distinctions. Individual distinctions include identity, consciousness, sense of agency, sense of worthiness and sense of connectedness. Group distinctions include collective identity, group consciousness, solidarity and organization.

## Introduction

There is increasing interest among adult learning theorists in developing alternatives to individualized learning theories to explain how and why learning occurs in groups. Individualized learning theories do not adequately explain a group as a learning system (Kasl and Marsick 1997) nor do they necessarily situate the learning process correctly between 'knowing' and 'doing' (Brown, Collins and Duguid 1989). In particular, understanding learning in social movements requires not only a concept of the group as a learner and constructor of knowledge, but also an understanding of the centrality of the group's vision of social justice that drives it to act – mostly in conflict with other groups – in the larger social, economic, and political field of meaning making.

In this article I propose a theory of collective learning, a process that occurs among two or more diverse people in which taken-as-shared meanings (including a vision of social justice) are constructed and acted upon by the group. One way to conceptualize the position of collective learning among broader epistemological worldviews is by placing it at the intersection of critical theory and postmodernism. Collins (1995) suggests an uneasy alliance that would allow both the hope for social renewal in the critical social project and the creation of space for previously marginalized voices in the postmodern project. Another conceptualization of collective learning places it beyond postmodernism. It is the order that arises from chaos. It is the definition that we seek – not only for ourselves, but for the group in which we are interested – that emerges from the complexity of our differences. A theory of collective learning emphasizes

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*Deborah Kilgore* is a doctoral candidate in Educational Human Resource Development at Texas A&M University, 615 Harrington Tower, College Station, Texas, 77843–3256, USA. Her research and writing interests are centred on group learning processes for individual and social change. Her dissertation research focuses on a group learning process for incarcerated women.

difference and opens the way from reductionist definitions of groups towards more detailed and rich understandings.

Here I shall make a case for a theory of collective learning, begin the explication of this theory, and describe ways that research would further contribute to its development. For those interested in understanding how people and groups learn while engaged in collective social action for the purpose of defending and/or affirming a shared vision of social justice, it is my hope that a theory of collective learning will be a better theoretical foundation than individually focused theories of adult learning or group learning theories devoid of social vision.

### **The case for social justice**

For many years, scholars in adult learning and education have called for a more socially conscious vision of adult education (Heaney 1992, Ilsley 1992). Specifically, we accuse our educational practices of being guided by the strategic interests of the State and capitalist economic systems rather than by the practical human needs of our everyday lives (Collins 1995, Briton 1996). There is a wealth of critical analysis of dominant theories and practices of adult education and learning (e.g. Finger 1995, Welton 1995, Briton 1996, Zacharakis-Jutz 1988). These critiques provide historical, cultural and theoretical examinations of the subtle ways our dominant theories have contributed to the displacement of social justice as an important component of adult education's mission. Social justice, in this discussion, refers to concepts like civil rights, peace, environmental fair play, and so forth (Ilsley 1992). Social action is taken in response to threats to these concepts of social justice, like homelessness, race and gender discrimination, weapons build up, and pollution (Greene 1988).

Some critics say our focus on individual development in adult learning is incapable of allowing space for a vision of social justice (Ilsley 1992), and has been the foundation of educational practices that paradoxically mitigate learner autonomy in unquestioning servitude to powerful institutions (Collins 1995). Also, some scholars (e.g. Freire and Macedo 1995) reject the notion of a value free approach to adult education as impossible, unnecessary and undesirable.

Self-directed learning 'has an almost cult-like quality to the extent that self-directedness is viewed as the essence of what adult learning is all about' (Caffarella 1993: 25). But some theorists (e.g. Collins 1995) find this cornerstone of adult learning theory conceptually inadequate to examine learning processes as forces for social change. In the historical and social context of late capitalism, the notion of self-directed learning serves to devalue both educator and learner by commodifying the learning process. Our respect for the learner's right to self-determination makes us reluctant to propose alternative visions. In providing no oppositional alternatives, educators become agents for the technical interests of business and industry and learners become consumers of packaged credentialing programs. As Collins (1995: 88) writes, we are faced with the anomaly of '*directed* self-directed learning'. Both adult learners and educators are no longer involved in the process of learning for its own sake or for the sake of making sense of our everyday lives. Instead, we learn for the sake of the increasing number of social control mechanisms that have developed in our economic, political and administrative institutions. Our well-intended recognition of the qualities and rights of individuals has transformed into unquestioning, perhaps cult-like idol worship.

Rogers (1984) defines the educated person as one who knows how to learn. Rogers (1984: 70) also highlights the significance of ‘self-initiated, significant, experiential, “gut-level” learning by the whole person ... Teaching is a vastly overrated function’. In a continually changing culture, Rogers (1984: 69) says the educator must turn to the ‘facilitation of change and learning’. This notion is also taken up by Freire (1996), who criticizes the traditional role of the educator as depositor of knowledge. Freire says that situations in which teachers act and students are acted upon are oppressive. But Freire distinguishes between professional authority and the authority of knowledge.

Freire insists that educators have authority of knowledge (Horton and Freire 1990, Freire and Macedo 1995) and that they must be aware of and indicate the values they bring to the teacher-learner relationship. Horton (1990: 128) agrees. ‘Often when I say you start with people’s experience, people get the point that you start and stop with that experience, but of course ... (t)here’s a time when people’s experience runs out’. Both Freire and Horton dismiss the notion that educators are mere facilitators.

Ellsworth (1989) also problematizes the facilitator role of educators, and challenges the possibility that educators can leave their values at the door. Ellsworth’s (1989: 300) focus is on those who call themselves critical or radical educators, who use ‘code words such as “critical,” which hide the actual political agendas...’. In serving *hidden* agendas, but agendas nonetheless, critical education ‘has failed to develop a clear articulation of the need for its existence, its goals, priorities, risks, or potentials’ (1989: 301).

There is a reciprocal relationship between learning theory and educational practice in the sense that each informs and enriches the other. This relationship can not be examined outside the historical and social contexts of late capitalism. In our well-intentioned pursuit of individual autonomy through ‘value free’ educational practice we have removed from learning theory a key knowledge interest stemming naturally from the theory-practice relationship: a practical interest in social justice.

Habermas’ social theory is a framework in which we can examine the effects of an absence of a social vision. Habermas (1989) describes progressive social evolution as the reciprocal development of the system and the lifeworld. The development of the system into a diversity of institutions promotes social control and security; the system benefits the lifeworld by keeping society safe and increasingly relieving individuals of responsibility for the instrumental mechanisms necessary to produce their material needs. The development of the lifeworld promotes individual growth and democracy, benefiting the system with ideals and ideas for improvement and mechanisms for democratically maintaining social order. As Marx did, Habermas sees Western capitalism as a threat to this relationship between system and lifeworld. ‘Capitalism has promoted social rationalization at the expense of cultural development’ (Seidman 1994: 186). Habermas (1989) thus concludes that the lifeworld has been traumatized by the system (see also Welton 1995).

This intrusion into the lifeworld occurs as social control mechanisms spin an ever-expanding web of influence into the sites of our everyday lives: our families, our communities, even upon our bodies. A loss of wisdom results, where administrative social steering is introduced in the private sphere, but can not be reflected upon because it can not be integrated with one’s lived experience (Melucci 1996). Mezirow’s (1996) emancipatory theoretical project addresses this loss of wisdom. In Mezirow’s view, the work of the adult educator is in understanding and providing conditions (like Habermas’ ideal speech situation) for emancipatory learning, in which learners make sense of their lives through critical reflection. Mezirow is careful to bound his work

within the realm of individual transformation. For Mezirow, imposing our beliefs about a need for social change beyond the learning experience would be indoctrination.

However, while adult learning theorists and educators relinquish our rights and responsibilities to pursue specific social visions, business and industry have no similar responsibility to forsake their strategic visions of profit and technical progress. The unfortunate result is our discipline's collusion in the colonization of the lifeworld. With no space granted toward developing collective goals of social justice, the individualized and value free learning experiences that many of us promote are in all actuality likely to be in the service of the Corporate State. Horton (1990) says it best,

As soon as I started looking at that word *neutral* and what it meant, it became very obvious to me there can be no such thing as neutrality. It's a code word for the existing system. It has nothing to do with anything but agreeing to what is and will always be – that's what neutrality is. *Neutrality is just following the crowd.* (1990: 102)

### **Collective social action, collective identity and individual meaning**

Collective social action is given in this article to mean a group challenge to existing material, cultural, or psychological conditions in society. It is motivated by norms of social justice; a collective sense of righting a wrong. A collective challenge can take place in the form of a single incident like a sit-in, or in terms of a social movement in which a variety of means are used over time to challenge existing conditions or alternative social movement organizations.

The necessity of collective social action to achieve social justice seems intuitive. As Frederick Douglass (cited in Greene 1988: 89) wrote, 'Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground, they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters'. A case for collective social action can also be made in a brief discussion of the nature of the corporate institutions whose interests are gradually overtaking our lifeworld. Currently, transnational corporations have many of the same kinds of civil and legal rights in the USA as human citizens. These entities, however, are guided only by specific objectives of material growth, efficiency, and technological progress in a global capitalist economy. The transnationals to which I refer have no articulated principles of social justice and no administrative mechanisms for developing them.

Individuals often reveal qualities of love and compassion in our interpersonal relationships. However, transnational corporations are guided by resource control strategies, not necessarily human interaction, and give no indication of developing human codes of morality. It is not the point of this article to attack any particular company, however my observations of working conditions on the US–Mexico border are rich with instances where human rights were casually sacrificed for the sake of corporate profit (Kilgore 1997).

Mezirow (1989: 172) says that while collective social action is 'crucial', it is not necessary for critical reflection to result in immediate collective social action. His claim seems to be that various individual perspective transformations will ultimately result in progressive social evolution. The tradition of Western Enlightenment is evident here,

particularly the idea that 'collective emancipation will be achieved through individual growth, development, and learning' (Finger 1995: 111–12). Finger points out that today's cultural reality is one of increasing social fragmentation. The '... assumed coherence and parallelism between individual and collective human development is disappearing' (Finger 1995: 113). In their attempt to develop a more inclusive feminist theory, Green and Curry (1991) note that women are curious about their differences as well as their commonalities with other women. Frye (1996) also writes that it is possible and desirable to facilitate a process of social interplay that satisfies these curiosities over time, allowing individuals to maintain their unique identities and perspectives, even as they construct shared meanings and a collective identity leading to collective social action.

To complement Mezirow's assertion that individual critical reflection does not necessarily result in social action, I propose alternatively that collective social action is not necessarily the result of individual critical reflection. There are many reasons why we do or do not participate in collective social action. Observations of recruiting efforts by social movement organizations reveal that the greatest source of new members is existing members' social networks. In other words, friends are recruited by friends (see Klandermans and Oegema 1993, Snow, Zurcher and Ekland-Olson 1993). Because we like our friends and want to be around them, we may participate in collective social action in a social movement without first or ever fully grasping or agreeing with its vision.

Sometimes we participate in collective social action because those who have asked us to participate have supported our causes in the past. Networks of smaller social movement organizations may be mobilized under a more generalized rubric. For example, the women's movement encompasses many diverse communities with different theories and approaches to feminism (Tong 1989).

We may also find ourselves in the same action with groups that promote a variety of different causes. For example, the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras is an alliance of over 150 organizations promoting various ideals like environmental justice, women's rights, worker's rights and human rights. These organizations find that their foci overlap with respect to foreign-owned factories in Mexico, and work together on specific actions to address these overlapping concerns. In this context, labour unions work in concert with environmental organizations even though dominant North American cultural understandings present worker's rights in conflict with environmental justice.

As Mezirow (1989) points out, sometimes we do not participate in collective social action even though we agree with it. We may avoid action because of the personal risks involved (Klandermans and Oegema 1993) or because we do not have the time or money to do so (Snow, Zurcher and Ekland-Olson 1993). Aguirre (1997) makes a strong case that participation in collective action is not necessarily a reflection of inner meanings. He describes an authoritarian institution in Cuba that effectively mobilizes its citizens in great numbers to participate in various demonstrations of government support and protest against US imperialism. Citizens are not compelled to demonstrate because of their personal understandings necessarily, but because of institutionalized processes that connect their participation to their livelihoods. Additionally, Cuba's government has been so effective in quelling dissent that it is nearly impossible to engage in any kind of organized oppositional action. Thus individuals may oppose the State, but the risks are too high to refuse to participate in government-organized solidarity marches much less organize a challenge to the State (Aguirre 1997).

Our dominant focus in learning theory has been primarily on individuals' inner understandings. We must turn now to an exploration of the learning community, because it is the dominant shared meaning and identity of the collective that is most closely related to collective social action. People collectively develop solutions to societal problems, a process that Milbrath (1989) calls 'learning our way out'. Finger (1995: 116) adds, 'This... must be a collective and collaborative effort, because there is no individual way out'. Our discipline can only play a part in this learning process if we broaden our understanding of learning to include a theory of collective learning.

### **Toward a theory of collective learning**

To view a group in its entirety requires a significant philosophical shift in which we 'conceptualiz[e] the group itself as a learner' (Kasl and Marsick 1997: 250). I would also like to add two considerations that deserve further exploration by group learning theorists. First, the relationship between individual and group learning remains incorrectly or inadequately defined and should be brought into focus. As we develop an epistemology of group learning and its concomitant measures of success, we run the risk of denying individual values as we make individual difference less visible in the learning model. It is difficult conceptually to understand what impact groups have on individual learning and what impact individuals have on group learning at the same time. In our enthusiasm to elaborate the interactive aspects of learning, we continue to maintain an arbitrary distinction between psychology and sociology. We are better served, I think, to remove the boundary between the two disciplines.

Social justice is another important consideration that has largely been avoided in theorizing about group learning. Most of our energies are still directed toward building theory without significant consideration of the social values that individuals and educators bring to the group learning situation and the social values that the group constructs together. Situated cognition is a promising area of exploration because it recognizes the context in which individuals learn and opens us to the notion of social interaction as a key aspect of the learning process (Brown, Collins and Duguid 1989). But what is the measure of merit that we use for learning groups? What happens when a work team, for example, comes up with a practice counter to management's goals? Values constructed outside the learning group can and do contradict values constructed within the learning group. An epistemology of group learning ought to consider conflicts over individual and group norms as normally recurring phenomena of social life.

To address the aforementioned issues, I would like now to begin an explication of a theory of collective development and learning that draws from sociocultural learning theory and contemporary social movement theory. My hope is that this epistemological move will provide a lens through which to view a group as a unit of analysis without losing sight of individual contributions to the group learning process. Additionally, I hope that this model will provide a way to consider the construction of moral norms in postmodernity.

A theory of collective development and learning involves both individual and group components. Individual components presented here are identity, consciousness, sense of agency, sense of worthiness and sense of connectedness. Individual identity answers the

question 'Who am I?' In a model of collective development individual identity is not only one's perception of self as unique from other individuals and groups but also as interdependent with other individuals and groups. For instance, 'I' am a US citizen, a woman, a daughter, a doctoral student at Texas A & M, a member of a book club. Much of my self-identification involves my membership in groups and my relationships with other people.

Individual consciousness adds experience to individual identity; it is the awareness of oneself as an autonomous actor. I follow the Marxian notion of consciousness as a function of one's experience; I am what I do. As individuals purposefully act, we come to see ourselves as actors, rather than being acted upon. A sense of agency adds imagination to individual consciousness. As individuals increasingly perceive ourselves as actors based on previous purposeful actions, we begin to imagine ourselves as agents who are able to make things happen in the future.

A sense of worthiness adds confidence to agency. This is the belief that we can contribute positively to the group process or product; that we have something to offer. Finally, the sense of connectedness adds a social vision to our other senses of self. It is the extent to which we feel affinity to others; it involves our empathic capabilities and the affective reasons for why we choose to coordinate our individual thoughts into a group process.

Individual development and learning as described above can and has been observed within group activity. For instance, Elsdon (1995: 78) observes that even in groups where the aim is purely sociable activity, 'members claim a growth of personal confidence, an improved ability to make constructive personal relationships, a variety of personal, social, physical and coping skills, and – some of them – widened interests and a willingness and ability to take on organizational responsibilities'.

As an individual is a learning system, so is a group. Vygotsky (1978: 85) writes 'learning should be matched in some manner with the child's developmental level'. Similarly, a group with a limited developmental level is restricted in its capacity to learn and act. Components of collective development presented here include collective identity, group consciousness, solidarity and organization. Collective identity answers the question, 'Who are we?' It consists of learning components like taken-as-shared meanings that may lead the group to a course of collective action. Group consciousness is the awareness of the group as a social actor. The group develops this notion of itself through its experience constructing a collective identity and acting collectively. Solidarity is a general feeling of unity or affinity among members of a group. Solidarity draws individuals to engage in the group process and the group becomes more confident of itself as a collective change agent. Organization includes technical features of the group like size, mode(s) of communication, member roles and material resources. Organization has an impact on other aspects of group development. For example, solidarity is likely to be stronger in smaller groups than larger ones (Gamson 1992).

In order to understand collective learning and development, we must consider the totality of the system. Individual development is partially determined by a group's development, a group's development is partially determined by any individual member's development, and all development is partially determined by the group's collective actions in relation to other groups' collective actions within a sociocultural context.

Collective learning consists mainly of the construction of collective identity; it is this process upon which I would now like to focus. Melucci (1995a) defines collective identity as a shared understanding of 'ends, means, and field of action' (1995a: 44), that

provides a sense of 'continuity and permanence' (1995a: 49) to the community. He conceives of collective identity as a mutable social construction resulting from continuous negotiation among individuals or between individuals and the community.

Many social movements in Western society today challenge dominant cultural meanings. Rather than addressing a structural issue like class, these kinds of movements address cultural symbols 'that organize information and shape social practices' (Melucci 1996: 41). These movements are not representative of a single class conceived as homogeneous, like Marx's working class, and they do not challenge specific institutions, like Marx's State. Rather, contemporary social movements are alliances of heterogeneous persons and groups concerned with quality of life and are 'motivated by substantive values and moral visions' (Seidman 1994: 187). They are characterized by the variety of localized understandings of material and cultural conditions warranting action, and the variety of localized actions taken. Collective identity therefore 'comprises different and sometimes contradictory definitions' (Melucci 1995a: 45). It allows individuals to remain in control of their own actions, yet also act in concert with other members of the collective as a unified body.

Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development (ZPD) is a helpful construct upon which to build an understanding of the internal workings of collective learning. According to Vygotsky (1978: 85), there are two levels of development. The actual developmental level is 'the level of development of a child's mental functions that has been established as a result of certain already completed developmental cycles'. The potential developmental level is 'determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers' (1978: 85). The distance between the two levels of development is the ZPD. In other words, '... [W]hat a child can do with assistance today she will be able to do by herself tomorrow' (1978: 86).

Vygotsky's ZPD emphasizes the way that social interaction can impact individual learning, but it does not apply beyond the individual learner. It also does not explain how individuals develop beyond the level of their teachers. Wells (1996) provides an expanded definition of the ZPD that brings the notion of development all the way into the social realm and solves the problem of those who excel beyond the limits of their teachers' expertise. An expanded ZPD applies to any situation in which individuals are engaged together in learning a new concept or practice. ZPD is an attribute of interaction among participants jointly engaged in learning activity. Most importantly, wholly 'more capable peers' are not necessary for collective ZPD. Each participant has different socioculturally developed understandings to contribute to the collective learning process. Thus, the potential for collective development is only limited when the diversity of individuals and interaction with other groups is limited.

A group has infinite developmental possibilities, *because* of the diversity of its members. The various standpoints of the members – and the standpoint of the group – are in flux with regard to a larger society in flux. They act as flexible tools that interact with one another and with which the group can continue to develop collective identity, consciousness, solidarity and organization.

In keeping with our habit of looking at the totality of systems here, we must also recognize the unlimited destructive potential of the collective ZPD. For example, there is empirical proof that as a global society, we are destroying our natural environment as we progress along technological lines. This highlights the importance of contradiction and conflict in collective development processes. In any social relationship, there is a potential for conflict as diverse ideas and experiences collide. What shall we do with difference? Are we interested in development or destruction? Development of what?

Destruction of what? The construction of moral norms is fraught with conflict, particularly in a postmodern era in which diverse voices are entering with increasing frequency into public debate.

For Melucci (1996), society is today increasingly an information society in which all meaning is constructed through the production and processing of information. An individual's potential affiliations are numerous and diverse; one can belong to many more institutions and groups than ever before. Tension results from the fact that individuals and local groups are given more information resources with which to identify themselves, but ' (dimensions) that were traditionally regarded as private... or subjective... or even biological... ' are increasingly regulated and manipulated by ' the technoscientific apparatus, the agencies of information and communication, and the decision-making centers that determine policies' (Melucci 1996: 101) that are deemed necessary to maintain social order in a highly differentiated world.

Thus, conflict is frequently a symbolic challenge rather than a material challenge. Traditional interpretations of conflict have either viewed it as a reaction to social crisis, a response to marginalization in society, or exclusion from political processes (Melucci 1996: 98–9). Today's complex system requires increasing intervention in the social processes of social and cultural production, and ' conflicts thus shift towards the new goals of re-appropriation and reversal of the meaning produced by distant and impersonal apparatuses' (1996: 101). In other words, '*individuals claim back the right to become themselves*' (1996: 101, emphasis added).

Holford (1995) takes issue with Melucci's (see 1989, 1995a, 1995b, 1996) cultural approach to social movements. Holford (1995: 100) sees the ' notion of actors in conflict ... [who are] fundamentally oppositional, excluded, almost sub-cultural', as inconsistent with ' social movements in terms of forms of cultural production' (1995: 100); as inconsistent with cognitive development. Alternatively, I see the necessity of conflict to collective development. Social actors not only stand in opposition to other social actors, but also produce meaning in the face of conflict. We do not produce meaning in a social vacuum, and ought not to pretend that invasions by the system into the lifeworld do not exist, or as though hierarchies of power based on race, gender, and socioeconomic class do not exist. Piaget says that children learn primarily by resolving contradictions. We can say the same thing about social movement organizations. Some arise to challenge the status quo and some arise to defend it, and ought to be viewed as both defensive and affirmative at the same time. Social movements defend a notion of social justice and at the same time create meaning and act to support this notion of social justice. I agree with Holford (1995) that social movements should be viewed as sites of cognitive praxis, but praxis is dependent on difference, contradiction, and social conflict. Whatever we choose to call it, conflict is crucial to collective learning.

Because the nature of contemporary collective action has to do with re-appropriating processes of symbolic and affective exchange – meaning making processes – solidarity is not only an outgrowth of action, but also an *objective* for action (Melucci 1996: 103). The very process of constructing collective identity in the lifeworld is oppositional to Western codes of extreme individualism (and isolation). And with each collective action in defense of the lifeworld, solidarity is reinforced.

On the cultural terrain, I think the development of a sense of solidarity is an important achievement. A sense of solidarity motivates individuals to participate in the collective learning process. Alienation from the group means alienation from the collective learning process, and a loss of agency with regard to actions taken by the group with which an individual may identify.

Conversely, solidarity at the extreme can cause individuals to buy in to shared meanings that are grossly contrary to their inner meanings. Individuals may participate in actions that they personally consider immoral, for example, as a result of their loyalty to the group. Gamson (1992: 495) says we must consider how people can ‘keep their social relationships liberating rather than having them become a new and more subtle form of oppression’.

### Conclusion

A theory of collective learning opens an avenue for studying what Plumb (1995) calls local learning communities. Collective learning theory sharpens the lens by more clearly defining the interplay between individuals and groups, between groups and other groups within a sociocultural context. Individual critical consciousness does not necessarily result in collective social action, nor does the existence of collective social action necessarily assume individuals’ critical consciousness. Thus, collective identity is frequently different from any particular individual meaning. For those interested in adult education and its relevance to collective social action to promote or defend a vision of social justice, the collective learning process of developing a collective identity and the nature of that identity – shared goals, meanings, strategies – is more pertinent than the individual’s learning. In addition, sociocultural constructivism introduced by the application of Vygotsky’s ZPD and Melucci’s cultural analysis of contemporary social movements must be approached critically, with an eye to social justice and the construction of moral norms. A vision of social justice and the means to achieve it are primary components of learning in a social movement.

A theory of collective learning would examine the dynamic interaction and mutual development of individual meanings and shared meanings. Research toward a theory of collective learning would be located in a local context such as one of the many unique affinity groups within a larger social movement. It would examine how individual community members come to understand and participate in the construction of a collective identity yet maintain their own unique identities. It would also include explanations of how communities develop and maintain a sense of solidarity that further compels individuals to participate in collective social actions stemming from a shared vision of social justice. Difference would be central in understanding the internal interplay among members of the local learning community.

A theory of collective learning would also consider the local learning community within the larger field of meaning making. As Habermas (1989) notes, individual autonomy is a fiction, but so is the autonomy of a particular culture. No learning community is free of engagement with individuals and other groups, political processes, mass media messages and economic structures outside the local community. Research toward a theory of collective learning would include the social, economic, and political contexts of collective social actions taken by a local learning community. It would include other groups with which the local learning community interacts. Conflict would be central in understanding the external interplay among groups in a larger field of meaning making.

Educational practice alone is not the source of progressive social change. But if we want to be relevant, we must understand and become involved with learning communities dealing with societal change. Adult learning theory for progressive social change should include a vision of social justice and notions of collective identity and

solidarity at its core. It is my hope that collective learning theory will provide a framework in which we can examine how people construct shared visions of social justice, and learn and act together to promote these shared visions.

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