Funds of Knowledge: A Conceptual Critique

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Abstract

The concept of ‘funds of knowledge’ is critically reviewed, tracing a history of the term’s changing use since its original conception by Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg in the late 1980s, and discussing its relevance in adult literacy and numeracy classrooms. An attempt is made to locate the concept within wider theoretical frameworks, and in particular to relate it to Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital. The article concludes that while the concept of funds of knowledge is powerful in disrupting discourses of deficit, practitioners or researchers who are committed to this approach need to be critically reflexive to avoid imposing their own, however well-intentioned, cultural arbitraries on learners.

Key words: Funds of knowledge; cultural capital; adult literacy; adult numeracy

Introduction

Critical self-consciousness is the ability...to discern in any scheme of association, including those one finds attractive and compelling, the partisan aims it hides from view. (Thomas, 1993:19)

When the Skills for Life strategy for adult literacy and numeracy was launched in England in 2001, policy-makers compared the literacy and numeracy skills of many adults to those of primary school children (DfES 2001). As a teacher in adult community education at the time, I felt that this comparison did not do justice to the maturity, self-motivation, sophisticated metacognitive skills and repertoires of informal literacy and numeracy practices possessed by many of the learners with whom I was working.

I found that the concept of ‘funds of knowledge’, originally developed by Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg (1990) and Moll et al (1992), offered a relevant and powerful way to describe the wide and varied resources possessed by these learners, and a useful model for research into
the practices adult learners bring to the classroom (e.g. Baker and Rhodes 2007, Oughton 2009).

However, it increasingly seems essential that we reflect carefully on exactly what is meant by the term ‘funds of knowledge’. The concept is highly ideological, and yet seems rarely to have been questioned or deconstructed; rather the term appears to have become reified with little critical reflection. In this article I attempt to consider clearly how the concept has come to be understood, to reflect on the ideological assumptions which may be at play, and to explore critically the concept’s relationship to, and position within, wider theoretical frameworks.

I begin with a brief history of the term ‘funds of knowledge’, and how its interpretation has been developed and extended in ways which make it increasingly relevant to adult learning. I then attempt to locate the concept within wider theoretical frameworks; in particular, the overlapping relationship between funds of knowledge and cultural capital. I also present some of my own reservations about the concept, which include: the possible stereotyping and ‘essentialisation’ of cultural groups; the reinforcement of the metaphor of learning as acquisition, rather than participation; and the danger of teachers and researchers imposing our own cultural arbitraries (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) as we identify and privilege what we regard to be ‘funds of knowledge’.

**The development of the concept of ‘funds of knowledge’**

Although the term ‘funds of knowledge’ is most often associated with the work of Luis Moll, Moll himself (2002) disclaims credit for the term, which was originally coined by Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg (1990). In their anthropological study of households in the US-Mexican borderlands, Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg describe the formation of ‘strategic and cultural resources, which we have termed funds of knowledge, that households contain’ (1992:313, original emphasis). They relate their use of the term to Wolf’s (1966) categorisation of economy in peasant households into several funds, which may take the form of labour, produce or currency. Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg suggest that ‘entailed in these are wider sets of activities requiring specific strategic bodies of essential information that households need to maintain their well-being’ (p.314), and define these bodies of information as ‘funds of knowledge’.
However, it is with Moll et al’s (1992) extension of this idea from anthropology to education, that the concept gains much of its power to disrupt discourses of deficit and to transform teachers’ beliefs and attitudes. Again working in the US-Mexican borderlands, Moll et al apply a funds of knowledge approach with teachers as ethnographers and explore how these new insights can be brought to the classroom. They suggest that the funds of knowledge identified by the study represent ‘a positive and realistic view of households as containing ample cultural and cognitive resource with great potential utility for classroom instruction’ (p.134). Table 1 below demonstrates the breadth of funds of knowledge identified by their study.

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Table 1. A Sample of Household Funds of Knowledge (Moll et al 1992:133)
They explore how an understanding of such funds of knowledge can inform and transform practice in the classrooms attended by children from these households. While the teachers had made home visits before, this had tended to be on school business, such as the delivery of report cards. In the funds of knowledge project, teachers took on the role of ethnographers, entering the households of their students to learn more about them. Moll et al emphasise that the importance of their approach is not limited to their own findings regarding Mexican families in Arizona. Rather they advocate the transformative effects of teacher-ethnography in any community positioned as ‘deficient’.

Moll et al’s link between Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg’s anthropological work and educational settings has been highly influential on subsequent work examining the funds of knowledge of different communities. (A Google Scholar search on 14 December 2009 suggests that Moll et al’s 1992 study has been cited in nearly 900 publications, compared to around 130 for Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg’s paper). Work in the US-Mexican borderlands has continued through projects such as Project Bridge, which applies a funds of knowledge perspective to mathematics teaching, including that of adults (Civil 2003). The funds of knowledge approach to teacher development has also influenced projects in Australia and in the UK, where it has been used in communities with low socio-economic status as well as those of ethnic minorities (e.g. Comber and Kamler 2004; Hughes et al 2005).

The term has become widely used within discourses of educational research and practice, especially those with a social justice agenda. In particular, the approach is used to disrupt deficit models, which remain pervasive and persistent (Luke and Goldstein, 2006)

The deficit model of educational failure isn’t just an incorrect or misplaced idea that somehow gets into teachers’ heads... It has a particular logic and obviousness that makes it appear “natural” to policy makers, the public and even to... educators. (p.1)

González et al (1993:11) suggest that teacher-research within a funds of knowledge approach can result in ‘pivotal and transformative shifts in teachers and in relations between households and schools and between parents and teachers’ (p. 4). Comber and Kamler (2004) describe these fundamental and lasting paradigm shifts as ‘turn-around pedagogies’, which not only result in classroom curricula and activities matched to student interests, but also a lasting shift in the perceptions, beliefs and attitudes of teachers towards their students and their communities, from a view of deficit to one of respect and understanding.
This transformative power seems equally relevant in an adult literacy and numeracy context, in which deficit models tend to dominate (Papen 2005; Oughton 2007). As requirements for continuous professional development in the post-compulsory sector come into line with those in the school sector, there is greater potential for teachers of adults to undertake such research (Institute for Learning 2009, Hamilton and Wilson 2005).

Changing interpretations of ‘funds of knowledge’

In the decades since Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg’s original paper, the term ‘funds of knowledge’ has been interpreted differently in different studies. Here I examine three notable shifts in interpretation: from resources held by households to those held by individual adults; the extension to interpersonal, communication and metacognitive skills; and its uptake by the discourse of policy.

From Households and Communities to Individual Adults

In some studies there is a significant, though unacknowledged, shift from describing the cultural and cognitive resources possessed by households or communities to those possessed by individuals. This shift coincides with the extension of the concept from the education of children (who draw on the funds of knowledge of their households) to the education of adults and young adults (who draw on their own funds). For example, Seiler (2001) uses the funds of knowledge of young, urban, African-American males to explore alternative approaches to high-school science teaching. The study draws on the students’ own out-of-school practices, rather than those held by their families. Hensley (2005) writes of the funds of knowledge held by parents as individual adults. Andrews et al (2005) discuss the funds of knowledge held by teachers themselves, again as individuals. This is quite different from Moll et al’s (1992) description of funds of knowledge which are available within a household, but which might not all be held by any one person in that household. This shift in conception is a more useful model for adult learners than for children, and allows us to draw on knowledge and practices they have acquired throughout their lives.

From Practical Skills to Interpersonal and Metacognitive Skills

Another shift in conception is the widening of the resources embraced by the term to include interpersonal and communication skills. For example, Hensley (2005) describes the communication skills possessed by parent helpers as funds of knowledge. A wider definition
of the term has also been developed by Baker for his research with adult numeracy learners (Baker 2005; Baker and Rhodes 2007):

- knowledge, experiences, histories, identities and images of themselves;
- attitudes, dispositions, desires, values, beliefs, and social and cultural relations;
- relationships with learning, teachers and mathematics itself; and
- numeracy practices beyond the classroom (Baker 2005:16)

Recognition of these wider funds of knowledge allows teachers to acknowledge and build on the personal, interpersonal and metacognitive resources of these mature adults. This wider definition is again particularly relevant to adult literacy and numeracy learners, and initially seemed an ideal framework for my own research in such classrooms (Oughton, 2009).

However, this broadening of the concept inevitably raises the question of where indeed we should draw the boundaries of the term, and the risk of it becoming elided with social practice theories of learning (e.g. Barton and Hamilton 1998).

From Critical Ethnography to the Discourse of Policy

As discussed earlier, the concept of funds of knowledge has tended to be used, often overtly, to disrupt discourses of deficit, right from its earliest inception:

‘This view of households contrasts sharply with the prevailing and accepted perceptions as somehow disorganised socially and deficient intellectually; perceptions that are well-accepted and rarely challenged in the field of education and elsewhere.’ (Moll et al 1992: 134)

However, the term has recently entered the official discourse of policy, for example in a DfES document for teachers of pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds:

Schools have much to gain from the experiences and understanding of pupils, their families and communities. Drawing on their funds of knowledge enriches a school in a range of valuable ways (DfES, 2004:8).

It remains to be seen whether this represents a genuine shift in government discourse away from the deficit model, or merely a weakening of the critical power of funds of knowledge as a concept. Since the aim of the original funds of knowledge project was to recognise, celebrate and utilise forms of knowledge which were not valued by dominant educational discourse, the adoption of the term by official rhetoric seems to present a danger of allowing dominant groups to stand in judgement of what does or does not constitute a fund of knowledge.
Funds of Knowledge and Cultural Capital

In the following, I attempt to locate funds of knowledge approaches within wider theoretical frameworks. I begin with Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital and consider whether there is an equivalence, overlap or analogy between the two concepts. Bourdieu (1986/2004:15) describes capital as something which:

in its objectified or embodied forms, takes time to accumulate and which, as a potential capacity to produce profits and to reproduce itself in identical or expanded form, contains a tendency to persist in its being, is a force inscribed in the objectivity of things so that everything is not equally possible or impossible.

In particular, he outlines three forms in which capital may present itself, and which, he suggests, contribute the reproduction of inequality in society:

as economic capital, which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalised in the form of property rights; as cultural capital, which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalised in the form of educational qualifications; and as social capital, made up of social obligations (“connections”), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalised in the form of a title of nobility. (p.16)

Elsewhere, he also uses the concept of linguistic capital, which we may regard as a form of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1991). Bourdieu suggests that the value and influence of cultural and social capital are often overlooked in analyses which consider only economic capital.

Bourdieu (1986/2004) suggests that cultural capital may be in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body (and is thus related to habitus); in the form of cultural goods; or in the form of educational qualifications and membership of professional organizations. Bourdieu regards academic qualifications to be the ‘objectified’ form of cultural capital, which he describes as a ‘conventional, constant, legally-guaranteed value with respect to culture’ (p.248). Cultural capital in the form of qualifications can be exchanged, by more or less direct means, for economic capital and symbolic capital.

He suggests that the transmission of cultural capital in the home maintains an inequality of educational achievement, but because it is less visible than economic capital, the advantages it confers may not be recognised as capital and may instead be seen as legitimate competence and the deserved result of hard work. It is important to stress this critical aspect of Bourdieu’s concept. Bourdieu emphasises that cultural capital is not inherently valuable; it has been given arbitrary value because of its legitimation by the dominant class. The critical power of the concept rests in its challenge to cultural hegemony, such as the discourses of policy.
We can indeed draw many parallels between cultural capital and funds of knowledge. They are both characterised by sets of gradually-acquired and long-lasting dispositions and manifested in skills, know-how, and competences. Despite the economic metaphors used in both cases, neither is diminished through use. They may be transmitted between generations and within a selected community.

Nonetheless, we may note some important differences. To continue the economic metaphor, Marx’s distinction between use-value and exchange-value is applied by Coben (2002) to different domains of adult numeracy practice (and may similarly be applied to other areas of adult education). Numeracy and literacy practices which have high use-value but low exchange-value might include those used in household budgeting, cooking or DIY; whereas an academic mathematics qualification, for example, has low use-value but high exchange-value.

Practices encompassed by the term ‘funds of knowledge’ tend to be dismissed as low-status, or common-sense, possessed in some form or other by everyone, and often regarded as having little exchange-value, though a high use-value. Contrast this with Bourdieu’s cultural capital, exchangeable for symbolic and economic capital, and privileged and legitimated by a dominant elite.

However, Lubienski (2003:33) notes a recent shift in the way the term cultural capital is being used. She argues that, in attempts to embrace diversity and be ‘politically correct’ the concept of cultural capital is in danger of losing its ‘critical edge’:

As originally intended, the term refers to high-status cultural resources...that can be employed to gain economic capital and social prestige. Such resources are not inherently better than other cultural resources, but in a hierarchical society they are “worth more” because they are valued by those in positions of power. So those with more cultural capital have greater access to power and privilege than those with less... However, I have noticed a change in the term’s use...with people conflating “cultural capital” and Moll’s “funds of knowledge,” which all possess regardless of background. This shift can be seen in the ways people preface the term in conversations, making it “White, middle-class cultural capital” instead of simply “cultural capital”—as if by implying that one group has cultural capital and another does not (or even has less), one conveys a deficit view of the less (or differentially?) privileged group. (p. 33)

So while some researchers might place funds of knowledge within a subset of cultural capital, I would suggest that possibly the opposite is a more appropriate conceptualisation; cultural capital consists of those funds of knowledge which are legitimised and privileged through the dominant discourse.
I also want to extend this idea to the relationship between funds of knowledge and the curriculum. Theories of social reproduction emphasise the part played by the curriculum in reproducing social inequalities by constructing certain knowledges as legitimate (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Bernstein 1975; 1996; Apple 1979; 1982).

According to Bernstein (1975:85), ‘curriculum defines what counts as valid knowledge’. He argues that the recontextualisation of a practice, from its original site to curriculum and pedagogy, opens up a space in which ideology inevitably plays a role in selecting what is to be learnt from the total knowable (Bernstein 1996). Apple (1979:30) stresses the ideological nature of curriculum selection, whereby what counts as legitimate knowledge is made to seem natural and common-sense.

In the academic achievement model, curricular knowledge itself is not made problematic. Rather the knowledge that finds its way into schools is usually accepted as given, as neutral, so that comparisons can be made among social groups, schools, children etc. Thus academic performance, differentiation and stratification based on relatively unexamined presuppositions of what is to be construed as valuable knowledge are the guiding interests behind the research.

Thus this perspective of curriculum theory, in which curriculum selection is seen as a cultural arbitrary, allows us to further categorise funds of knowledge as forms of knowledge not defined by the curriculum as ‘valid’ knowledge.

‘Funds of Knowledge’: A Conceptual Critique

While I find the concept of funds of knowledge a powerful and useful model for my research interests, I do have some reservations about its uncritical use, and am concerned that the concept has not always been subjected to sufficient critical reflection. Of the literature I reviewed for this article, only one group of authors (Hughes et al, 2005) critiques the concept. They suggest that the metaphor of ‘funds’ might be misconstrued, with some households having ‘more funds’ than others, thus contributing to, rather than disrupting, a deficit model. They also express concerns about the metaphor of learning as acquisition rather than participation, and again briefly note the similarity in metaphor with Bourdieu’s forms of capital.

In this section I offer my own critique, which covers three aspects of the concept which I find problematic: the possibility of ‘essentialising’ cultural or ethnic groups as homogenous; the appropriateness or otherwise of the ‘funds’ metaphor; and the danger of the teacher or
researcher imposing their own cultural arbitraries in deciding what ‘counts’ as funds of knowledge.

**Problem 1: The stereotyping of cultural or ethnic groups**

Gonzalez (2005) raises concerns that attempts to develop culturally-responsive pedagogies may risk portraying groups as homogenous and possessing fixed cultural traits, and this certainly demands critical reflectiveness on the part of the teacher or researcher. However, none of the studies I have reviewed above seemed to stereotype groups in this way; in general, the studies tended to take a case-study approach, and any generalisations made referred more to the benefits of the funds of knowledge approach itself, and not to any findings about the individuals or communities studied.

In fact there is some evidence that the converse is actually more likely to be the result:

> It seemed to us that the prevailing notions of culture in the schools centered around observable and tangible surface markers such as dances, food, folklore and the like. Viewing households within a processual view of culture, that is, a view of culture as process rather than as a normative end state, emphasized the lived contexts and practices of the students and their families. (Gonzalez et al 1993:10)

Amanti (2005:131) takes this idea further, using a funds of knowledge perspective to reject a view of culture as static and normative (a view which she dismisses as a ‘beads and feathers approach’) and instead to explore an understanding of cultures as diverse and dynamic.

**Problem 2: The metaphor of ‘funds’**

Sfard (1998) describes metaphors as ‘the most primitive, most elusive, and yet amazingly informative objects of analysis’ and reminds us of their constitutive power.

> Because metaphors bring with them certain well-defined expectations as to the possible features of target concepts, the choice of a metaphor is a highly consequential decision. Different metaphors may lead to different ways of thinking and to different activities ... and – above all – perpetuate beliefs and values that have never been submitted to a critical inspection (p.5).

For this reason, it seems essential to examine and critique the use of the metaphor of ‘funds’.

As outlined above, Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg adopted the term ‘funds of knowledge’, following Wolf’s (1966) categorisation of economy in peasant households into several funds, including caloric funds, replacement funds, ceremonial funds and funds of rent. In doing so,
they associate their concept with two metaphors widely used in education (although more typically within neo-liberal discourse): economic metaphors and metaphors of learning as acquisition.

Historically, learning has always been conceived of as an acquisition of knowledge, the human mind as a container to be filled with knowledge, and the learner as gaining ownership of that learning. We talk about intellectual property and copyright theft. Sfard (1998) points out that ‘if people are valued and segregated according to what they have, the metaphor of intellectual property is more likely to feed rivalry than collaboration’.

Sfard suggests that the acquisition metaphor has become so natural to us that we would probably never become aware of its existence if another, alternative metaphor had not started to develop. The alternative metaphor is that of learning as participation, within which the learning of a subject is regarded as the process of becoming a member of a certain community (Lave and Wenger 1991). Within this metaphor, the state of ‘having’ gives way to the process of ‘doing’, and we speak of situatedness, context and culture.

Learning involves the whole person; it implies not only a relation to specific activities, but a relation to social communities – it implies becoming a full participant, a member, a kind of person. In this view, learning only partly – and often incidentally – implies becoming able to be involved in new activities, to perform new tasks and functions, to master new understandings. Activities, tasks, functions, and understandings do not exist in isolation; they are part of broader systems of relations in which they have meaning. (Lave and Wenger 1991: 53)

Hughes et al (2005) suggests that Sfard’s distinction between the two metaphors of ‘learning as acquisition’ and ‘learning as participation’ may be applied to formal and informal learning, linking the acquisition metaphor with learning in the classroom domain, and the participation metaphor with informal learning. Of these two metaphors, the participation metaphor does, indeed, seem more appropriate for the type of learning through which one develops ‘funds of knowledge’. The term describes skills and understandings which result from participation in a community rather than from the deliberate and purposeful pursuit of knowledge.

In a recent examination of adult learning as participation in cultural practices, (Hodkinson et al 2007) provide rich and varied examples from the workplace, leisure and community involvement. Learning is seen as inseparably associated with learners’ identities, and recognised both as a process of ‘becoming’ and a process of ‘being’. The learning as participation metaphor is also extended to formal adult education classes, for example in a case study of one of their participants, ‘Tony’:
Learning on formal courses can also be usefully seen as participatory. Tony clearly gets a strong sense of belonging from his beloved adult education classes, and is learning through engagement with and participation in those classes, with the tutor, others students, and the varied activities and practices in the class. (p21).

It is interesting to note that although the research draws on many of the same themes as Moll et al’s work – acknowledging undervalued forms of learning, and challenging discourses of deficit – it does not use the word ‘funds’ and emphasises the limitations of metaphors of acquisition.

It is also noteworthy that the Brazilian educator and reformer Paulo Freire uses an economic metaphor, ‘banking’, as a derogatory term to describe a model of education in which legitimised knowledge is ‘deposited’ in the passive learner, and which he utterly rejected (Freire 1972; 1976). Since most advocates of the funds of knowledge approach are likely also to embrace Freirean principles, the clash of metaphors is striking.

While I do not seriously propose a change to this well-established term, it seemed worthwhile to carry out some personal reflection on what I would consider to be a more meaningful metaphor than ‘funds’. The metaphor which to me seemed most appropriate is that of a village well or pool. It is a source which is filled without intention or directed effort on anyone’s part, yet which can be drawn upon by any member of the community and is not diminished through use.

Problem 3: The imposition of cultural arbitraries

My third concern is, in my opinion, more problematic and less easily addressed than the first two. It concerns the danger of replacing one set of cultural arbitraries (the curriculum privileged as ‘legitimate knowledge’ by policy or other dominant discourse) with another set of cultural arbitraries (the resources privileged as ‘funds of knowledge’ by the researcher or teacher).

To illustrate what I mean by this, I draw anecdotally on an experience from my own teaching. A few years ago, the adult community education service I worked for received external funding to run a Chinese-themed literacy course in the weeks before the Chinese New Year. The area from which we drew our students is ethnically homogenous (white-British), but a short train ride from a thriving China Town district. Because the external funding meant that students did not need to be working towards vocational qualifications, we gave priority to our older students – adults of retirement age who enjoyed learning literacy for its own sake.
Amongst a number of literacy activities, aimed at celebrating Chinese achievement and culture, was a group reading exercise about the 60-year history of the nearby China Town, which I had prepared myself following internet research. The students participated politely in the reading exercise for a few minutes, then the older students began spontaneously to share their earliest memories of visiting the China Town district in the 1940s. I soon realised that they knew far more about it than I had gleaned from my internet research, so we put away our reading materials and I and the younger students listened in fascination to the reminiscences of the older students. They gave us insights which it would have been hard to find elsewhere: how exotic it had seemed the first time they went; the way that the restaurant menus had changed over time to reflect British expectations from Chinese food. I felt privileged to benefit from my students’ funds of knowledge in this way.

However, in a later session I initiated a (somewhat ambitious) discussion about why China’s history of technical achievements was not well-recognised in the West. As some of the students started tentatively to formulate ideas about colonial and post-colonial narratives, one of the older students swept these ideas aside. He explained, with conviction and authority, that ‘the oriental’ was ‘devious but lazy’ and so had failed to capitalise on Chinese developments. He cited the war-time experiences of a family friend as a prisoner of the Japanese as evidence of this.

I think many adult literacy teachers would share my satisfaction at the students’ funds of knowledge about China Town in the 1940s, and my dismay at the uninformed racism expressed in the later episode. Yet, to my student, the family friend’s war-time history would probably seem as much a part of his funds of knowledge as his experiences of China Town, and is embraced by Baker’s (2005) broader definition of funds of knowledge discussed above. If we, as teachers or researchers, feel entitled to arbitrate what ‘counts’ as valid and useable funds of knowledge, are we not replacing one set of cultural arbitraries (the approved curriculum) with another (our own well-intentioned but value-laden judgements)?

Taking an example from the literature, Baxter et al (2006) study teaching and learning about measurement in adult numeracy educational settings, including colleges and prisons, and draw on a funds of knowledge approach to consider how measurement might be made relevant to these learners’ lives. Amongst the funds of knowledge possessed by these learners, they describe the sophisticated strategies used to weigh and price recreational drugs. Baxter et al’s team of researchers and teacher-researchers view this experience as a
valid and pedagogically useful fund of knowledge, but it seems possible that others might not. For example, would (and should) such a fund of knowledge be recognised and celebrated in a classroom of schoolchildren? I do not attempt to answer these questions; merely to illustrate how subjective the answers might be.

Whose Knowledge Counts: Applying Freirean principles to Funds of Knowledge

These questions address difficult issues, and I have considered them at some length. It seems to me that the teacher or researcher who is committed to a funds of knowledge approach needs to be highly reflexive and (self)-critical as they attempt to arbitrate which funds of knowledge to draw on in the classroom.

Two concepts seemed helpful to me in providing a framework for critical reflection: Freire’s commitment to conscientisation and to mutual dialogue between teacher and learner; and Moje et al’s (2004) notions of third space and scaffolding.

Freire (1972; 1976) advocates that education should involve questions which challenge unexamined assumptions about what knowledge is deemed ‘normal’. He emphasises that teaching is a political act, and that teachers should embrace this aspect of their work and place critical pedagogy at the core of the curriculum. Students are encouraged to become critically aware and to take an active role in their learning. In such an approach, creativity and reflection are fostered.

In the dialogical pedagogies described by Freire, students become ‘critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher’ (Freire 1996:62). He rejects student-teacher dichotomies and suggests that in a participatory classroom, teachers should learn as well as teach, and students should teach as well as learn.

By taking a Freirean perspective, based on mutual respect, ‘what counts as valid knowledge’ (Bernstein 1975:85) is determined by the learner. The learner’s definition of ‘valid’ may include knowledge that is: of intellectual interest to the learner; of use in the learner’s everyday life; or (increasingly within a Skills for Life context) of use in gaining a recognised qualification.

Freirean dialogue can additionally be used by groups of learners to establish ‘house rules’ about racist, sexist or other abusive discourse in the classroom (e.g., Beder and Medina, 2001; Purcell-Gates et al, 1998) and to bring into the open contentious subjects such as drug use and abuse. Learning as participation in cultural practices is also a useful model here, as
members of the class learn to ‘become’ students and encounter the diverse mores and attitudes held by others in the group.

An example from my own work is an adult numeracy class on measurement, with a small group containing both African and white-British students. The African students, whose countries of origin used only metric measurements, were able to share their funds of knowledge through groupwork with the British students, who were more familiar with the imperial system. As a group we then discussed the historical context of the two measurement systems, their relevance to the students, and in particular, the questionable and arguably out-dated use of the term ‘imperial’ – a discussion made more political because the African students’ countries of origin had each been under British rule in the past.

While Freire’s ideas provide a useful framework, they may still be problematic. It could be argued that the learner is still one more cultural arbiter in addition to the curriculum or the teacher. Furthermore, as Taylor (1993) argues, the teacher’s own ideas and values can be consciously or sub-consciously imposed under the guise of dialogue. Finally – and this issue will be familiar to anyone who has tried to incorporate Freirean principles into their own teaching – the students’ own expectations will often be that knowledge should come from the teacher:

They call themselves ignorant and say the “professor” is the one who has knowledge and to whom they should listen. The criteria of knowledge imposed upon them are the conventional ones. “Why don’t you,” said a peasant participating in a culture circle, “explain the pictures first? That way it’ll take less time and won’t give us a headache.” (Freire 1972:45)

From ‘use-value’ to ‘exchange-value’: Third spaces and scaffolding.

Although it may seem a worthy aim to draw on students’ funds of knowledge, these often have low exchange-value. Knijnik (1993:25) warns us against ‘glorifying popular knowledge’ and emphasises the importance of using knowledge in ways valued by dominant groups. Moje et al (2004) propose a model which draws on learner’s existing funds of knowledge (which have high use-value but low exchange-value) to support the learning of legitimised, formal knowledge which has high exchange-value, is associated with cultural capital, and which is important to learners’ sense of achievement and self-worth. (Knijnik 1993; Swain et al 2005, Oughton 2008).
Moje et al (2004) propose a development of hybridity theory and Bhabha’s (1994) concept of ‘third space’ – a virtual (and sometimes physical) place where opposing discourses meet to generate new, creative and constructive discourses. Drawing on work by Gutiérrez et al (1999), they suggest that third space can be seen ‘less [as] a space in which new types of knowledges are generated and more [as] a scaffold used to move students through zones of proximal development toward better honed academic or school knowledges’ (p.43, my italics). They recommend that such third spaces should be actively constructed:

Such a third space is important because it provides opportunities for success in traditional... learning while also making a space for typically marginalized voices... With this scaffold, students would be able to better access and negotiate the privileged texts of upper level, content area classrooms. (Moje et al 2004 p.44).

Moje et al’s model of third space as a scaffold between funds of knowledge and formal learning has been successfully used to engage young adult literacy learners in England (Euesden and McCullough, 2005) and shows potential for use with other adult groups.

Conclusion

In attempting to apply a funds of knowledge approach to my research in adult Skills for Life classrooms, I have found the concept to be over-simplified and ideologically problematic (Oughton 2009). In particular, the concept seems to get more ‘slippery’ the further it is taken from its original formulation by Moll and colleagues. Baker’s (2005) broader interpretation allows us to acknowledge the wider range of resources, experiences and attitudes which adult learners bring to their classrooms, yet the breadth which makes it useful is also a weakness, in that boundaries become poorly defined, and the teacher or researcher must grapple with what to accept, and what to discard, as a fund of knowledge.

The concept of funds of knowledge has proved a powerful model for disrupting discourses of deficit and reconstructing teachers’ attitudes to communities other than their own. My caveat is that teachers and researchers committed to this approach should proceed with the ‘critical self-consciousness’ advocated by Thomas (1993) in my opening citation, and not allow the ideological attractiveness of this concept to blind them to its potential pitfalls.

References


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