Expansive learning: benefits and limitations of subject-scientific learning theory

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One critical learning theory that has survived is once again being acclaimed. Subject-scientific theory requires learners to be taken seriously. Their reasons and resistance need to be brought into the open. This requirement was too radical for schools since it does not allow a fixed syllabus. It has borne fruit, however, in continuing education.

Some of the core concepts are outlined, namely expansive and defensive learning, together with the underlying discourse. Well-known criticism is then reviewed, such as the use of Foucault's analysis of power and the complete absence of informal learning. Links with constructivism, habitus theory and gouvernementalité, which have been discussed at conferences, are used to examine the scope of the theory. Critical psychology was long ignored. During the Cold War it had adopted too radical a position to be accepted by that generation. A second generation of educational researchers is today using the insights offered by its concepts in empirical studies, while adopting a discriminating approach to the theory. It is increasingly being applied in practice, although translation for use abroad is still in its infancy.

The European Union has set itself the objective of becoming the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economic area in the world by 2010. Priority is therefore being given to lifelong and life-wide learning, which 90 % of EU citizens regard as having at least some degree of importance according to the latest Eurobarometer survey (Cedefop, 2003, p. 5). These views are also reflected in the holding of central economic forums. The 2004 Zurich Congress of the German, Swiss and Austrian associations of educationists, for example, is entitled 'Education throughout the Lifespan' ([1]). It thus explicitly recognises the relative importance of continuing education by comparison with school and university. One of the topics to be discussed is 'learning', or to be more precise, the term expansive learning. A working group under the same name is looking at the benefits and limitations of so-called subject-science (published in Faulstich, Ludwig, 2004). What lies hidden behind this term? Why has it now been more widely accepted? These questions are intended to open up what has been a (sometimes excessively) German theoretical debate to European discussion. Here I examine particularly the critical papers reporting on the benefits and limitations of subject-scientific learning theory. I argue that a second generation of discussants of expansive learning and the subject-scientific learning theory underlying it will set the tone in the 21st century ([2]).

Basic concepts: expansive learning and the logic underlying it

What is expansive learning? The best explanation is given by the creator of the concept himself, Klaus Holzkamp (see Box p. 19). The idea of subject-science is described especially accessibly in an interview which Rolf Arnold conducted with him. This interview has recently been republished (Faulstich/Ludwig, 2004).

When asked about his conception of learning, Holzkamp answers: 'According to current ideas, learning takes place if the learning process ... is initiated by a third party.' Holzkamp then refers to what he calls the 'teaching-learning short circuit' which runs through the study of education and says that where something is taught, it appears that it must also be learnt. Is this the case? Holzkamp continues: 'I take the view, however, that intentional, planned learning only occurs if the learning subject himself has reasons to learn' (Holzkamp, 2004, p. 29). Here lies the change of paradigm which makes the concept so attractive: the key to learning does not lie on the teaching side. Learning is not improved by improving teaching. Even the most perfect teacher finds that learners cannot be manipulated: we cannot generate or plan learning, it is always up to learners themselves whether they either change their ideas or decline to learn what they are asked. From the perspective of research and as an object of academic study, learning is thus also to be conceived from the standpoint of the subject - the learner. But why should anyone learn anything unless obliged to do so by teachers or educators? In the interview, Klaus Holzkamp argues: 'Learning always occurs if the subject encounters obstacles or resistance in carrying out his normal activities' (Holzkamp, 2004, p. 29). It is apparent here that practical interest contributes to learning motivation. Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger would agree. Their highly respected notion of community of practice is precisely one such learning interest. Participation is in fact a rea-

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son for learning: ultimately 'I' learn because 'I' wish to be part of the community of practice (see Lave, Wenger, 1991 and Wenger, 1998). This idea is closely related to Holzkamp's problem of action (Handlungsproblem). That is not surprising because Lave and Holzkamp exchanged creative ideas (see Forum Kritische Psychologie No 38). But if there is already a widely known and accepted learning theory in the field of open and distance learning which places the learner at the centre ([3]), why should we bother with another fifteen hundred pages of hardgoing literature? What is so special about expansive learning and what does the 'subject' mean in 'subject-science'?

Key terms and paradigms

Expansive learning means: 'I' learn on the basis of my action problem what I need to learn to pursue my activities and to expand my options for action. In order to clarify the term further, it is worth looking at the opposite extreme, namely defensive learning: if I learn defensively, I only do so because I see a threat to my existing world and can react in no other way than by learning. Is this a problem? Yes, and it is familiar to each of us. Everyone knows that defensive learning is not effective. We benefited from many years of language teaching at school and yet retained little of all that Russian, French or Spanish. However, we can learn a language remarkably swiftly if it has some connection with action. Why is defensive learning so ineffective? Subject-science is still the only learning theory providing a concept to cover this situation: defensive learning amounts to a lot of boring copying and rote learning which is promptly forgotten. In somewhat more abstract terms, it comprises anything which serves 'to prevent teachers from imposing punishments, to satisfy them, i.e. to demonstrate or even give a semblance of learning' (Holzkamp, 2004, p. 30). We can thus appreciate and understand expansive learning by contradistinction to defensive learning.

Subject-science also contains a breakthrough in epistemology. It turns away from the cause-and-effect models which predominated from behaviourism (Skinner, Watson) through to cognitivism (Bandura, Bruner) and finally the cultural history school (Vygotsky, Leontyev, Galperin) and are still partially implicit in yet more refined versions in constructivism (Maturana, Varela). What is meant?

The theory of the subject states that scientific explanations need to be thought through from the standpoint of the subject. That means that researchers must put themselves in the position of the subject. From the subject perspective we can then understand ([4]) why someone learns or does not learn. It is possible therefore to enquire into the reasons and not merely to be content with the conditions from which it is hoped to be able to predict learning. Are reasons and conditions so different? An example will make clear what is at issue: a person reads the newspaper rationally when he or she wishes to know something about the world. This connection is reconstructed on the basis of a logic of reasons, and it is generalisable. It refers, however, to living beings with intentions and plans. If we speak of plants or matter, the syntax does not work: an apple falls to earth rationally when it is dropped? The sentence is grammatical nonsense. We see that nature functions causally, in cause-and-effect structures, without rationality but according to laws. The structure of the liberal or social sciences is easier to explain, however, if we involve rationality and emotion (unfortunately we lose the natural laws).

This perspective of understanding is not new in the history of science. It became familiar through Wilhelm Dilthey, reference to whose theories is explicitly rejected by Holzkamp, incidentally (Holzkamp, 1997, p. 260 and p 350). Peter Faulstich currently makes the connection when he looks beyond the controversy over understanding in the liberal sciences versus explanation in the natural sciences: 'If we look more closely, Wilhelm Dilthey's hermeneutics is also (...) not a method of interpretation but relates essentially to the issue of the constitution of the liberal sciences when confronted in the second half of the 19th century with the growing hegemony of the natural sciences' (Faulstich, in preparation). In brief that means that where Dilthey and subject-science agree is in defining the world and its theory as changeable and historical. There may be - and no doubt will be - further argument over this connection.

In summary we can extract two core pairs of terms from subject-scientific learning theory: expansive and defensive learning direct the attention to the problem of action and the learner's learning interest and address the short circuit between teaching and learn-

([3]) The debate about learning is currently matched by a comparable paradigm shift in the debate about quality, which is put forward for example in the paper 'Qualität aus Lernersicht' (quality from the learner's viewpoint) by Ulf Ehlers in the *European Journal Vocational Training* No 28. ArtSet in Hannover (artset.de) is an institution which has taken up the subject-scientific approach. An instrument to measure quality of education from the learner's viewpoint is currently being developed there (artset-lqw.de).

([4]) Accordingly, a current book on learning and organisational theory by Joachim Ludwig is called 'Understanding learners'.

ing. The second pair of terms, logic of conditions and logic of reasons, refer to the subject of learning, that is, the person who is learning, and to his or her declared and secret, conscious and unconscious, scurrilous, irrelevant, noble and ambitious reasons, hopes, fears and non-manipulability.

Critical psychology

A whole series of publications appeared on subject-science before the first major work, Holzkamp's Foundation of Psychology (Grundlegung der Psychologie, 1983). A bibliography can be found at kritische-psychologie.de, which also lists which subject-science texts have currently been translated into English. The first generation of subject-scientific theoreticians and practitioners discovered through lengthy argument how difficult it is to change paradigms. The second major work by Holzkamp, *Learning* (*Lernen*, 1993), faced fewer difficulties. It may be widely ignored in German psychology, but it goes to the heart of education.

In fact the so-called 'Learning Book' has already found its way into general textbooks on education (Gudjons, 2001, p 230). Here too, however, the radical criticism of schools contained in the Learning Book makes it difficult for many people to accept it. It is therefore largely vocational and continuing education that has taken up, criticised and pressed ahead with the development of subject-scientific theory. Rolf Arnold (1996), for example, attempts to link it to his concept of enabling didactics, on two premises. He calls on both moderate constructivism and subject-scientific theory, and uses its concepts to criticise the teaching-learning short-circuit. The book on constructivist adult education by Rolf Arnold and Horst Siebert (1999, p 5) acknowledges subject-scientific learning theory, and Siebert (2003, p. 317) has now produced links between these theoretical systems, which used to provoke controversial debate (Grotlüschen 2003, p. 35 et seq.).

Peter Faulstich uses another concept - mediation didactics - to reconsider the role of teachers: their task is to mediate between learning content and learners, or in other words, to formulate reasons for learning (Faulstich, Zeuner, 1999, p. 52). Besides theoretisation, subject-scientific systems of categorisation are also used in a number of research papers on e-learning (Patricia Arnold, 2001 and 2003; Grotlüschen, 2003). More re-

cent theoretical discussion of e-learning, driven by Gerhard Zimmer, is also concerned with subject-scientific paradigms (Zimmer, 2001).

Christine Zeuner and Peter Faulstich are currently producing an overview and setting the topic in the wider context of 'subject-oriented adult education research'. They have succeeded in particular in making connections with the long historical tradition of biographical research (Faulstich, Zeuner in preparation).

To sum up, it is possible to identify a second generation who are turning to subject-scientific theoretisation from a background of education, and specifically adult education, with particular reference to virtual learning.

Theory in the shadow of the Berlin Wall

At the outset I suggested that subject-science is discussed largely in the national context. Specific historical events are partly to blame, and are still associated with it even though they only affect the discussion implicitly. In order truly to pass on the development of concepts to a second generation, building on the Zurich discussions for instance, I believe it would be sensible to jettison some national ballast. Continuing education practice in France, Belgium and Norway has already drawn closer to learning concepts which point to meaning, sense and interest as recurrent motifs in successful learning. In my view it is time to offer these close allies a theory which sees learning from the subject's standpoint and explains the business of meaning in the context of learning success. But back to history.

Critical psychology - as this direction of theory has been known since 1971, when the Psychology Department of the Freie Universität Berlin was split - grew up as a direct response to the student movement, the interpretation of Marx and the Cold War, within view of the Berlin Wall. A working group came together in a geographical enclave surrounded by the GDR. It was joined by Frigga and Wolfgang F. Haug, and published jointly with the 'Projektgruppe Automation und Qualifikation (PAQ)'. The editors of the 'Forum Kritische Psychologie' are still among the national discussion partners (the editors of the 1997 special issue on 'Learning:

Holzkamp-Colloquium' were: Ole Dreier, Frigga Haug, Wolfgang Maiers, Morus Markard, Christof Ohm, Ute Osterkamp and Gisela Ulmann).

Critical psychology had to compete with Marxist tendencies in finding a justification for a separate subject theory, and had to negotiate the justification for an understanding-hermeneutic research method with empirical-analytical psychology. In this process many distinctions were made which appear surmountable in the present-day historical situation - particularly if we think in terms of the international level. Over many years of constructive discussion, the Berlin Group moved closer to Jean Lave (University of Berkeley) and Ole Dreier (University of Copenhagen), and to Charles W. Tolman (University of Victoria, Canada).

The opening-up of the GDR and the collapse of dictatorial 'Realsozialismus' have now cast a latent ideological shadow over critical psychology in Germany, although the baby may somewhat over-hastily have been thrown out with the bath water. It is now the task of a second generation to disentangle the sustainable theoretical concepts from the argument over methods and the Cold War in order to extract the essence of subject-science, and specifically of its learning theory, so that this can enrich the European debate.

Current reappraisal, criticism and links

Any renewed acceptance and criticism in a contemporary context of a theory that has become a school invariably involves reappraising and expanding it, and forging links. In order to escape the threat of ossification, the old must always accommodate new discoveries, for else it will become no more than a dogma to be learnt by rote (Dewey, 1989, p. 80, original 1920). Mention should therefore be made of some links and counter-arguments.

Even when the Learning Book was first published, Holzkamp's incorporation of Michel Foucault's analysis of power was questioned. It does indeed appear difficult to see Foucault's 'Control and Punishment' (1975) as being within the Marxist tradition (Holzkamp, 1997, p. 273). It is appropriate at this point to consider Michel Foucault's subsequent works up until the mid-1980s. The relation-

ship of the individual to society appears to be a matter for constant criticism: on the basis of the further development of Foucault's theoretisation, namely the 1984 *Governmentality Studies* (Lemke, 2000), Hermann J. Forneck demonstrates that Holzkamp clearly assumes a subject who acts at least partially independently of society (see Forneck, 2004, p. 258). The criticism by Frigga Haug tends in the same direction, calling for greater cultural, social and historical contextualisation of the concept of the subject (Haug, 2003, p. 28 et seq.). A second line of criticism by Frigga Haug relates to the distinction between Holzkamp's learning theory and unintentional, unconscious learning (Holzkamp, 1993, p. 184 and Haug, 2003, p. 27). While Haug agrees with Lave (1997) in pleading for an expansion of the concept of learning - which offers further links with 'informal learning' and 'implicit knowledge' (Polanyi, 1985) - my own plea goes in the opposite direction: I regard it as desirable to make learners more aware of their (implicit, informal) learning processes in the best Enlightenment tradition, thus also giving them increased self-learning competence (Grotlüschen, 2003, p. 310 et seq. and 2004, p. 14 et seq.).

In general terms, it is very difficult to stress the 'subject' in an age in which individualism has become debased into a neo-liberal ideology. It might be contended that critical psychology always pointed to the social contextualisation of the subject and the mediation of meanings by historical processes, even to the extent of Feuerbach's 11th Thesis, if that is not going too far. But there is still some obvious unease throughout the schools of theory. Jürgen Wittpoth looks at another theory, again French, and examines its links to and differences from subject-science: this is the concept of habitus drawn from Pierre Bourdieu (1987). If it is assumed that habitus is essentially an unconscious phenomenon which strongly influences subjective actions, then the question arises as to how the subject can recognise his or her own interests. May custom, environment and habitus not distort the subject's view? From this perspective, the learner may be under a delusion about his or her interests, or may simply be perplexed (Wittpoth, 2004, p. 266). This raises once again the question of the relationship between the learner and society.

Overall, the acceptance and reappraisal of subject-scientific theory by a second generation is again leading to constructive debate

about autonomous (Otto Peters, 2004), self-directed (Faulstich, Gnahs, 2002) and indeed expansive learning. The key point remains, however, the requirement that society and the individual be perceived as being in a relationship of mutual exchange, so that learners can for example influence the content of what they learn from virtual learning, and teachers can refer to organisational and societal demands, such as employability.

Klaus Holzkamp *was born on 30 November 1927 and died on 1 November 1995. He took his higher doctorate in 1963, gave his inaugural lecture in 1963 and was appointed lecturer in psychology at the Freie Universität Berlin in 1967. The student movement began at around the same time, and with it, the call for socially responsible academic research. Holzkamp had no hesitation in learning from students inspired by Marx. The outcome was a project entitled the 'Red Freedom School Shop': the shop opened in 1969 in response to demands from students, and under the academic control of Klaus Holzkamp. The project ended in a television broadcast in 1970. In the estimation of a fellow proponent and academic, Ute Osterkamp, this experience of failure demonstrates that 'good will' alone is not enough and that other theoretical bases are necessary. A perception of psychology bound to a renewed, democratic and more humane society led to rejection of traditional psychology and opened the way to subject-science. The major work,* Foundation of Psychology*, appeared in 1983, followed by* Learning. Foundation of Subject-Science, 1993.*

This attempt at a learning theory builds on post-structuralist theorems of French sociology (Michel Foucault) as well as on the arguments of the student movement. Critical psychology manifests itself today through an Institute of the Freie Universität Berlin, its own society - the Society for Subject-Scientific Research and Practice (Gesellschaft für subjektwissenschaftliche Forschung und Praxis, GSFP) - a comprehensive online archive with a bibliography of comment (kritische-psychologie.de), a mailing list (crit-psych@yahoogroups.de) with several hundred international members, and a printed newspaper 'Forum Kritische Psychologie/FKP' published by Argument-Verlag. Current further developments are based largely on the theoretical work, 'Learning. Foundation of Subject-Science' of 1993.

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