

# A Commentary on the Article ‘Learning as Changing Identity Investment in Social Practice, Discourse Analysis of a Peer Feedback Activity’ by Chunxian Zheng and Xueying Huang

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We wrote this article on the background where the study of community of practice (CoP) learning in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) or foreign language learning (FLL) was conducted essentially in a longitudinal way to see how learners acquire a specific competence in their language classroom CoP [1,2], with their focus mainly on the learners’ cognitive development in their classroom social settings while they were enculturating it. In these studies, CoP appeared to be an ideal learning environment where no contradiction emerged. In the few cases where contradiction or challenge did occur, the peripheral participants’ role was marginalized rather than legitimated, resulting in the peripheral participants’ non-participation, or limited participation in a group of silence [3]. In other words, in such classroom practice, learning happened only through core interaction of the CoP, there is no boundary interaction. In the educational field, learning through boundary interaction was mostly interpreted as the one happened in the cross disciplines cooperation, as what Engestrom reported [4], where leaning through boundary interaction means the learning of knowledge from different professional fields when people with different professions cooperatively carry out a project.

In our study, we found the two layers of CoP learning emerged in the peer feedback activity, learning at the core and at the boundary of it respectively, the latter of which was different from that of the Engestrom’s case. Specifically speaking, learning at the core interaction of the CoP unfolded in the way whereby Sun, the legitimate peripheral participant, got access to the learning resources of the social world and appropriated them to develop his competence, shaping “a novice-master relation between him and the other member(s) in the negotiation process of the activity, producing a social structure of unequal power relationship between them” [5]. And learning at the boundary interaction represented itself as his challenge of others, forming either a “dominant-dominant relationship” [6] or a collaborative relationship between him and the other member(s), producing a social structure of approximately equal power relationship between them, resulting in “his either no identity investment in the practice led by others, or increased identity investment in the practice led by himself” [5]. At the core interaction, he was trying to adapting himself to the imagined classroom CoP via the group activity, whereas at the boundary, he was shaking free from it by turning down the learning opportunities and struggling for his abnormal discourses to be accepted by other participants as a result of his exercise of agency as an agent. The two interactions were complementary in that the former was of evolutionary character, and the latter, revolutionary and innovative. And Sun was found to have experienced “this double binds of honoring the history of the practice and shaking free from it in the dynamic process of the activity” [5]. And in Sun’s claim to competence, we saw the co-work of the cognitive, affective, social, and even cultural factors, contributing to his multiple competences to be developed. In this sense we say his participation is “a whole person development” [7].

And our research is classroom (a broad concept, referring to any place where learning happens) action-oriented, focusing on the process of a specific classroom activity, where Sun’s increased participation is

both the result of his “participatory appropriation” [8] and exerting of agency as a learning agent. Here the concept ‘appropriation’ is different from the concept ‘acquisition’ in that appropriation means “individuals change and handle a later situation in ways prepared by their own participation in the previous situation”, which is “a process of becoming, rather than acquisition” (ibid). In other words, appropriation is an interpersonal process, involving a short time or even an instant activity so far as discourse action is concerned, as the case in online chatting context [9], while acquisition is an intrapersonal process, taking a long time. So it is possible to see appropriation occur in a specific social interactional activity, but impossible to see acquisition completed in such an activity. And it is in this sense that we say our study on CoP learning is different from those studies on this theme, which focus on the acquisition of a competence, such as the linguistic competence through a longitudinal study process [2].

In our study, we found Sun, the writer of the first draft of composition, was eager to have his first draft revised through the help of the group members for the purpose of completing his homework. In other words, he was highly motivated in this peer feedback activity. But discourse analysis revealed his occasional dis-identification with the activity, and we found this was not the embodiment of his low motivation, but rather a way of his negotiating his participating identity or investing in his identity construction through the boundary interaction. So the psychological concept ‘motivation’ was not fit to explain this phenomenon, whereas the sociological concept ‘investment’ proposed by Norton [10] fit well with the explanation of the boundary interaction as well as with the core interaction of the CoP. It is for this reason that we say learning is an identity investment in this social practice of peer feedback activity.

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