Monika Popow

Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu

Learning as a discursive space

KEYWORDS

learning, discourse, identity

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to present the conception of learning as a discursive space. It presents the existing research in the field of critical discourse theory, cultural processes of learning as well as dialogic theory of learning. Different aspects of discourse of learning are discussed, including learning as a space for identity creation processes. Furthermore the issues of empty signifiers in a discourse of learning as well as cultural aspects of the discourse of learning and its consequences for identity creation processes are raised.

As observed by Alicja Jurgiel-Aleksander, learning is a manifestation of continuous development throughout the entire life and of engagement in social practices: "thinking about experience belongs to the world of social practices and requires that we think about an adult person not only as a subject of empowerment, but also someone who can promote his or her own change as well as the change of the environment as part of the learning process (...). Transformations in the economic life related to economic instability as well as new work opportunities resulting from advanced technologies generate new models of communication, social mobility and the new culture of learning that is based on reflection, not on habits." (Jurgiel-Aleksander A., 2012, p. 41). The above quote concerns learning adults, but it seems that it is possible to extend those processes to apply to other learning individuals, including children and adolescents who are affected by the changing

reality in a greater degree. Therefore, one can refer, in general, to learning subjects that function in an increasingly complex social environment.

Today, it is particularly significant what is said about learning and how it is said, including how this process is construed in the public discourse and interactions. Learning is an integral part of the public discourse, not only within the educational policy discourse, but also in a broader perspective, i.e. within various other discourses functioning in our social reality. These include discourses on development, transformation, reforms, personal development, sports and fitness. The significance of learning as a natural human activity regardless of age and a part of daily experiences is growing (Field J., 2000).

As observed by Gert Biesta, the contemporary model of education has been dominated by the demand for the continuous provision of learning to customers in the education market (Biesta G., 2010). Today, learning is pervaded with the language of competences and qualifications as well as the language of economic development for which learning is one the main tools. Learning is the key drive of social development in a knowledge-based society. Gaining knowledge treated as a commodity that can be commercialised and sold is becoming the individual task of each person and each society. Learning individualisation tendencies can be observed. In this context, discursive learning plays an important role in construing social meanings and building identities.

It should be noted in passing that learning as a process and a cultural phenomenon is particularly significant in the context of civilisation. All colonial discourses, past and present, are based on the juxtaposition of the teacher and the learner. The learner is the on who must gain knowledge to become civilised. Knowledge transfer in a colonial context is hierarchical and it establishes unequal power relations under the guise of civilising processes (Young R., 1990, p. 120). In the context of contemporary capitalist societies, one can refer to the transfer of knowledge on economy and entrepreneurship from the centre, i.e. The Global North, to the peripheries. To describe these processes, Walter Mignolo uses the term "geopolitics of knowledge" (Mignolo W., 2002).

My understanding of learning processes is based on the assumption that social and discursive aspects of learning constitute the areas where social processes are construed and reflected. I will, therefore, consider learning to be a sphere where various social, cultural and political interests come to be manifested.

The aim of this paper is to present the concept of learning as a discursive space. It will take the form of an overview of the up-to-date research that functions as the foundation for my reconstruction of the concept of learning. My sources include the works of discourse researchers, among whom James Paul Gee is the key author.

Other inspirations are the dialogic theory of learning by Mikhail Bakhtin and the critical studies of the cultural aspects of the learning process by Bonny Norton.

This paper consists of five parts. First, I will discuss the various aspects of the discourse of learning. Next, I will continue to learning as a space of discursive construction of identity. The following part will be concerned with empty signifiers that can appear in the discourse of learning. Next, I will go on to discuss the cultural conditions of the learning discourse formation and their consequences for identity formation processes. The final part will be a conclusion.

The learning discourse – various aspects

According to James Paul Gee and Judith Green, studies on discourse in the last two decades have gained the position of an important theoretical perspective in the research on learning in its social context (Gee and Green 1998:119). These studies are applied in the research on social construction of knowledge and relations between discourse, social practices and learning processes. The discursive perspective allows to see how the knowledge shapes and is shaped by discourse, social practices, various types of knowledge as well as various social agents engaged in the knowledge production process (Gee and Green 1998:119).

However, before I go into details, I would like to introduce a strict distinction regarding definitions of the discourse about learning, the discourse of learning (or the learning discourse) and learning as a discursive space which is my specific area of interest.

The discourse about learning comprises all narratives regarding the process of learning in formal and non-formal conditions. It concerns what is said about learning and it is said in the public discourse, including the educational discourse. An example that will illustrate the discourse about learning is the set of various discourses on learning practices and strategies or discourses regarding the services on the educational market. The discourse about learning is also related to the expert discourse. Very often, experts and educational authorities, e.g. within the media discourse, create a narrative regarding definitions of acceptable and unacceptable learning, correct learning methods and the target results of this process.

On the other hand, the discourse of learning consists in what is said and how it is said in a learning situation. For instance, it can be a discourse of learning in a classroom. The concept of learning is construed on the basis of the socio-cultural perspective on the nature and function of language, thinking and social interactions. As such, the discourse of learning can be an object of the socio-

cultural analysis of discourse. In this context, the focus can cover the interactions between different participants of the learning process, usually between the teacher and the learner and between learners. As put by N. Mercer, people in the process of communication construe the understanding of their shared experiences, which occurs also in the learning process. It is a dialogic process which reflects the values as well as social and cultural practices of the engaged subjects, including institutions (Mercer N., 2004, p. 139). As a result, we can pose questions about relations between language, thinking and, to use Vygotsky's terminology, what is "intermental" and "intramental" in the learning process, i.e. what is social and what is psychological. Mercer continues as follows: "Partners in a conversation use language to travel together from the past into the future, jointly transforming the current understanding of particular topic(s) in their conversation. For this purpose, they need to build a contextual basis for their conversation" (Mercer N., 2004, p. 139). He refers to the works by Gee and Green (I will discuss them in detail in the subsequent parts of my paper) who use the term "reflexivity" with respect to this process. Regarding the processes described by Mercer, the discourse of learning comprises educational situations of communication that take place, for instance, in a classroom and are embedded in the socio-cultural context of their emergence. As part of the socio-cultural study of learning processes, the concept of discourse allows to see how new information is introduced into language and how the participants meet, understand each other and produce joint actions (Mercier N., 2004, p. 166).

Similar ties between learning and discourse are explored by Per-Olof Wickman and Leif Östman in their concept of the classroom discourse. They are interested in how meanings change within discourse and how it pertains to the learning process in a classroom as well as how learners become participants in this process (Wickman P-O. and Östman L., 2001). In a broader perspective, the question is what meanings are given to particular social phenomena in the learning process or what meanings are given to the learning process as such.

The dialogic theory of learning, based on Bakhtin's ideas, is equally interesting and related to the concept of learning as a discursive space. Assuming that learning is a construction or a reconstruction of social meanings within a temporary, socially negotiated discursive activity (Hicks D., 1996, p. 136), the process must comprise a conversation between two or more voices. Utterances are made and understood, while the content, i.e. what the learners is supposed to learn, is temporary, indeterminate and conditional. In this context, Bakhtin's concept of language stratification along professional, social, generational and generic lines plays a significant role. The dialogic concept will pose the question about what social

language is adopted in the learning process as the language of science. It is not only a question of specialist terminology, but also of the specific type of language that is used to describe a vision of the social world (Koschmann T., 1999).

I separate the above aspects from the concept of learning as a space where identity is discursively construed. I will take up this topic in the next part of my paper.

Learning as a space of discursive construction of identity

The concept that I wish to focus on in particular is learning as a space of discursive construction of identity. Such an interpretation of the learning process is deeply rooted in Bakhtin's concept of language and its relations to the social reality. Language within social interactions is here as space of tensions or a conflict between different ways of speaking which refer to various social groups (Bakhtin 1981; Menard-Warwick, 2005). As such, this space is shaped by constant changes of meanings, symbols and metaphors that reflect, for instance, the changes in the society's foundational values.

This concept of learning is also tied to the understanding of discourse as a practice. James Paul Gee and Judith Green observe that language is much more than simply utterances. To quote: "language helps us act. It allows to get engaged in activities. We make promises, we open meetings, we propose, we argue about politics and we speak to God (we pray. These are some of the countless things we do with the use of language apart from giving and receiving information. Language allows us to be someone. We use it to adopt various socially meaningful identities. We can speak as experts, physicians, lawyers, fans of anime, carpenters or just ordinary people. To adopt an identity at a given place and time, we need to speak authentically, not just talk. Take gangs: members of a street gang will use a different language than the best learners in class. However, they can be the same persons (...) (Gee J.P., and Green J., 1998, p. 139).

Gee and Green distinguish discursively construed areas present in every interaction:

- building words – assigning specific meanings related to reality, present and absent, concrete and abstract (...);
- building activities – assigning specific meanings related to what activities take place and are made up of other specific activities (…);
- building (socially embedded) identities – assigning specific meanings related to identities which are relevant in the given interaction (written text),

including attitudes, feelings, ways of knowing and believing as well as activi-
ties and interactions (…);

- building relations – making assumptions about how the past and the future
of the interaction are connected with the present moment and with one an-
other (…) (Gee and Green, 1998: 139).

The tasks specified by Gee and Green that are constructed in the text produc-
tion process, both oral and written, form the expression of the social nature of
language. In the context of the learning process analysis, they allow to perceive
learning as a socio-cultural phenomenon. It is seen as a process wherein particular
learning opportunities are constructed, relations are build between the interaction
participants, activities take place and various momentary social worlds emerge.

Each of the four areas within this process will require a separate approach,
either semiotic or socio-cultural. Therefore, Gee and Green say that the under-
standing of language is necessary to analyse this process discursively. Their con-
cept is based on Bakhtin's theory which claims that each language consists of vari-
ous social languages (Bakhtin M., 1981). Each of the four distinguished areas is
construed through the resources and grammatical structures of social languages.
When communicating, we switch between diverse social languages depending on
the context. Moreover, those structures are hybrids, because their contexts change
and overlap fluently (Gee J. P. and Green J., 1998, p. 142). From this vantage point,
the analysis of discourse is an analysis of social languages that emerge in vari-
ous social contexts, including the learning process. Learning is here understood as
a collection of changing models of participation in various social practices within
practising communities (Gee J. P. and Green J., 1998, p. 147). These communi-
ties produce and reproduce themselves within social processes and practices, in-
cluding the learning process. Interactions within particular institutional and so-
cial frameworks both structure and are structured through activities between the
interactions participants. In other words, these structures are established in the
course of the interaction.

Gee and Green refer to the works of Norman Fairclough and transfer this
mechanism to the level of discourse. Each discursive event has three dimensions:
the spoken or written text, the discursive practice of the production and interpreta-
tion of this text and the social practice. From this perspective, learning is: "a prod-
uct of the activities carried out by the members of social groups at each moment
and in the course of time, just as a text or a social structure is also such a product"
(Gee J. P. and Green J., 1998, p. 148). Seen as such, learning is a discursive practice
that allows us to analyse cultural models, social practices and discursive practices
brought into learning by the participants in the process.

Learning as a discursive practice will also be significant from the lifetime perspective. Why? Because the learning process is related to the construction of one's own discourses of learning embedded in the social and cultural experience of the individual. In this context, one could speak about social environments of learning or landscapes of learning or ecologies of knowledge wherein meanings are generated and stabilised in a temporary mode (Evans R. and Kurantowicz E., 2009; Evans R., 2013). Evans also uses the term "space of learning". It is transitional and comprises diverse processes; it is also reflexive, since it is the space where the "reflexive self" is construed (Evans R., 2013, p. 18). The reflexive self will be construed in the learning process in relation to the significant Others. Memory, experience and emotional ties triggered in the learning process will refer to the entire professional, personal and emotional biography of the individual, including his or her past and present relations with the social world. This experience, as put by Evans, can be articulated within discourses of learning based on the complex "speech grammars", language worlds or narratives built from the biographical knowledge (Evans R., 2013, p. 18). In particular, this pertains to reflections on one's own learning processes perceived in the context of other life experiences. For this reason, the above perspective is used in biographical studies (Evans, R. 2013).

Empty signifiers in the discourse of learning

The reflection on learning processes within the discursive perspective poses the question about symbols which infuse this process with meaning. It is particularly important in the context of identity creation processes. In this part of my paper, I wish to look at the discursive space of learning through the lens of Ernesto Laclau's theory.

His stance is that objects and activities receive the meaning which emerges in the systems consisting of signifying differences, i.e. within discourse. He writes that "discourse is the basic area where objectivity as such is construed. When I speak of discourse (...) I do not mean simply speech and writing, but each set of elements where *relations* play the constitutive role" (Laclau E., 2009, p. 63). This set may include hegemonic threads which bind the entire discourse and strive to dominate the fields of available meanings, thereby to create conditions for the emergence of the identity of objects and practices (Howarth D., 2008, pp. 157-159). The interesting question is which symbols, i.e. empty signifiers, as Laclau would put it, dominate the learning discourse field. I will focus on several most representative examples.

The available studies that apply Laclau's theory show that the discourse of learning comprises a wide spectrum of empty signifiers which can hegemonize it. One of the examples is the *life-long learning* (Montessori 2011; Jurgiel-Aleksander and Jagiełło-Rusiłowski 2013). It has become the ubiquitous metaphor for development of individuals and societies that one can find in educational documents of countries and international organisations as well as in the narratives on individual growth.

It may be that some empty signifiers, e.g. the knowledge-based society (Szkudlarek T., 2007), do not refer directly to the learning process. The empty signifiers present in the learning discourse field include: "partnership" (Burgos R. B., 2003) as well as the empty signifiers referring to knowledge and understanding, e.g. "complete", "partial", "incorrect", "meaningless" (Land R., Rattray J., and Vivian P.,2014).

The term "learning" as such can become an empty signifier (Hansen A.D., 2005). Hansen says that the empty signifier of "learning" can be given various meaning depending on the context. In his view, there is no "natural" signification attached to learning. It is, in fact, a field of various senses, contestations and metaphorizations. His studies of the Danish context show that the empty signifier of "learning" could be tied such signifieds as "literary", "adult supervision", "science", "externally derived" or "head". The opposing associations included "play", "free childhood", "development", "internally derived" and "body". One could conclude that meanings given to learning are construed socially and historically (Hansen A. D., 2005, p. 6).

The discourse of learning may play a significant role in the processes related to the emerge of social structures in contemporary capitalist societies. In this context, Tomasz Szkudlarek points to the economic discourse about education where empty signifiers rooted in the learning discourse perform a significant function, e.g. the above-mentioned "knowledge-based society"(Szkudlarek T., 2007). Seen from this point of view, capitalist societies consist of diverse communities that learn and know, but differ in the degree of access to knowledge, including material and non-material resources which decide about the position in the social structure.

Cultural aspects of learning and identity construction

The last area I would like to explore in my reflections on learning as a discursive space covers the cultural relations and dependencies that shape this discourse. The studies on adults learning a foreign language provide some interesting material

in this respect. Another valuable point of reference is the analysis of identity processes and linguistics by Bonny Norton.

She perceives the language learning process as one that includes construction of identities which are negotiated through language. Language as such reflects social structures which impose specific boundaries on what we say and how we say it (Norton B., 1997, p. 5). The social position of the learners, i.e. their social class, gender, race and origin, will be significant in the learning process which takes shape under the influence of various power structures.

Assuming that the very fact of having an identity is related to desire for recognition, belonging and safety. Norton says that this desire cannot be disentangled from the social distribution of material resources. Access to those resources is the condition for understanding one's relations to the world and one's own opportunities. Norton argues that the question "who am I?" cannot be separated from the question "what am I allowed to to?", while those both questions cannot be conceived outside the material structure which is the basis for the possibility to satisfy those desires (Norton B., 1997, p. 8). It defines the way that those desires will be articulated. Identity will be construed along the lines of the changing social and economic relations.

The complex networks of social relations are, therefore, essential to the processes of communication and, by extension, learning. It is important who listens and who is worth listening to. Referring to Pierre Bourdieu's works, Norton says that the extended definition of communication competences should include the "right to speak" and the "power to impose reception"(Norton B., 1997a, p. 8).

Norton also introduces two other categories that are interesting in the context of studies on learning processes. They are the ownership of language and the imagined communities, the latter being a term derived from Benedict Anderson's theory.

The question about the ownership of language is specifically crucial with respect to foreign language learning. Who is the owner the a language? Does it belong only to native speakers or to those who learn it as well? In consequence, one should ask who has the right to speak a language. Bonny Norton poses these questions when speaking of the identity of foreign language learners, especially migrants (Norton B., 1997b).

The imagined communities of learners refer to the relations between learning and the social reality or, to be more precise, our images of the social reality. The images pertain to our belonging to a specific social group and, as a result, they are images of what skills, qualifications or language are desired for this community (Pavlenko A., and Norton B., 2007). As such, they encompass a specific and discursive construct of the social world.

If we see learning as a discursive space, we should also consider its cultural conditions in the light of Bonny Norton's studies. For instance, this space allows to ask what is articulated in the learning process and by whom, especially in the context of social diversity. We can also see that the learning process differs depending on the social agent or participant. Bonny Norton's studies of female migrants in Canada show that nationality and social class are differentiating factors in this process. What those migrants learned during language courses, e.g. specific tools to describe reality, positioned them within a specific social structure (Norton B., 1997a). If we place the learning process in the context of emancipation, the question about discursive learning processes will be immediately followed by the question about the possible agency of the learner within such a discourse, including education in which the subject can articulate one's own meanings.

Conclusion

This paper is an introduction to reflections on discursive dimensions of the learning process. Any detailed study, as in all works on the critical analysis of discourse, requires empirical data that will allow to trace dynamics of the discourse. A theoretical reconstruction of the key themes of learning as a discursive space provides the outline of the areas where individual and collective identities are construed.

There exist two principal metaphors that portray the learning process, i.e. the metaphor of acquisition (knowledge is a commodity that one acquires) and the metaphor of participation where learning is conceptualized as a community of practice, changing roles and identities (Sfard A., 1998, p. 6). It seems that discourse-based concepts of learning call for the second metaphor, since learning is perceived as a socially created space where social forces clash, but the individual agency is not excluded. The question about the discursive nature of learning is, therefore, also a question and inclusiveness and exclusiveness within that process, and a question about the possibility of the learner's empowerment and emancipation. In this respect, discursive concepts are close relatives of the critical pedagogy tradition that has always stood up for those excluded from the educational processes.

Sources

Bakhtin, M., 1981, *The dialogic imagination*, University of Texas Press, Austin.
Biesta G. J. J., 2010, *Good education in an age of measurement. Ethics, politics, democracy*, Boulder–London.

Burgos, R. B., 2003, *Partnership as a floating and empty signifier within educational policies: the Mexi-can case,* in: Educational Partnerships and the State: The paradoxes of Governing Schools, Children, and Families, Palgrave Macmillan US, pp. 55-79.

Evans, R., and Kurantowicz, E., 2009, *Learning in changing educational landscapes: migration at the margins and biographical narratives of identity in transition.* Between Global and Local, pp. 65-78.

Evans, R., 2013, *Learning and knowing. Narratives, memory and biographical knowledge in interview interaction,* European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults, 4(1), 17-31.

Field, J., 2000, *Lifelong learning and the new educational order.* Trentham Books, Ltd., London.

Hansen, A. D., 2005, *Politics and metaphor–a discourse theoretical analysis,* Paper to be presented at ECPR conference.

Hicks, D., 1996, *Contextual inquiries: A discourse-oriented study of classroom learning,* in: D. Hicks (Ed.), *Discourse, Learning, and Schooling,* Cambridge University Press, New York.

Howarth D., 2008, *Dyskurs*, Oficyna Naukowa, Warszawa

Jurgiel-Aleksander A., 2013, *Doświadczenie edukacyjne w perspektywie andragogicznej. Studium biograficzno-andragogiczne*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, Gdańsk

Jurgiel-Aleksander, A., and Jagiełło-Rusiłowski, A., 2014, *Dyskurs uczenia się przez całe życie: administrowanie kompetencjami czy pytanie o ich sens i znaczenie?,* Rocznik Andragogiczny, 20, 65-74.

Koschmann, T., 1999, *Toward a dialogic theory of learning: Bakhtin's contribution to understanding learning in settings of collaboration,* in: Proceedings of the 1999 conference on Computer support for collaborative learning, International Society of the Learning Sciences.

Laclau, E., 2009, *Rozum populistyczny*. Wydawnictwo Naukowe Dolnośląskiej Szkoły Wyższej, Wrocław.

Land, R., Rattray, J., and Vivian, P., 2014, *Learning in the liminal space: A semiotic approach to threshold concepts*. Higher Education, 67(2), 199-217.

Mercer, N., 2004, *Sociocultural discourse analysis,* Journal of Applied Linguistics, 1(2), 137-168.

Mignolo, W., 2002, *The geopolitics of knowledge and the colonial difference,* The South Atlantic Quarterly, 101(1), 57-96.

Montessori, N. M., 2011, *The design of a theoretical, methodological, analytical framework to analyse hegemony in discourse,* Critical Discourse Studies, 8(3), 169-181.

Norton, B., 1997, *Language, identity, and the Ownership of English,* TESOL Quarterly, 409-429.

Norton, B., 2000, Identity and language learning: Gender, ethnicity and educational change, Editorial Dunken.

Pavlenko, A., and Norton, B., 2007, *Imagined communities, identity, and English language learning,* International handbook of English language teaching, 669-680.

Sfard, A., 1998, *On two metaphors for learning and the dangers of choosing just one*, Educational Researcher, 27(2), 4-13.

Szkudlarek, T., 2007, *Empty signifiers, education and politics,* Studies in Philosophy and Education, 26(3), 237-252.

Wickman, P. O., and Östman, L., 2002, *Learning as discourse change: A sociocultural mechanism,* Science education, 86(5), 601-623.

Young R., 1990, *White Mythologies. Writing History and the West*, Routledge, London-New York.