Chapter 3
Social Science Universals

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ABSTRACT

In a global world, people change because of communicative exchanges and technological development. Eventually, human behavior and use of technology share some common characteristics. Universals, concepts, texts, information, and discourses influence contemporary meanings and activities. Uses of scientific language help theorists and practitioners develop knowledge, skills, and abilities. This chapter covers the analysis of two separate but related cases, formation of learning objectives and religious canvassing. The cases clarify the explanatory power of universals. One of them relates to theoretical-conceptual study of assessment in higher education. The other case relates to an empirical study of the methodological reliability and validity of interview data. Results verify to the analytical “power” of action-oriented universals.

INTRODUCTION

The common denominator of the two cases presented in this chapter is that they contain frequently used concepts in natural language (who, what, when) as well as in research (objective, motivation, learning). Analysis of the first case supplies information on the specifics of objectives in higher education. Analysis of the other case supplies information on the methodological difficulty of analyzing interview data.

People generally use universals without reflecting over what they imply. In studying exchange of information between people there is a need for an integrated and comprehensive theory based on universals. The theory must harbour a wide and deep scope of (in this case) pedagogical theorizing. Results should describe and explain how a particular design help the students access e.g. conceptual explanation; questions and answers; solutions to tasks; feedback; problem solving; lessons learnt; discussion; ideas; learning objects.

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For example, Salomon (1998, p. 4) opts for the situated version of constructivism, emphasising an account of individual cognitions and collective solutions, two familiar universals.

Furthermore, the local configuration of artifacts for teaching and learning provide a unique context, enabling for the study of mediating processes between objects and people. Furthermore specific designs for tutoring, lecturing, testing, simulating, guiding, informing, discussing etc. could be properly designed by means of specific universals like why-objectives, what-contents and how-methods. Engeström (2007, p. 34) suggests general activity theory for separating between mediating processes going from specific (a) tool usage via (b) production of pre-empted results to (c) full-fledged designs for collective co-construction of learning objects. But for any design, flexibility with the specifics of the context is a prerequisite. For example, Hopmann (2007) and Vásquez-Levy (2002) say that universals like subject matter, instruction and tasks engage students with relations between knowledge/information, method/communication and technology/tools.

Research from Dewey (1916/1985) onwards (Hansen 2007, p. 177) oscillates between universals like democracy and self-control, illustrating that “intellectual and moral aspects of educating are too often treated separately.” There is a need to study relations between pedagogical theory and instructional practices, particularly regarding planning, application and evaluation. Hansen (2007) emphasizes Dewey-inspired ideals, suggesting e.g. a Maths teacher is something different from a ‘civilian’ teaching a subject at school. A good teacher thinks, speaks, acts and embodies Maths, ideals and life in a special way. Dewey-followers apply extreme conceptions of “knowledge” by method of strictly teacher controlled social engineering and choice of course objectives related to instruction and experiments. Such procedures, however, merely focus on the teachers’ ability to present a concept, define a goal, design a task, provide feedback and supply additional tasks.

More specifically, there is a divide between constructivist/constructionist approaches to teaching and learning. Piaget’s (1977) conception of accommodation and assimilation inspired Papert (1991) to say any teacher’s challenge regarding design (method) and curriculum (contents) lies in constructing a learning object which the students accept. Constructionist rather than empiricist approaches and outcomes allow for experimenting, simulation and modelling of learning objects, i.e. designs that allow for teachers to facilitate learner progress and adapt complementary input to the learners’ needs. Teachers must improve on presentation, facilitation and evaluation of a design relative to the sought contents and learning processes. Students must learn to consider discoursed relations between goals, concepts and actions.

Cultural-historical activity theory (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1985, 1998; Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006) offers an alternative set of socio-cultural universals. Tool mediation, appropriation, externalization of ideas and interaction with peers makes up the salient universals of the theory. The teacher’s role is to manage the process, introduce a theme, define an issue, offer a setting for dialectic negotiation, mediation and discussion based on natural contradictions (collective referent) and unique (individual referent) zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1987). Eventually expectations on intended learning outcomes generate dialectical (thesis-antithesis-synthesis) agreement between people.

Adding to the above, globalization of knowledge, economy and cultural values influence ongoing social processes in many walks of life. One foreseeable result is a vulnerable mono-cultural society. A positive end-point could be creative homogeneous communities. Already today influences on mono- and multi-cultural development affect universals like religion, family, collectivism and solidarity. Also affected are the ways people speak, verbalize and choose specific utterances, words and discourses during virtual or real life exchanges.