Chapter 24
Vocational Learning Mediated by Constructive Competition

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ABSTRACT

Competition among students has been found to support motivation, learning, and knowledge if interrelated with collaboration. In this chapter, it is argued that the development of constructive competition is closely related to competitive intentions and material resources. Drawing on activity theory, learning is understood as materially mediated activity in a collective cultural setting and involving transformation of novel concepts and objects. The presented findings in this chapter are based on a field study, where students and teachers participate in activities of vocational learning and preparing for apprenticeship. The findings show that the students' competitive intentions for achieving recognition of their cooking skills mediate engagement and vocational learning for students at risk of dropping out. Findings further suggest that the students' participation in and conceptualization of vocational activities are materially mediated through competitive actions and deployed artifacts like “timing” and use of food ingredients. A central conclusion presented in the chapter is that it is important to take into account the particular competitive intentions and the related mediating artifacts of constructive competition, through which student engagement and learning is developed.

INTRODUCTION

There is competition in many arenas, in the family, at school, at the workplace and in sport activities (Fülöp, 2004). Competition can be defined in terms of individuals or groups pursuing exclusive goals (Deutsch, 2000; Wittchen, Krimmel, Kohler, & Hertel, 2013). Interpersonal competition has been conceptualized in distinct ways (Brown, Cron, & Slocum, 1998; Murayama & Elliot, 2012): First, competition is defined in terms of a characteristic trait of the person in terms of a dispositional preference to compete with others. Second, competition is defined in terms of perceived environmental competitiveness, and third, in it is defined as structural competition representing an actual situation in which two or more people strive for a mutually exclusive achievement and outcome. In particular the latter two understandings of competi-
 tion are important for investigating an educational context and activity, to which competitive interactions pertain as well as the achievement of results among e.g. competing students (Murayama & Elliot, 2012).

Research on student performance covers aspects of competition among students, often defined as negative or destructive competition in working toward competitive goals involving self-protective strategies leading to poor achievement. (Johnson & Johnson, 1994; Kohn, 1986). Other studies and meta-analysis suggest that there is a positive relation between competition and student performance (Johnson & Johnson, 1989; Murayama & Elliot, 2012). Competition has also been considered the negative opposite of collaboration in that competition may be arranged in ways that hinder each other’s performance and encourage some people to gain success at other peoples’ expense (Kohn, 1986). Collaboration, on the other hand, has been argued to be fundamental to contributing to development of critical thinking, engagement in creativity and willingness to take on other peoples’ well-being (Dillenbourg, Baker, Blaye, & O’Malley, 1996; Mercer, 2005). However, other research argues that competition works in complex ways, where competition and collaboration are interrelated concepts and processes (e.g. Fülöp, 2004). In this vein of research, a few studies focus on what is defined as constructive competition (Fülöp, 1999, 2004; Sheridan & Williams, 2006), i.e. a social and cultural phenomenon that enhances peoples’ ambitions and learning potential clarifying that combined competition and collaboration is a multidimensional educational phenomenon that motivates people for learning (Williams & Sheridan, 2010). The studies are conducted in different educational settings, where children, adolescents and teachers act in competitive situations and take on board a socially mediated learning perspective on the process. Moreover, the studies emphasize that collaborative and competitive processes are interrelated, each being a requisite of the other. One example of the interrelationship is a description of how students were found to not only want to win but want to spur one another forward and during this process in order to develop reciprocal guidance and to deepen each other’s knowledge of new areas and contexts (Sheridan & Williams, 2011).

Williams and Sheridan (2010) and Sheridan and Williams (2006) call for attention to studies of the conditions for constructive interrelated competitive and collaborative patterns in schools, and how this focus affect students’ interaction and learning. In one of their studies (Williams & Sheridan, 2010) they show that three conditions are needed for constructive competition and collaborative learning. The first condition is positive attitudes where values and ways of acting among teachers and pupils involve efforts to include competition as a potentially constructive input to collaboration. The second condition applies for organizational characteristics and covers an open climate with mutual encouragement to do well. It also includes friendships and room for collaboration intertwined with competitive wants of achievement as good as that of peers. The third condition relates to learning, where learning needs to be regarded as meaningful, interesting and challenging. All three conditions cover important influences on learning processes. They are argued to motivate people to learn and to support development of constructive competition. Fülöp (2002; 2004) identifies the characteristics of competing people finding that the particular goals of competition are central criteria for constructive competition to develop. She emphasizes that competition is a goal oriented behavior and that the goal or intention of competition is not merely winning but also improvement or gaining knowledge. Competing individuals may adopt multiple goals of knowing and learning along with ways or strategies for accomplishing such goals (Fülöp, 2002). Moreover, Fülöp (2004) argues that in relation to the intentions of competition, explicit criteria of evaluation of the reached competitive intention must be accounted for if constructive competition is to develop. These findings are further supported in a meta-analysis of relations between competition and student achievement. Murayama and Elliot (2012) argue that positive relations are mediated by the goals of performance, which the competing persons hold. Yet in relation to this result, further research should