Tutors:
Prof. Etienne Wenger
Prof. Julian Williams
Prof. Tim Dornan
Prof. Yvette Solomon
Prof. Erica Burman
Dr Diane Harris

Course Co-ordinator: David Swanson
david.swanson@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk

Course outline: EDUC70500

Social Theories of Learning in Research and Practice

Social Theories of Learning in Research and Practice is an innovative module that functions as a collaborative group of students and tutors who have an interest in applying social theories of learning to research problems in practice. We have built a strong network of participants that join us each year to continue learning in this dynamic and productive group. The module is suitable for students at Masters and PhD level, and provides expert support in theoretically focussed research training. The course is formally assessed and carries a 15 credit award for Masters students. Although situated in the School of Education at the University of Manchester, we welcome students and professionals from other disciplines and institutions.

Aims
- To have an advanced understanding of Social Theories of Learning for application in research and practice
- To engage in sustained and focused study of four theoretical frameworks: Communities of Practice, Cultural-Historical Activity Theory, Discursive Practice and Figured Worlds
- To gain experience in cross-disciplinary collaboration for the purpose of advancing our understanding of theory, research and practice
- To develop a sufficient understanding of foundational texts in order to critically interpret, evaluate and apply social theories of learning in research and practice.

Objectives
On completion of this unit, successful participants will be able to:
- demonstrate an awareness of foundational theoretical perspectives on social theory
- evaluate theoretical frameworks with regards to their applicability to a particular research project and/or professional practice
- demonstrate critical understanding of at least one social theoretical framework presented in the course unit
- develop a theoretical framework for an action or research plan
- justify their application of a social theory to a particular practice or research project
- show due concern for possible limitations of social theory with regards to research and practice

Transferable Skills
On completion of this unit, successful participants should have developed:
- enhanced skills in reading theoretical texts critically and analytically
- adeptness at identifying dimensions along which similarities and differences between theoretical frameworks can be detected
- enhanced skills in presenting their work orally and building networks with colleagues
- an appreciation of the value of engaging with diverse perspectives in order to advance understanding of research, theory and practice

Assessment
Students will be required to prepare short writing/oral assignments of reflections on the readings at various times during the unit. These short papers and any materials prepared for oral presentations will be compiled into a portfolio which must be submitted at the end of semester two. The portfolio will also include a formative

assessment for the course unit which will be a paper on a topic to be determined in negotiation with course tutors on an individual basis, for example:

-Masters students - equivalent to 3000 words: A social framework for practice in learning and teaching or a theoretical framework for a research proposal
-Doctoral students – equivalent to 10,000 words: A theoretical framework chapter for thesis

Aside from the formal assessment, the portfolio contents will not be marked other than pass/fail, i.e. to note that the student satisfactorily engaged with the readings. These assessments will be marked on an individual basis.

Information
This course is for MSc Educational Research students and any other Masters or Doctoral level student wishing to engage in this theoretical research training. The unit serves to support students who are preparing research projects for their MSc or PhD dissertation and prepares professionals with theoretical perspectives on advancing their practice.

Pre-requisites: There are no programme-specific prerequisites for this course unit.

Course Content
The course unit will explore the question: What does social theory have to say about learning?
Learning is understood in the context of social practice and activity that does not only take place in formal educational institutions but also informally, e.g. in workplaces and in everyday life. The four main trends covered in this unit will be Communities of Practice, Cultural-Historical Activity Theory, Discursive Practice and Figured Worlds. The content of the course will be structured to provide:
  • an awareness of social theoretical perspectives on learning (see Indicative Foundational Texts for theoretical perspectives to be addressed in the unit)
  • theoretical grounding through sustained engagement with foundational texts within each strand of social theory presented in the unit
  • evaluation of theory by contrasting theoretical frameworks presented as part of the unit
  • application of social theory in research and practice (based on student interest and project goals)

It is a requirement of the course that students also sign up to the NING website www.socialtheory.ning.com. An invitation link will be sent out via email after Session 1. If there are any issues related to signing up, please email david.swanson@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk.

Timetable

Session 1: Friday 27th September 2013
1-2pm, **Uni. Place 3.205:** Public seminar by Prof Etienne Wenger
2-3pm, Uni. Place 3.205: Introduction to STL course tutors, outline of the course, introduction to the NING website and experiences of past students.

4 peer led session to take place in October. Students are required to have read the indicated reading **prior** to the meetings. The aim of the sessions is to engage together with the readings and to come up with questions /comments/reactions for discussion in Session 2.

- **Monday 7th October 2013, 10 – 11.30am, Venue Ellen Wilkinson C2.32:**
  Wenger, E. (1998). Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity. New York: Cambridge University Press. (Prologue, pp. 3-41).

- **Monday 14th October 2013, 10 – 11.30am, Venue EW C2.32:**
  Holland, D., Lachicotte Jr., W., Skinner, D., & Cain, C. (2001). Identity and agency in cultural worlds. Boston, MA: Harvard University Press (Chapter 1, pp. 3-18)

- **Monday 21st October 2013, 10 – 11.30am, Venue EW C2.32:**
  Engeström, Y. (2009) Expansive learning: Toward an activity-theoretical reconceptualization. In: Illeris, K. (Ed) (2009) *Contemporary Theories of Learning*, London: Routledge, pp. 53-73.

- **Monday 28th October 2013, 10 – 11.30am, Venue EW C2.32:**
  Parker, I. (1994). Discourse Analysis. In P. Banister, E. Burman, I. Parker, M. Taylor and C. Tindall, *Qualitative Methods in Psychology: a research guide*. Buckingham: Open University Press, pp. 92-107.

  Burman, E. (1992). Feminism and discourse in developmental psychology: Power, subjectivity and interpretation. *Feminism & Psychology*, *2*(1), 45-59.

Portfolio document: (due in by 30/10/2013) 500 word online reflection of the introductory readings and how they may help you with your research or practice problem or issue. This assessment will also help tutors to suggest individual readings for the next set of working groups.

Session 2: Monday 4ᵗʰ November 2013, 1pm to 4pm, Room: EW C2.32

Questions and issues from the introductory papers are discussed.
Each student's context of interest is briefly introduced in a way that allows us to discuss ways of seeing this context through the different theoretical lenses.

Session 3: Thursday 7ᵗʰ November 2013, 10 am – 1pm, Room: EW AG3/4

Workshop on application of theory to practice: Each theoretical strand is the focus of discussion via presentations from the tutors. Study groups are formed around the different strands. The session ends with new groups meeting to review the reading list for the strand and arrange their next meeting. Approximately four readings assigned to address foundations, theoretical concepts, applications and critiques in each strand, specific readings to be negotiated as a group within each strand.

November – February working group agendas: between November and February each study group should work on a reading agenda with a view to leading the whole class at the Feb meeting on their study area. The options for strands and working groups here are usually (i) Vygotsky/Leontiev OR Engestrom and newer ChAT; (ii) STL/CoP OR newer versions; (iii) Figured Worlds; (iv) Discursive Practice.
Groups meet at least twice (preferably more) as arranged for discussion and preparation of presentations.

Session 4: Monday 24ᵗʰ February 2014, 1pm to 4pm, Room: EW C2.32

Groups share with the whole class what they have learned about each strand from readings (foundations, applications and critiques of theory). NB: The aim is to develop critical understanding of the theory/strand. Critiques do not need to come from a perspective offered by the course, but can be general and/or grounded in your expertise in other areas.

Session 5: Thursday 27ᵗʰ February 2014, 10 am to 1pm & 2pm to 3pm, Room: EW C2.32

Group sessions continue. In afternoon: discussion across strands/theories, formation of critical friendships and working groups in which the focus is on making theory work for you and your project. Students with shared interests support each other. Readings selected depending on student's individual projects in preparation for final assignment.

March – April: groups meet at least once as arranged

Session 6: Tuesday 29ᵗʰ April 2014, 1pm to 4pm, Room: EW C2.32

Whole class discussion of theory and final projects, students present on individual research problems for focussed feedback.

Session 7: Thursday 1ˢᵗ May 2014, 10 am to 1pm (& 2pm to 4pm depending on student numbers), Room: EW C2.32

Whole class discussion of theory and final projects, students present on individual research problems for focussed feedback.

May–June: online discussions, group and individual meetings for feedback on projects

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Final assignment due by 13/06/2014

Timetable Summary

Sep 27ᵗʰ (Fri): Intro Session
Oct 7ᵗʰ, 14ᵗʰ, 21ˢᵗ, 28ᵗʰ (Mon): Introductory reading sessions
Nov 4ᵗʰ & 7ᵗʰ (Mon+Thu): Intro readings/ Intro to strands/ Student contexts
      Nov-Feb: Working groups on theoretical strands
Feb 24ᵗʰ & 27ᵗʰ (Mon+Thu): Working group feedback sessions
      Mar-April: Interest groups + Individual work
Apr 29ᵗʰ & May 1ˢᵗ (Tue+Thu): Student presentations

Teaching Methods

The unit is open to students across faculties and encourages participation from diverse disciplines in order to strengthen discussion regarding similarities and differences across contexts for the theoretical frameworks addressed in the unit. As such, student participation is crucial and we have structured the course to provide maximum opportunity for discussion through small groups or learning sets, in which groups of students discuss readings in a particular strand.

Through workshop-style sessions, learning sets will meet together as a group to discuss readings across their theoretical strands. Learning sets will rotate in order to provide participants with the opportunity to engage critically in another theoretical strand. Readings, small group meetings, seminars and workshops are seen as preparation for an individual final presentation and writing assignment, in which the student considers ways social theories of learning can advance their research or practice goals. Participants will be able to access an online learning environment to share and discuss relevant readings and resources.

Participants will be expected to:
- work in action learning sets, regularly meeting with their group to support each other in the on-going tasks during the course unit, as well as in lecture/seminar contexts
- present informally and formally on the readings and on their research and practice in writing (to be included in a portfolio) and to the course as a whole at various times
- actively engage in the online learning environment, maintaining an electronic portfolio
- read regularly and attend School/ Faculty research seminars where appropriate between sessions