The Social Construction of Literacy Development and Classroom Ecologies

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A wag somewhere once noted that there are two kinds of people in the world: those who believe there are two kinds of people in the world, and those who don’t. By extension and much elaboration, we might observe further that there are at least two kinds of people in literacy education in regard to the paradigmatic narratives they employ in their research: those who subscribe to mechanistic motifs and metaphors, and those who subscribe to contextualist motifs and metaphors. The mechanistic motifs addressing what goes on inside learners and knowers are drawn from research from behavioral and cognitive psychology on learning (e.g., Anderson, 1995; Kintsch, 1998). The contextualist motifs addressing what goes on between learners and knowers are drawn from historical and anthropological research on learning communities (e.g., Kirshner & Whitson, 1997; Lave & Wenger, 1991). We might thus hypothesize that it is because the cognitivist (mechanistic) and anthropological (contextualist) paradigms are not commensurable (Kuhn, 1962; Pepper, 1948), that research on learning processes and learning communities within education has often been at odds, at times quite vehemently (e.g., the phonics-whole language debate; the basics-critical thinking debate; the situativist-cognitivist debate, and so on).

For this reason, I was initially encouraged by the development of alternative attempts to explain learning and literacy development in bio-ecological terms (Abram, 1996; Bidell & Fischer, 1998; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 2000; Iran-Nejad, 2000; Guthrie, 2000; Hruby, 2001a; Pearson, & Raphael, 1999; Sumara, 2001; Weiner, 2000). Bio-ecological dynamics, after all, account for both that which occurs inside the organism (biology) and that which occurs outside the organism (ecology). The distinction between
the biological and ecological is one chosen for its privileging of the multi-cellular organism as life’s ultimate level of organization – the center of the organic universe, as it were. This is, of course, a “truth” only multi-cellular organisms such as us would find self-evident. However, the dynamics of structural organization, supervenience, adaptation, and agency are similar across the bio-ecological continuum (Michel & Moore, 1995). And, happy happenstance, it just so happens that human beings “are” ecologically situated, biological organisms (at least that has been the long-standing and highly successful narrative assumption of the life sciences). Thus, the ecological motif seemed to suggest a way to reconcile the inner and outer – cognitive and social – domains of literacy development.

Unfortunately, these efforts to employ bio-ecological metaphors have been largely unsuccessful, I believe, because they have generally failed to acknowledge that bio-ecological systems can only be properly understood within an organicist theoretical framework (Pepper, 1948). To misconstrue the organic as wet mechanics (Kosslyn & Koenig, 1992) as the cognitive neo-connectionists do, or as merely inter-nested contextual locations (Bronfenbrenner, 1972) as many “ecological” analyses of classrooms do, is widely off the mark. It is as much of a travesty as thinking of interpersonal transactions as the end result of cognitive processes, or of reducing psychological accounts of behavior to mere rhetorical ploys for privileging the individual over community. In other words, in paying only lip service to the organic nature of bio-ecological systems, some researchers promoting supposedly ecological frameworks have missed the most obvious and helpful characteristics of the organicist trope.

This is not an unimportant matter. Currently, RAND is funding a major long-term research planning initiative that will set the course for future research (and research funding) for years to come (Sweet, Kamil, Alvermann, & Strickland, 2001). (The RAND RSG web site featuring a downloadable pdf. file of the report draft can be found at: www.RAND.org/multi/achievementforall.) The researchers involved in RAND’s
Reading Study Group are highly respected and justifiably so. But in patching together their quilt of personal research interests, the issue of just how mechanistic and contextualist research is to fit together in a theoretically cohesive fashion is not adequately addressed. Theirs is not a proper resolution, but a temporary truce, one at best guaranteeing fragmentary and epistemologically anemic understandings of literacy development, and at worse, continued professional infighting into the future. The fact that the RAND group has gingerly indicated that development (i.e. growth) might act as a unifying bridge between the two positions (Anders, 2001) is a masterful bit of irony, for contexts do not nurture just anything, and machines do not grow regardless of their contexts. Human development, as it is scientifically understood today, is an inherently organic, transactional process of extension and integration between and within levels of bio-ecological organization (Bjorklund, 2000; Elman, et al., 1996; Michel & Moore, 1995).

Though theoretically unsatisfying for literacy education researchers, this situation is nonetheless a wonderful example of how social processes foster scientific understandings and worldviews almost without regard for the nature of the central objects of their inquiry. In a phrase, the social construction of reality, or at least that portion of reality centered on literacy education, has literacy research stuck in a pair of parallel ruts on behalf of professional prerogative and the protection of personal legacies. It is this issue and the thematic dynamics of its construction that I wish to explore in this paper. The following, therefore, is not a proper research report, but a meditation on the ways in which we come to construct our understanding of literacy classrooms – what one might refer to as the ecology of classroom research – and how it can be understood as an example of scientific social constructionism.
Which Classroom Ecology?

There are two ways in which the ecologies of learning and literacy development in classrooms can be thought of as socially constructed. The first entails the study and analysis of the factors at play in fostering patterns of classroom discourse. The procedures and tone set by the teacher, the personal behaviors and cultural values brought by the students, the policies and agendas posited by the school administration and the local school board, as well as parents’ expectations, political pressures from special interest groups, national policy initiatives, and so on: all of these go into the construction of certain patterns of practice, discourse, workaday schoolroom reality, or what we might otherwise describe as a pedagogic ecosystem. By the light of this first definition, researchers attempt to inventory and account for the multiple and complex transactive relationships between factors that constitute even as they give rise to such ecologies (Pearson & Raphael, 1999).

The other approach to describing the construction of classroom ecologies focuses on the way in which researchers themselves posit and describe learning and literacy development in classrooms. That is, while the first definition above presumes a transparent objectivity by researchers in the observation and description of the behaviors and relationships under examination in a classroom, the alternative definition references the construction of those observations and descriptions by researchers. Research itself is an example of the social construction of knowledge which informs our sense of reality – both directly, in the sense of an accumulation of knowledge artifacts, and indirectly, by the fostering of models and theoretical frames that allow for coherence across artifacts, and, indeed, which allow knowledge artifacts to be identified as such. This second
approach to studying the social construction of classroom ecologies might be considered a special case within the sociology of scientific knowledge, or SSK (Potter, 1996). I believe researchers ought to address this specialized sense of social construction before attempting the broader sense, and it is scientific social construction in literacy education research that we will address in this paper.

Allow us therefore to briefly review how the social construction of realities has been hypothesized in sociological, psychological, and philosophical research, and distinguish between the scientific construction of our understanding of the natural world and the scientific construction of heuristics. I will maintain that it is crucial to differentiate between these two types of scientific constructs. To make the case for that distinction, I will cite some well known constructs in psychology and sociocultural education theory as examples of heuristics that have been inappropriately reified as aspects of the natural world in either its physical or conceptual sense. I will assert that confusing our theoretical models with material or ideational realities engages our predisposition toward territorial claims and all of the aggression, dominance displays, and promotion of hierarchy endemic to primate sociality at its human worst. I will conclude by offering a few suggestions on how we might develop an alternative and more cohesive theoretical framework for literacy research, one informed by empirical research on the natural world but pointedly distinct from it, that is, one knowingly constructed as a narrative purely for its heuristic value in advancing research on literacy and learning.

**Social Constructionism: Some Clarification**

Up front, it is important to distinguish between social constructionism and social constructivism. The latter is concerned with the social processes that facilitate the
psychological dynamics that produce understanding in learners (Phillips, 2000; Spivey, 1997). Social constructionism, by contrast, is concerned with the social processes themselves and the cultural artifacts they produce and that identify them (Font & Hruby, 2000). These social processes would include identification, classification, and legitimization of knowledge as such; identity assignation; and the institutionalization, preservation, and dissemination of knowledge. Artifacts would include things like books, libraries, schools, universities, professional organizations, and so on (Hruby, 2000). These distinctions are generalizations based on historic use (Hruby, 2001a), but they are not set in stone. Different definitions, inappropriate equation across levels of analysis, and blurring between the terms is common (Font & Hruby, 2000; Hruby, 2001b; Phillips, 2000). This confusion is perhaps fostered by the allowance that, in a weak sense, all culture is evidence of social construction, from driving a car, to building a work shed, to dancing the hootchie-cootchie: all demonstrate and can facilitate the distribution of knowledge.

Use of social constructionist theory in literacy education research has been inconsistent and somewhat confusing because of the various and often allusive ways it has been applied (Hruby, 2001a). Some appropriations of the terms and trappings of social constructionism seem little more than window dressing for ethnographies of productive classroom practice. This is worthwhile work, but as social constructionist analysis it has been dismayingly vague. As Schoenfeld (1999) and others have complained, it is difficult to fashion testable hypothesis from overly broad definitions and overly general theoretical assertions about “the sociocultural.” On the other hand, some work in literacy education using social constructionist lenses has been exemplary, both
theoretically rich and philosophically sophisticated (e.g., Blanton, Moorman, Hayes, & Warner, 1997; Rex, L. A., Green, J. L., Dixon, C. N., & The Santa Barbara Classroom Discourse Group, 1998). Nonetheless, the exceptions underscore the general tendency: a failure in most of this research to provide a precise working definition of what the social construction of knowledge entails, and scant attention to the processes of construction ongoing in the research itself.

Elsewhere, I have suggested that social constructionism can be historically and paradigmatically divided into three waves: an empirical wave in sociology beginning in the 1960s, a postmodern wave in social psychology beginning in the late 1970s, and a new-realism wave in philosophy of mind and of science in the 1990s (Hruby, 2001b). The use of the term “waves” in this context was perhaps unfortunate as it suggested more than that the three approaches in the study of social constructionism succeeded one another. It also seemed to suggest, in spite of my cautions to the contrary, that the earlier versions are no longer viable. In fact, all three approaches are possibly useful because they are paradigmatically distinct and therefore not commensurable (Kuhn, 1962). Lenses would have been the better term to describe these three ways of focusing inquiry on the social processes of knowledge formation in communities.

**A Brief History of Social Constructionism**

One of the more salient features distinguishing these three lenses is where the bounds of the social construction of knowledge are drawn. For the sociological empiricists (e.g., Berger & Luckmann, 1966) the natural world was acknowledged to include the human organism and its species-specific and species-probable traits. However, these traits were deemed to include the capacity both for language (semiotic
systems) and culture (the appropriation and modification of aspects of the natural world, including those aspects directly relating to human lifeways). Hence, humans had the ability to collectively modify behavior through cultural systems built on language. The linguistic rationales, identifications, institutions, models of causation, and so on, developed within communities were matters of social construction born of the dialectic between individual and society, a dialectic that was constrained by the natural world even as it was mediated by language.

In this, the empirical sociologists were much in line with what had been suggested already in pragmatist epistemology (e.g. Dewey & Bentley, 1949). However, many empirical constructionists had placed their theoretical focus squarely on what the common man and woman on the street took to be reality sui generis, something presumed to be quite different from what empirical scientists engaged in. But the pragmatists had already called this distinction into question (Dewey & Bentley, 1949), as had other philosophers of science (Kuhn, 1962; Quine, 1969; Pepper, 1948). It wasn’t long before research on constructionism in science as another variant of the same process gave way to the second wave in social constructionism.

The postmodernist social psychologists of the 70s and 80s (e.g., Burr, 1995; Gergen, 1985; Gergen & Davis, 1985; Shotter, 1993) claimed that scientific knowledge itself – and the greater-than-human world it presumed to represent – were all socially constructed. Rather than being the result of empirical observation of the natural world, science was actually the result of humans in social relations making meaning of their social and semiotic selves within historical and ideological contexts. Scientific reality, according to the postmodernists, had no more foundational or essential basis for being
enshrined as inarguably factual or natural than any reformulation except insofar as it served political, ideological, or economic agendas. The numerous epistemological problems with such an encompassing constructionism became immediately obvious to critics and eventually obvious even to proponents (Burr, 1998; Gergen, 1998).

For instance, it was difficult to explain how social oppressors were able themselves to successfully function free of the self-oppressing nature of our shared discourses and institutions. Worse, claims of oppression could be called into question as similarly being social constructions, for everything was a social construction – including the concept of social construction! This self-undermining relativism could only be deemed liberating by the most anti-rationalist among the postmodernists. Stresses between the politically driven critical theorists, literary and rhetorical analysts, and researchers in social psychology proved too great to maintain a growing critical mass in this vein, and the third wave of social constructionists began to step forward.

The new realists and neo-naturalists in epistemology (e.g., Putnam, 1987), philosophy of mind (e.g., Block, Flanagan, & Güzeldere, 1998) and philosophy of science (e.g. Greenwood, 1994) are a varied and recent lot, and it is therefore more difficult to characterize them. Suffice it to say that their positions are not simply a return to a naïve positivist empiricism, nor are they champions of reductionist, determinist, or mechanistic models of causation. Like the empirical constructionists, the neo-realists acknowledge a natural, greater-than-human world that humans are not merely in, but of. However, the new realists’ grasp of this bio-ecological relationship is considerably more sophisticated than that of social constructionists a half century earlier.
For the new realists, our ability to perceive and conceive of our world is constrained by evolved, species-probable capacities, capacities whose evolution and development carry the nature of our world (our Umwelt) within them. Those capacities are predisposed to give emphasis to levels of bio-ecological organization of long-standing species-specific significance. They thus structure our perceptions and categories through biologically-grounded qualic phenomena possessing an inherent level of base significance. By their nature, and by evolutionary necessity, these capacities for perception, categorization, and concept formation are variously plastic and adaptive to changing circumstances and can recursively mediate our categorical and conceptual distinctions in ever more sophisticated ways. Thus, our ability to construct better understandings of the world (i.e., more adaptive for a fruitful and satisfying condition), while far from simple or perfectible, is nonetheless usually serviceable and often improvable.

Like the postmodernists, the neo-realists caution against naïve suppositions about the seeming obviousness of fact or reality. Much that passes for reality is indeed a construction, especially in a highly articulated domain such as scientific research. In a limited sense, everything must be a social (linguistic) construction since everything is signified in a language that can never be the thing, perception, or conception itself (Derrida, 1976). But it is not true that every description is therefore equally (or nothing but) a social construction. Some things are more constructed than others (i.e., rationally or aesthetically derived, less based on empirical observation). After all, if wishes were fishes, we’d all live like kings. And we don’t. So successfully negotiating our ecological surrounds, presumably on the basis of both perception and a knowledge base, must surely
involve more than simply “constructing reality.” Some constructions about the greater-than-human world are more serviceable than others, and this is often demonstrable. Indeed, the purpose of science is to pursue such careful demonstrations.

All empirical observation is based on qualic phenomena (sensation and memory) made coherent through theoretically-informed interpretation. It does not follow from this, however, that all observations are equally informed (let alone entirely informed) by theory, or, for that matter, that all statements are entirely informed by interpreted observation. To this end, there is a distinction to be made between epistemic and linguistic objectivity (Greenwood, 1995). Thus, we can distinguish at least two types of scientific construction: those that are attempts to signify careful observations of the natural world, and those that attempt to hypothesize causal factors not actually observed or observable, and which indeed may not exist in the natural world at all. In a word, this is the difference between naturalistic (empirical) and heuristic (rational) constructions. The psychologists Paul E. Meehl and Kenneth MacCorquodale have proposed a similar distinction between hypothetical construct (the scientific description of physical or physiological phenomena) and intervening variable (the stop-gap explanatory abstraction). The distinction in social constructionism is blurry, however, and these two types of scientific construction are perhaps at the ends of a continuum. Still, a rifle barrel, too, is a type of continuum, so I would hedge that it is best to know which end is up when dealing with a continuum.

Failing to distinguish between when we are measuring and describing processes and systems of the natural world, and when we are constructing explanatory narratives or models of the invisible forces presumed at work animating that world is a serious
categorical error. It is one, I believe, that has defined much scientific research in reading
and literacy education over the past 30 years. And this ought to be a concern, for when
we reify our heuristics we are led to embrace a ghost-in-the-machine or over-the-shoulder
dualism that is both philosophically and scientifically unsatisfactory. Worse, we are led to
stake territorial claims on what we mistake to be certainties within and of our
phenomenological domain.

The Cautionary Tale of Research on the Psyche

Let us then distinguish between the scientific construction of heuristics and the
scientific construction of our understanding of the natural world. The construction of
heuristics is chiefly an exercise in constructing facilitative theories that allow us to
rationally think about, discuss, and research things that otherwise we could not (i.e., the
mind, society, unicorns, the number of angels that can dance on the head of a pin, etc.).
By contrast, the construction of our understanding of the natural world is an exercise in
articulating empirically observable and dependable patterns of ecological constraint and
affordance (i.e., the “laws” of nature that allow us to appropriate natural resources
effectively; observations on how humans tend to use those resources, etc.). It is important
not to conflate and confuse these two types of constructs.

There is a resistance to acknowledging heuristics as such once they have been
thoroughly reified through the processes of social construction. Professions, institutions,
careers, identities, and practices – these things take on a life of their own. Collective
professional identities become as cults, their objects of inquiry fetishes, and their
methodologies rituals. But the existence of such entrenched institutions, practices and
professional communities is not adequate evidence of an empirical reality represented by
the heuristics entertained therein. An example of entrenched institutionalization grounded on a reified heuristic might clarify what I mean.

Once upon a time, long, long ago, back before the days of the cognitive model of the mind, there was the psychoanalytic model of the psyche (several, actually). Indeed, it is worth noting that before the psyche there were religious, essentialist, empiricist, and romantic models of the spirit, the soul, the pneuma, the humors, the passions, elan vital, etc., many of which still persist in the general vernacular today (e.g., Moore, 1992; Redfield, 1993). The idea behind all of these is the same. Without some animating force, the body is presumed to be an inanimate glob of dross matter, nothing more. Historically, it was inconceivable that living things might, by their very nature, be self-animating, largely due both to a legacy of essentialist, dualistic religious dogma, and to the early scientific use of mechanistic metaphors drawn from Newtonian physics to describe biological organisms and processes in terms of distinguishable bodies and forces (Dewey & Bentley, 1949; Johnson, 1987). Something beside the body itself had to account for its behavior. The hypothetical cause was determined by the way behavioral explication was narratively justified, but the resulting explanation always suggested the causation worked the other way around. As a result, the dualism inherent in the initial assumption was presupposed in any understanding fostered by the model. This sort of circularity is an unfortunate hallmark of heuristic constructions.

In any event, one of the first major disruptions in the development of psychoanalytic theory occurred with the break between Sigmund Freud and his colleague, Carl Jung. One of the reasons for this break was Jung’s acknowledgement that Freud’s model of the psyche, with its Ego and Id and complexes and sublimations and other
mechanistic arrangements, was not a description of an actual location bounded by time and space, but rather was a heuristic device. Ultimately, Jung noted, the physical mechanisms for the behavior of biological organisms such as human beings would be located in the neurophysiological substrates, but there was no way in the early 20th century to study such things. In the meantime, Jung explained, models such as Freud’s – or his own, or Adler’s – allowed researchers, therapists, and their patients to think about and talk about what would otherwise be ineffable. And this ability to postulate and share structures of emotion and memory was in and of itself of therapeutic value (Clarke, 1992).

Freud, the logical positivist, vehemently denied Jung’s observation, decrying it as mysticism – although he himself tacitly acknowledged and tried unsuccessfully to address the problem in the 1920’s (Holland, 1992). Almost a century later, the consensus in psychology is that the success of traditional psychoanalysis is anecdotal, meager and limited to moderate emotional distress. Meanwhile, the impact of psychopharmacological interventions (based on psychobiological and neuroscientific research) has been astonishing even in severe cases of psychosis. Thus, the current trend in psychiatric intervention is based on a situation-specific blend of psychopharmacology, behavior modification, and talk therapy.

The point of this historical digression is to exemplify how easily heuristic models can be reified by even the most sophisticated of minds, and to note how such reification leads to delusions of pseudo-empirical grandiosity. More to the point, it can lead to entire research agendas, academic departments, professional organizations, publications of theory and practice, and highly lucrative professional identities fostered by heuristics that
no more describe the real world than a vibrant description of the Easter bunny. Of course, every spring, countless grandparents across the land delight in the behavior modification they have encouraged as their grand children cavort about backyard shrubbery in search of painted eggs. But is that any basis for justifying a program of literacy research?

The point is, the existence of such an institutional status quo built around a reified heuristic is itself not proof that the heuristic represents causative aspects of the natural world. And the bald assertion that a heuristic must in fact represent unseen aspects of the natural world because it is useful as a heuristic makes no sense at all.

**Intellectual History Repeating Itself**

This brings us to the long and proud legacy of cognitive psychology’s influence in literacy education research. Like earlier dualistic explanations of human behavior, cognitive models rely on a stopgap, intervening explanatory device such as the psyche. That device is called the mind. The mind has a long pre-scientific history as a construct in the vernacular, so its use in psychology has a certain intuitive appeal. Models of the mind are said to account for behaviors, and research on behaviors is said to prove the validity of these models of the mind. The circular reasoning here is obvious, and has been described as “phlogiston theory” by neuro-philosopher Patricia Churchland (as cited in Churchland, 1995). (Phlogiston was an imperceptible gas postulated by fifteenth-century chemists to account for the deterioration of matter by rust and fire. The rationalists who championed this conceptual breakthrough were certain that phlogiston existed even though it could not be observed. Proof of the existence of phlogiston was to be had in the phenomena of rust and fire, the very phenomena phlogiston was supposed to explain. Similar circular reasoning allowed psychoanalysts to justify models of the psyche on the
basis of complaints, and cognitivists to justify models of the mind on the basis of behavior.)

The problem with the mind, as with other examples of phlogiston theory, is not that it makes for a poor heuristic. In fact, the mind is a very powerful pedagogic and rhetorical device. Research on the mind has allowed for important advances in educational and behavioral theory, which in turn have informed solid research. Current models of the mind are certainly more satisfying as intervening variable than the behaviorists’ black box. And the mind is destined to continue in the vernacular in the same way that constructs of the soul and of passion do today. The problem is our believing that because the mind is useful as a heuristic it must therefore represent an actual, if imperceptible, causative aspect of the natural world.

Such reifications, I suggest, entice researchers to take on the mantle of ontological certainty and thus engage in a territorial vehemence that demands and indeed fosters professional unity around an orthodoxy (as demonstrated in the case of Freud and Jung), but ultimately retards theoretical development within the profession. Such reification occurs through processes of social construction earlier described. For instance, to have challenged the hegemony of cognitive assumptions and institutions in psychology during the past quarter century would have been professionally disastrous. The more recent advances in psychology along psychobiological and neuroscientific lines has occurred thanks to an end-run around cognitive certainties that avoided openly acknowledging or challenging them. Similarly, the development of sociocultural perspectives in literacy education had more to do with professional exhaustion by many literacy education researchers over arguments surrounding the minutia of mental processes than with a
coherent critique of the inherent flaws of cognitive models (D. Alvermann, personal communication).

Again, the problem is not that the mind is “only” a heuristic. Heuristics are invaluable in advancing human understanding. Nor is the problem the cognitive choice of mechanistic (and thus reductionist and deterministic) metaphors to describe the mind. Mechanistic models are very useful at describing many things, particularly machines, and they are therefore pedagogically useful because they are easy to understand. Nor is the problem the inherent dualism presumed and promulgated through the circular reasoning commonly employed, although such dualism is generally in low repute among most current philosophers of mind (Block, Flanagan & Güzeldere, 1998).

The problem is the unwarranted assertion that the central construct is a natural fact, and thus inarguable, unmodifiable, and professionally possessable. The mind, however, does not exist in the natural world, except in so far as it can be described as a cultural artifact. This is perhaps one reason why research on the mind’s learning does not always readily translate into effective classroom practice. Theories of the mind’s structure can inspire literacy research, but it cannot displace or preempt it. Only research on literacy learning in classrooms can tell us anything about literacy learning in classrooms.

**Intellectual History Repeating Itself Repeating Itself**

Lest those of a sociocultural stripe delight too much in this critique of cognitive psychology’s influence in literacy research, it should be noted that socioculturalists, too, have run afoul of the same problems. Because socioculturalists rely on a contextualist motif rather than a mechanistic one, the emphasis is on forces rather than structures, but
the Newtonian-articulated dualism of inert bodies and motivating forces still undergirds this perspective as it has since Comte founded “Social Physics” in the 1820s. Socioculturalists also rely on Idealist rather than Materialist philosophical positions, positing reality as a construct in the realm of ideas rather than in the natural world, but the determinism of their models is similarly manifest in their narratives (Farrell, 1996). As with psychological constructs, something other than the ecologically-situated biological organism in the process of negotiating its contextual surrounds is presumed to account for that organism’s behavior.

The contextualist motif asserts that phenomena arise from unique contextual influences or situations. The contexts of general concern are usually the social and the cultural, although linguistic, semiotic, economic, and ideological contexts are treated similarly (e.g., Gee, 1990). That which arises from such spatially and temporally unique circumstances is either itself unique (say some ethnographers and postmodernists), or exhibits general tendencies of historical progression (say the Hegelians, Marxists, and Frankfurt School-inspired critical theorists) (Farrell, 1996; Foucault, 1978; Pepper, 1948).

Contexts are usually posited as being two-tier in nature, with an immediate, observable micro-cultural level of individuals in relation, and a higher, theoretically postulated macro-cultural level of societal forces contextualizing the micro level. Socio-historical determinists maintain that the macro socio-historical level constitutes the micro cultural level in accordance with certain presumed historical inevitabilities, which in turn constitutes individuals and gives them their sense of identity. Causation is thus basically top-down and reflects a theoretical rationale for authoritarian socio-economic
arrangements. Other contextualists describe a more transactive relationship between individual agents and their immediate surround which gives rise to collective generalities that can feed back upon the lower levels of organization. In these views, agency and identity are developed recursively over time from immediate experience. Lev Vygotsky would be an example of a pioneering socio-historical determinist; John Dewey would be an example of a pioneering transactionalist (Glassman, 2001). Foucault might be an example of a postmodern contextualist emphasizing the incommensurability of historical experience.

But, again, as with the cognitivists, the central problem for sociocultural theory is not with its choice of framing motif. The problem is that socioculturalists posit a macro-level construct – culture, the social, the socio-historical, etc. – the entirety of which would elude observation, were it to actually exist, except by way of a God’s-eye view. Human beings have never had, nor never will have, such an all-encompassing perspective. Such demiurgic macro-cultural constructs of historical destiny or cultural influence, therefore, like the construct of the mind or the psyche, by their very nature, can never be empirically demonstrated; rather, they are only rationally postulated. A non-believer might suggest that macro-cultural levels of social or discursive organization are actually abstracted generalizations based on anecdotal observation of behavior and demographic quantifications drawn from the level of immediate experience -- measurements and observations undertaken and selected precisely because they bolster the presumed heuristic model of causation being asserted. Thus, the reasoning supporting these models is as circular as that employed by the cognitivists. More phlogiston.
As with the cognitivists, the socioculturalists tend to reify their heuristic narratives as actual causative forces, and this encourages the same professional territorial prerogatives displayed by the earlier cognitivists. Indeed, a dismaying progression of parallel ideas in Western thought can be identified between those positing internal causation (the soul, the spirit, the conscious, the psyche, the mind) and those positing external causation (God’s will, fate, destiny, the zeitgeist, the world spirit, history, inevitable socio-economic progression, culture, the social, etc.). If the academic debates between these incommensurable camps take on the tenor of religious wars, it should come as no surprise. Again, these reifications are bolstered by the processes of social construction that gives rise to institutional systems, identities, and communities of practice. And these, quite literally, apart from the posited intervening variables they entertain, are physical territories that can be fought over. And so they are.

The shibboleth that education is a social practice is often reiterated like a catechism at many a literacy conference and graduate seminar today. To observe that this is a rather banal observation is to invite professional rebuke in most quarters of the profession. To note in addition that history has not been kind to socio-historical prophecy is to provoke severe ostracization. We have not yet exhausted our recent fascination with the social, the continental, and the easy heroics of critical polemics. Thus, borrowing a page on tactics from the psycho-biologists, the best way to produce new knowledge in literacy education is to avoid challenging sociocultural and cognitive pieties altogether, and get on instead with an entirely different research agenda, one grounded in an alternative conceptual motif, staying humble until such time as it bears discernable fruit.
An Incautious Organic Conclusion

This leads us back to a justification of my original interest in bio-ecological motifs in literacy education. The current “peace accord,” on behalf of balance at RAND and elsewhere is an attempt at perpetuating the current Two-World Hypothesis approach, balancing one narrative motif against another, in an effort to preserve personal and professional positions and legacies. This is understandable, but it can likely lead to the preservation of the reification, dualism, and theoretical turf wars endemic to our current condition. And this, I would insist, is an unhappy situation for 21st century researchers.

It would be premature and beyond the scope of this paper to speculate on just what an organic or bio-ecological motif would entail entirely. Indeed, the development of such a motif for literacy education research would be a rich area for extensive future inquiry. There are places to begin, however. Inspirations for an organicist motif might include work in philosophy (Allen & Bekoff, 1997; Block, Flanagan & Güzeldere, 1998; Millikan, 1984), activity theory (Wertsch, 1998); sociocultural dynamics (Minick, Stone, & Forman, 1993), situated cognition (Kirshner & Whitson, 1997), ecological psychology (Reed, 1996), cognitive ethology (Hauser, 1996; Tomasello & Call, 1997), developmental psychobiology (Michel & Moore, 1996), neo-connectionist models of neurological processing (Sinha, 1988; Elman, et. al. 1996), situated robotics (Clancey, 1997), and the integration of these perspectives (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 2000; Clark, 1997; Hendriks-Jansen, 1996).

Though informed by the life and social sciences, the organic motif also needs to be kept in mind as a heuristic. It should never be posited as an account of factual reality itself, but only as a means of promoting research on the nature of our realities.
Given the foregoing review, allow me to rather boldly make the following suggestions:

Literacy education researchers need to:

• allow for the value of heuristics as such and resist the seduction of reification;
• acknowledge that reification is a long-standing foundational problem for our theories of literacy development;
• address dualism, and accept that, whatever one’s personal or religious views might be on the subject, it has little place in a scientific understanding of learning or learning communities;
• explore encompassing motifs that can provide an idiom to include both cultural and cognitive phenomena – as well as developmental, emotional, motivational, ideological, and individual factors;
• keep in view our participation as researchers in practices that socially construct our sense of reality, and the inherent responsibilities to honesty, effectiveness, fairness, and truth such mindful participation entails.

Given these needs, and what I perceive to be the promise of organicist motifs in addressing them, I believe that bio-ecological narratives are deserving of a second chance. Only, this time around, we need to avoid half-hearted attempts and construct them for real, but not as reality.
References


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Stephen Pepper identified the neo-Hegalians as organicists. However, as sophisticated as Pepper’s analysis might be, it was informed by a less than current understanding of organic processes, the study of which has evolved impressively over the past fifty years. For instance, he mistook biological processes to be static (the popular environmentalist misnomer that nature, left to itself, is in a state of perpetual balance is a perpetuation of this outdated belief). He also thought organicist motifs were unduly determinative, and had qualms about the notion of supervenience, or emergence, a notion that was just beginning to get off the ground in philosophy, biology and ecology (Drai, 1999). The noxious legacy of Social Darwinism and eugenics might have been another inspiration for his misgivings. But, if the contextualists and cognitivists who attempt to employ bio-ecological metaphors fail to relocate their models within an organicist framework, the Pepperian organicists in critical literacy research fail to acknowledge and incorporate what is currently understood about the dynamics of bio-ecological systems. Rather, by dint of ideological prescription, critical researchers continue to propose various forms of a cultural determinism that howsoever effective it might be as political analysis is useless as an organic trope. I would therefore, pace Pepper, categorize socio-historical determinists as teleological contextualists.