

a Brief Guide to

SOCIOCULTURAL LEARNING THEORIES

from RadLab

Many of us think of learning as something that happens in an individual brain—



—but that's only *part* of the story.



In North America, we often think of teaching as an act of filling an empty vessel—

—students are assumed to bring nothing to the classroom, and teachers benevolently fill them up.



Paulo Freire called this the **Banking Model***

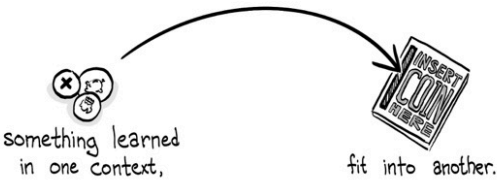
learners are empty piggy banks.

teachers have all the coins.

Part of what **doesn't** work about the metaphor is that it assumes that each coin can be pulled out and used any time.

← (and there's a **lot** that doesn't work.)

This is what learning theorists call **transfer**.



But if that's the way we learned, what would we do when we meet unanticipated problems or contexts?



To be clear, this was a **critique** of these learning paradigms!

Another thing that doesn't work about these ideas is they assume that humans move through the world as individuals —

—but we don't!

Everything about our lives is *social*.



A better metaphor might be to think about how kids learn their first language



First, babies learn through being *around* language that *other people* are using.

want a glass of **water**?

Don't go in the **water**!

Let me check the **water**

Is there something in the **water**?



they mostly experience it through *immersion*.

Second, words don't get deposited into babies' brains, they get *practiced* (and mangled, and tried again and again and again!) and used in different contexts.



It's always about participating in the contextual practices of the group of language speakers.

So basically, learning is social, it's about cognition and practice together, and it's contextual.



Learning scientists (like Joe) talk about this approach as being *Sociocultural*.

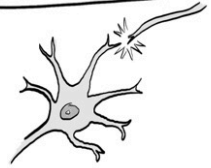


We think about cognition being bound up with the sociocultural practices of a community —

— what and how and why people do the things they do together



It isn't just about content, or only what's happening at the synapses in people's brains



Learning is a community process, and it's always developing through our shared participation

because ideas and ways of acting together are always evolving.

There are lots of different approaches to thinking about learning socioculturally.



Lave & Wenger talk about **Situated Learning**, where newbies learn their way into a community of practice through **Legitimate Peripheral Participation**, gradually learning by being involved in joint work.

Rogoff and her team suggested **Learning by observing and Pitching In**, thinking about how some kids participate in community as they grow.

And Esmonde & Booker remind us that all of these learning relationships exist in the context of power relationships:



One of the metaphors that we like comes from apprenticeship. Apprentices get formally "taught" some things, but mostly, they hang around someone more experienced and help do the work.



Think of learning to cook.

I grew up in a family of women that baked, and I was always in the kitchen, experiencing the movement, the talk, and the patterns of baking as part of other gendered and cultural practices.



As a tiny kid, I would "help" measure out flour, stir batters, or cut out biscuits.

As I got older, I was encouraged/allowed to do more things, like make brownies from a box.



By doing these things,
I came to understand the
chemistry of baking.



not in a molecular way, but
in a practical, embodied way.

I also messed up a *bunch*.



I remember mixing up salt and
sugar in one recipe (gross)

and my family still tells the story of the time
I aggressively mixed in the whipped egg whites
instead of gently folding them, resulting in a
dense rock of a cake meant to be light and fluffy.



This example helps show that
learning isn't done in isolation.



It's enabled by community that
shows what to do through immersion,



helps you experience why
you do things that way,



(and maybe teases you forever
about your mistakes)



It's about participation
in tasks large and small

so that you become able to
do the tasks independently.



Many sociocultural
learning theorists would
argue that the most important
thing in the process is
Becoming

coming to understand
yourself as a member of
the community.



Like, *I* am a **baker**.

And other people, like my
grandma and my mom and
my sister,



see me as a baker because
I do the things that **we**
bakers are supposed to do.



As activists thinking about politicization, looking at learning in these ways is important because it helps us avoid some key pitfalls:



- ① That there is only one way to have radical politics, and once you're there, you're *done* learning



- ② That lone wolves become politicized



This is a big thing in studies of radicalization that focus almost exclusively on Brown, Muslim men. Security Studies scholars argue that it's possible to just suddenly become radicalized. This is a deeply racist and islamophobic approach, and assumes a pathological problem with these individual actors, rather than seeing their learning as embedded in material conditions and sub-communities producing particular practices.

- ③ That it's just the tactics

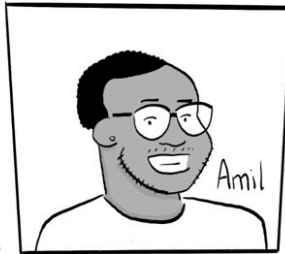
People can do direct action tactics without having what we would recognize as radical politics. Liberal and conservative activists may use many tactics that look the same, but their learning through and around those tactics may be very distinct.



KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

- ④ That it's just in your head

Lots of people learn histories of race and racism—that doesn't transform them into racial justice activists!



This comic made by the
RADLAB

a Participatory Action Research
Collective now based out of
the University of Manitoba



For more information, visit: joecurnow.com

This research was supported by:
the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada
the Ontario Graduate Scholarship program
the Jeanne F. Goulding Fellowship
the University of Manitoba

This work is licenced under a Creative Commons
Attribution-Noncommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International Licence
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

Art & Illustration ©2019 Andrew Kohan

Text ©2019 Joe Curnow

Based on work by Lila Asher, Jody Chan, Joe Curnow,
Amil Davis, Sinéad Dunphy, Tressanne Fernandes,
Keara Lightning, and Jade Wong

Illustrated
by
Andrew
Kohan

