

## **Learning and the Psycho-Societal Nature of Social Practice**

Tracing the Invisible Social Dimension in Work and Learning

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# Learning and the Psycho-Societal Nature of Social Practice: Tracing the Invisible Social Dimension in Work and Learning

**ABSTRACT:** This paper introduces a psycho-societal approach to empirical learning research combining a materialist theory of socialization with a hermeneutic interpretation methodology. The focus is on individual subjectivity as well as subjective aspects of social interaction. The term “approach” indicates the intrinsic connection between the theorizing of an empirical object, the research process and the epistemic subject. The practical method is an interpretation procedure based in interview transcripts or field observation notes. By interpreting articulations and interactions in the perspective of the subjective meaning for agents and interlocutors, it seeks to understand learning as a subjective process of experiencing social reality. In particular, this methodology is interested in the relation between what is “visible,” i.e., a conscious level of knowing and learning by participating in social interaction, and “invisible,” i.e., collective unconscious meanings that can be traced in texts and interaction by sensitive interpretation.

**KEYWORDS:** psycho-societal approach, qualitative methods, learning theory, socialization, experience, language game, neo-marxism.

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This paper will introduce and argue for a psycho-societal approach to empirical learning research combining a materialist theory of socialization with an interpretation methodology based in hermeneutic experiences from psychoanalysis. The focus is on individual subjectivity as well as subjective aspects of social interaction. The term “approach” indicates the intrinsic connection between the theorizing of an empirical object, the research process and the epistemic subject. The practical method is an interpretation procedure based on interview transcripts or field observation notes. By interpreting articulations and interactions in the perspective of the subjective meaning for agents and interlocutors, it seeks to understand learning as a subjective process of experiencing social reality. This methodology is particularly interested in the relation between what is “visible,” i.e., a conscious level of knowing and learning by participating in social interaction, and “invisible,” i.e., collective unconscious meanings that can be traced in texts and interaction by sensitive interpretation. The point is to be able to relate to unintended and unrecognized subjective dimensions of the wider societal context in which learning and social interaction takes place. The understanding of this invisible socialization is significant for understanding the relation between linguistically mediated knowledge and social practice, as well as for understanding emotional engagements and identity aspects of learning. My notion of subjectivity combines a social reinterpretation of the core insights in classical psychoanalysis—the unconscious, the drives—with a theory of language acquisition. The “invisible” aspect of learning is in the socialized but unconscious interaction experience, which is embodied and remains virulent in practical learning (and work processes as well). The empirical research that has contributed to the theoretical work mostly deals with learning in relation to work and professional knowledge. In principle these areas are just obvious examples of the societal meaning of subjectivity and the subjective experience of societal structures. In this paper I will point out just the frameworks of a more general learning theory.

The paper will introduce the line of reasoning and then refer to a thematic issue of the open-access journal *Forum: Qualitative Social Science*, in which I, together with a number of German, British and Danish colleagues, have provided an introduction

to the theory of socialization and the methodology, with a number of empirical interpretation examples.

#### LEARNING AS A SOCIAL AND CULTURAL PROCESS

Theorizing learning has previously been the business of schools and education. Educational thinking has dealt with issues ranging from the philosophy and rationales of education to very technical issues of efficient teaching and teacher-training, but its horizon has been defined by formal education. The implicit or explicit theory of learning has been one of delivery—of transmitting certain knowledge, skills, even attitudes or values—and has implicitly assumed a learning outcome, practically confined to individuals. Most learning research has accordingly been instrumentalized by the perspectives of this cumulative, transfer-oriented mode of learning—sometimes widening the scope of attention to “reality” and to students’ past experiences, but then most often as a *tool* for more efficient education and training. Development psychology, instructional psychology and theories of curricular structure have prevailed.

In the last few years, learning research has developed beyond this psychological and educational framework. Several more or less independent processes in other disciplines or across disciplines have contributed, redefining the very object of research, but mostly still undertheorized. You could speak of an emerging “Copernican Turn.”

The new interest in learning responds to a shift in societal thinking on the role of education and institutional learning in people’s lives, which in policy agendas has been labeled “lifelong learning.” This shift has been particularly clear in relation to adult learning, and in work-related education and training, but it can also be expected to affect the basic and academic education systems. Theory of education and training will correspondingly have to develop formats and practices to understand learning inside formal education in a school situation in relation to experiences outside, and also different forms of remote and blended learning, taking into account an entirely new situation of access to knowledge and communication technologies.

Industry’s increasing interest in human resources has boosted interest in broader theories of learning and subjectivity. Policy-driven thinking is looking for the potentials and the needs for learning in every aspect of everyday life, speaking of human resources, competence, etc. Learning research correspondingly includes studies in all these learning environments—work life, everyday life interaction, cultural practices—and looking at learning as an aspect of these domains of social life has actually contributed to more fundamental theorizing, transcending the fundamental scheme of education in which institutions/teachers intentionally nurture the learning processes. These learning discourses, however, remain “ideological” in the sense that they deal with truly important and novel issues in a very abstract way, when talking about individuals’ learning in general, in contexts of “organization,” “tools,” “knowledge” and “practices,” not to mention “creativity” and “innovation,” without specification. A critical theory of learning should provide a deeper insight than just assisting in redefining learning environments. It should maintain a focus on understanding

the learning processes as such, and also reflect the societal dynamics and interests involved in this redefinition of the research object, and the potential consequences of this development. It should also enable a critical awareness of the limitations for human development and autonomy that they entail, and work out ideas about richer, better, more democratic learning practices.

Let me briefly comment on some of the important theoretical trends in this reorientation in this perspective.

One emphasizes the significance of the social context of learning. Inspired by anthropological thinking about cultural transmission, we see learning as the gradual inclusion in a community of practice, i.e., the group of people whose shared practice also forms a cultural framework and meaning-making (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The early anthropological or cultural theories of learning have—rightly, I think—been criticized for a conservative bias because they tend to mold the learning process in the forms of the established practice or organization under consideration, often a workplace. However, whereas the subjective meaning of the immediate workplace context is obvious, the fact that “work” is a societal life condition, and the related meanings and conflicts, receive little attention. The societal outlook is pretty narrow. Wenger seems to go beyond this problem by generalizing the notion of community of practice so that it is not in his sense necessarily a concrete social context. In his model, learning is connected with the trajectory of the learning individual across and between a number of communities in which (s)he participates and negotiates meaning and identity. But it remains very vague how community of practice applies to all the interesting—and conflicting—social affiliations of the worker in, and in relation to, the workplace: formal organization of a company, informal organization(s) at the workplace, professional affiliations, trade union, family situation. I think this vagueness may be responsible for the fact that practical analytical application of the concepts tends to identify the community that enables the subjective meaning-making with one specific dimension, which may be defined by task in the organization, by work process similarity or by location. Wenger’s point of the trajectory across different communities of practice, and the potential conflicts between them, is often lost in application.

This vagueness may also become a virtue in a more systems theory-oriented approach of cultural learning theory, opening a perspective on general systems and broader historical transitions (e.g., Yrjö Engeström’s activity theory). Locating learning processes in complex social relations as networks and institutions is obviously inspiring for organization and management research, but it leaves little theoretical trace of the dialectic between particular (individual) perspectives and meaning-making. And it does not account for wider societal context—the organizational totality of systems’ functionality (or dysfunctionality) that was the important innovation anthropological or cultural theory brought into learning theory in the first place.

The anthropological inspiration has drawn the implicit content of learning, but it does not provide useful answers to the other important questions in relation to learning: what are the driving forces and dynamics of the process? In what way does

the learning individual make meaning of and “negotiate” his/her identity in existing social communities, and when can we say this continuing modification of identity and meaning-making has the quality of learning, not just of change? In fact, it can be questioned if there is a theory of learning, or rather a relevant account of (parts of) the social context in which learning may take place. Making it a proper theory of learning requires theorizing the learner as a subject in its own right, and the processes s/he is undergoing in the interaction with and inclusion in the cultural environment.

Psychological theorizing has its point of departure in the individual. Until now it has seemed difficult to connect the attention to social context in learning theory with the concepts of the individual learner and learning potential available in learning psychology and cognitive science. But it has been attempted, and some contributions are more rewarding than others. Stephen Billett, in his book on workplace learning (2001), refers—critically, though—to the concepts of situated learning to frame the learning within the workplace—and builds on constructivist learning psychology (Piaget and onward), seeing learning as the result of practical problem-solving in the work process in the analysis of concrete cases. The important insights—the attention to the agency of the learner, and the socially embedded and material nature of learning—are eye-opening in the context of the theme of promoting learning in the workplace. It emphasizes the fact that workers are agents of learning enabled or enforced by the workplace, that workers are in fact learning all the time, and that there are endless possibilities to create workplaces that are more supporting and stimulating for workers’ learning.

However, in this approach the workplace remains relatively abstracted from the wider societal environment. Learning is seen in particular cases as an interplay between the “materiality” of the work process and the worker. This abstraction may have to do with the strategic, practical development perspective, and it limits theorizing of the social context. But I also see some limitations in understanding the subjective aspects of learning.

The learning processes are understood as the cognitive aspect of problem-solving (and knowledge-building). By distinguishing routine and non-routine work, Billett defines work situations in relation to the experience of the learner-subject, and hence their subjective status as problems to be solved, or not. But this distinction also simplifies the possible meanings embedded in the materiality of the work processes. It seems likely that work “means more” to the worker, relative to his or her subjective experience, than the dichotomy of routine or challenge embraces. And the possible learning outcome (or no outcome) of the encounter between the task or perceived problem and the worker depends on much more complicated relations between the worker and the work process.

Eraut has analyzed professional knowledge and competences in terms of the ways of knowing and using knowledge in work situations. He provides interesting and distinctive discussions of theories of knowledge and knowledge use, and he relates them to the features of the work situation and the dependence on the tasks being performed. In this way, he provides a useful corrective to the generalizing theories of

knowledge and professions, and especially emphasizes the processual and contextual nature of knowledge use.

Indirectly, this is also a way of theorizing learning (similarly to Billett's analyses) as ways knowledge is being used and how knowledge resources are being modified in the problem-solving processes of work.

But this contribution to learning theory is restricted to (or at least strongly prioritizes) the cognitive dimension. Despite an obvious awareness of other dimensions—the learner's personal experiences, the specific nature of the work—they appear as ad-hoc analytic observations and distinctions, which are not being theorized. Eraut's mission is different: to study the development of knowledge and competence. As I have argued elsewhere, however, this mission would gain strength by paying systematic attention to the dynamics of learning and to the subjective meaning of work and knowledge for the professional (Olesen, 2007a).

These approaches share a tendency to operate with abstract learner subjects, individuals without history—both in the sense of an individual life history and in the sense of societal and cultural attributes, e.g., gender. They bring valuable insights but need to be reinterpreted and complemented.

Two questions seem to be left behind: 1) The societal dimensions defining the practical environment, including the historical/cultural framework of knowledge and meaning-making, and 2) The subjective mediation of culture in the individual life history of the human agent. Such generalizing characterization may be unfair to these approaches. My point is not to judge and evaluate, but to indicate some theoretical questions that have troubled me in some of the most productive lines of thinking about learning. Without rejecting the approaches in general, these questions have led me to work within more fundamental theoretical frameworks—Marxism and psychoanalysis—providing the context for what I call here a psycho-societal methodological approach.

### SUBJECTIVITY IN MARXIST THEORY

I have always been fascinated by the concept of the “Political Economy of Labor” or “Political Economy of Working People,” which was not first launched but convincingly elaborated by Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge in their great 1981 (Negt & Kluge, 1981) book *Geschichte und Eigensinn* (translated roughly as *History and Autonomy* or *History and Self-Reliance*). I see this concept as a potential framework for reinterpreting the ideas of subjectivity and learning within a Marxian theory—with implications for political as well as for social science thinking. This reinterpretation would potentially link the utopian idea of a society beyond capitalist organization with the interpretation of subjectivity in everyday life in capitalism.

The concept met a long-felt need in relation to the theoretical interpretation of Marxism in my student generation around 1970, and in the neo-Marxism of all Continental Europe. In the reception of the analysis of capital and capitalism by Marx, there was always an intellectual irritation about the relation of this theoretical insight

in capitalism to political agency and ideas about socialism. Marxism must encompass an endogenous understanding of potentials and conditions for political agency and societal change to prevent the political void, which in the “realized socialism” in the Soviet Union was filled by elitism. The new left in the West, in opposition to the Communist-led socialism, opted for a more radical idea of democracy, also rejecting the Social Democrats who had abandoned Marxism and believed in a more equal distribution of an ever-growing capitalist cake. In some Nordic countries, the fact of a relatively benign social welfare state and the role of the labor movement in building a welfare society were unquestionable, but the politics of work life were somehow relegated to a limited defense of wages. The new-left ideas of a more radical democracy were mainly based in the libertarian culture of the middle class, and mainly related to material structures by pointing out their repressive and distorting influence in the form of industrial work conditions and meaningless mass consumption. Negt and Kluge (1981) reinvigorate the idea that a more radical democracy (than the liberal/social democracy) must have its footing in the basic economic relations of capitalism. Theoretically, working people should learn to be able to create a democratic political economy on the basis of “living work.” The political agency must be based in the experiences of work, and it must include the reorganization of work beyond capitalist control. This is the groundbreaking point of the political economy of the working people. I was involved in trade unions’ political education from the early 1970’s, when I was attempting to mediate practically between different experience horizons: the struggles within a capitalist economy and the utopian striving for a different societal order. So to me Negt and Kluge (1981) provided a decisive development in Marxist theory. They gave a logical complement to Marx’s theory as developed in *Grundrisse* and *Das Kapital*, and they synthesized a new version of historical materialism as a history of civilization, which promises a way out of the determinism of the capital and avoids the mechanical quality of historical materialism developed especially by Friedrich Engels and the communist political theory. The notion of the Political Economy of the Working People faces the basic question that remains today: how can we, living in the middle of a capitalism with an ability to flexibly subordinate all materiality and all subjectivity, see any *material dynamic* that can produce substantial change? Utopian perspectives must take their point of departure in the constitution of capitalism itself to be realistic, taking for granted that capitalism is the constitutive organization of our society. Negt put it in the title of his 2012 book *Nur noch Utopien sind realistisch (Only Utopian Ideas Are Realistic)* (Negt, 2012).

In the 1960s Oskar Negt anticipated this thinking in an important critique of political education in the labor movement, developing his alternative vision of “exemplary learning” (Negt, 1963). His point was that instead of stuffing people with theory of capitalism and socialist principles—which obviously failed—labor education should take everyday experiences as its point of departure. He was writing at a time when industrial workers were rebelling against the price paid for the economic prosperity in terms of work intensity and environmental risks—and against the lack of practical democracy in the labor movement itself. His points might have appeared less hopeful



in other periods when there were no rebellions, and when the societal preconditions for mobilization of class consciousness in the sense of traditional labor movements (communist and social democrat alike) were disappearing. Today it has become obvious that a theory of class consciousness extrapolated from *industrial* labor is obsolete. But it does not negate Negt's argument from this early book that political education must begin with concrete everyday experiences.

In *Geschichte und Eigensinn* the scope was much broader: a civilization history of subjectivity, constituted in the reproduction by work—not in the narrow capitalist sense of paid work or in the historically limited form of industrial work, but the living engagement with the environment in all its forms. Within this notion, capitalism is an organizing relation, and the life mode of wage labor an important but not universal historical form of subjectivity (Olesen, 1999, 2009).

But the point is that the idea of the political economy of the working people is a utopian concept related to the material societal level. In the scientific context of learning research, it can help us direct our attention and form questions for empirical study. In the Marxist tradition of the Frankfurt School, the aim of the critique is to reveal the historical and changeable nature of social reality, and to discover the invisible but latent potentials. By insisting on a principle of endogeneity, this critical tradition maintains a strictly materialist ontology while paying respect to the power of intellectual work and the dialectic between social reality and knowing and learning. The decisive contribution of Negt and Kluge's book (1981) is that it provides the framework for the historical and material interpretation of subjectivity as a product of capitalist civilization and a potential source for a new social order. And this is where it comes together with the theorizing of learning. Negt's critique of labor education pointed out the need to connect the experience of everyday life and analytical understanding of societal structure to foster what C. Wright Mills called sociological imagination—the ability to imagine an alternative reality. Understanding learning in the wider societal context means theorizing the material production of subjectivity in everyday life, finding out how it can be empirically researched. (It is social but not immediately visible.)

#### A METHODOLOGY FOR DISCOVERING THE INVISIBLE

Negt and Kluge (1981) have provided a conceptual framework that embraces evolutionary as well as historical dimensions of the material production of subjectivity—a Marxist phylogenesis. For learning, however the ontogenetic dimension, the development of subjectivity in an individual's life is the immediate context in which societal dynamics enable and shape learning processes. I want to introduce very briefly a proposal for a methodology that can trace the invisible subjective dimensions in everyday life interactions and articulations.

For many years, my research group in Roskilde has worked with life history approaches to understand learning, participation in education and (work) identity processes, e.g., in studying professional learning processes, in studying learning

motivation, in studying competences and formal qualifications, etc. In some cases we have used life stories as our material; in others we have just tried to understand embodied societal and cultural dimensions in individual identity processes and social interaction in everyday life—including work organizations. Our life history research has drawn on several sources of inspiration, but one of the most important has been a German methodology of researching the consciousness of everyday life (Leithäuser, 1976; Olesen, 1999). It is based on a synthesis of the Frankfurt School critical theory and psychoanalysis as originally developed by Alfred Lorenzer, and a phenomenologically inspired attention to the experience of profane everyday life. In the last 10 years or so, we have established an international research group of German, British and Danish scholars working with similar psycho-societal approaches to everyday life. The shared concern has been methodological and theoretical, but our mode of operation has been to work together on empirical interpretations of everyday life material—for the Danish participants, primarily work-related learning and identity processes. The joint work within similar approaches revealed very deep cultural differences between different language communities. Together we produced an introduction in English to this research experience in the form of a thematic issue of the open-access online journal *Forum for Qualitative Social Research* (Olesen, 2012), including a rather detailed introduction to the theoretical and methodological contributions of Alfred Lorenzer. His proposal for an “in-depth hermeneutic” cultural analysis methodology was launched in an environment with an almost complete split between social sciences and psychology/psychoanalysis. It presents the background in his materialist socialization theory, which combines social reinterpretation of the core insights in classical psychoanalysis—the unconscious, the drives—with the theory of language acquisition. His methodology is based on a transformation of the “scenic understanding” from clinical to text interpretation, which seeks to understand collective unconscious meaning in the text.

There were two interrelated reasons for focusing on Lorenzer within a broad and multiple tradition of combining a Marxian analysis of society (Frankfurt School critical theory) and psycho-dynamic theorizing of the subject. One was that Lorenzer was particularly important to the development of a methodology of empirical qualitative research. The other was that his socialization theory, with its focus on language while maintaining a clearly materialistic view of the body and socio-material structure of society, provided a key contribution to theoretical and epistemological issues of social science that have become articulated much later.

#### **SOCIALIZATION, LANGUAGE AND SCENIC UNDERSTANDING**

Alfred Lorenzer (1922–2002) was a medical psychiatrist trained in Freudian psychoanalysis. As a doctor and psychoanalyst, he took an early interest in societal critique and cultural theory, taking to task the Frankfurt School of thought and its critical theory. Understanding subjective structure as influenced by societal conditions increasingly came to dominate his theoretical thoughts. The red thread of his contribu-

tion is to provide a ground for social interpretation of the basic psychodynamic forces without giving up the radical insights of Freud's theory. The first step in this chain was an interactionist theory of socialization (1972) in which he reconceptualized the psychodynamic forces that were seen in classical psychoanalysis since Freud as a result of natural drives. In this way Lorenzer took up a decisive development in psychoanalysis, interpreting psychodynamics as a result of social interaction experiences in the early period of life, first between an infant and her/his mother (caring person). But his development of the symbolic dimension of this interaction provides the foundation for a cultural dimension that is important for learning. As early as 1970, he criticized the psychoanalytical concept of the "symbol" (1970a), placed it in a linguistic science context (1970b) and subsequently expanded the application of it into socialization theory (1972), epistemology (1974) and cultural analysis (1986). Lorenzer's socialization theory enabled an understanding of the unconscious—the most radical element in psychoanalysis—as a result of the symbolic interaction. Like Freud, he analyzes the development of the structure of personality as "representing experiences of bodily interactions" (1972, p. 17). But whereas Freud saw their impact on the psyche as predominantly distortion, disturbance and blocking of (biological) drives in the subject, Lorenzer approaches these social interactions and their bodily experiences as a dialectical *shaping* of the drives *into a subject*, and the resulting psychic dynamics as a highly social and cultural phenomenon. The individual sensual experiences of social relations and meanings in immediate interaction are connected with the wider social world in the form of symbols. The issues of psychotherapy, disturbances of the psychic development, were reinterpreted as disturbances of the possibility to symbolize individual sensual experiences in socially recognized language. Lorenzer's critical reinterpretation of the psychic disturbances are expressed in the early book titles *Kritik des psychoanalytischen Symbolbegriffs* (*Critique of the Psychoanalytic Concept of Symbol*) and *Sprachzerstörung und Rekonstruktion* (*Language Destruction and Reconstruction*), both published in 1970. The works that followed developed methodological ideas for an endogenous understanding of the subjective dimensions of social interaction and language—quite opposite to the direction Freud took in his meta-psychological and cultural theory.

While this critique enables a reinterpretation of the psychotherapeutic task, it also opens a new way of theorizing the psychodynamic aspects of societal relations. Symbolic/cultural meaning (for the individual) is seen as a complex mediation of social interaction and sensual experience, and it has conscious aspects as well as unconscious ones. Later, Lorenzer further developed his key concept of "interaction forms" to understand the inner, pre-linguistic experiences of practices and relations. These interaction forms are connected with the socially recognized language to form symbolic interaction forms, and the developing of capacity for symbolic production can be seen as an integrated dimension of socialization. This understanding of the early socialization process enabled Lorenzer to see language, interaction and bodily (drive) processes in their wider societal context. We can add an epistemological perspective: in the context of a constructivist social science, it enables us to see how ideas

about societal relations are embodied in individual socialization. Lorenzer's thoughts on the role of language in subject constitution build on the theorem of language games, which he took up from the works of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953/2009) and developed further. Language is anchored in concrete social practices in a dialectic unit of language use, everyday life practice and view of the world (Weber, 2010). Language games are thus defined as the interface at which subjective and objective structures interact. The question of the constitution of language games is, therefore, also one that addresses the constitution of the relationship between individual and society. Approached this way, language and consciousness are inseparably linked with social practice. If the constitution of language games is seen as integral to the development of subjective structures under objective conditions, then the individual subject can be understood and deciphered using its *ex ante* social reference.

### PSYCHO-SOCIETAL METHODOLOGY AND CRITICAL SOCIAL RESEARCH

Lorenzer's contribution to the methodology gains a wider perspective by theorizing the genesis of the correspondence between unconscious dynamics in the subject and unconscious or unintended dimensions of societal and cultural processes. What is in the first place mainly a material theory of socialization—which, unlike many other theories, does not see the social shaping of the individual as assimilation to social structure—is in the second place a radical epistemology of societal dynamics. Lorenzer's theory of language games and his meta-psychological and methodological notions are closely linked with the search for opportunities for epistemic reconstruction of suppressed social relationships, which are (societally) imprinted in the (many individual) psyches and in their interaction. Lorenzer, in brief, draws attention to the hermeneutic methodology of psychoanalytic understanding. The immediate inspiration is offered by an interpretation of interaction and cultural meaning in a way inspired by psychoanalytic interpretation, namely "scenic understanding." Lorenzer separates the methodological principles of psychoanalysis—simultaneous attention, free association, and the concepts of transfer and counter-transfer—from the clinical context of doctor-patient relationships, and transfers them to social and cultural scientific interpretive practice. He thus emphasizes the methodological experience as opposed to direct transfers of theoretical models, since, in his view, these cannot be transferred from one field to another.

The socialization theory with an emphasis on the forming of the relation between sensual experiences and language in social interaction was Lorenzer's first distinguishing contribution. It builds a theoretical foundation for his second distinguishing contribution: the development of a psycho-societal interpretation method with inspiration from the psychoanalytical interpretation of individuals, which enables the focusing on the societal and cultural dimensions of psychic dynamic—and vice versa: the psychic dimensions of social interaction and societal practice. In a late stage of his work, in the key text in *Kulturanalysen* (1986), he coins the (title) notion of "Tiefenhermeneutische Kulturanalyse," which focuses on the systematic reconstruc-

tion of unconscious meaning dimensions in analysis of literary texts. According to his cultural analysis, literary texts contain a provocation that goes beyond individual and biographically specific reception patterns and points to societal, collective motives and meaning substance, which are unconscious.

The first methodical issue is to gain access to this level, not with an individual therapeutic aim, but to understand its social meaning. The interpretation of texts, be they literary works, field notes or excerpts from interviews, also constitutes a multilayered scene. Just like the conscious level, the unconscious level is a result of life-history experience of social interaction. For the same reason, the unconscious is assumed to contain potential for social imagination that goes beyond the actual state of consciousness—either because it contains interaction experiences later been excluded from consciousness, or because it contains anticipating ideas of something “emerging” that has not yet been realized in social practice.

Lorenzer’s understanding of the critical and utopian potentials in the unconscious articulates an important dimension in the thinking of critical theory or the Frankfurt School, which generally sees theorizing and critique as a key to social imagination and utopian ideas. Since this thinking is based on materialist assumptions, it means imagination is endogenous—i.e., it must be discovered and articulated from within societal reality, as it is condensed in Adorno’s argument in the positivist dispute:

But if theory is not to fall prey to the dogmatism over whose discovery skepticism—now elevated to a prohibition on thought—is always ready to rejoice, then theory may not rest here. It must transform the concepts which it brings, as it were, from outside into those which the objects has of itself, into what the object, left to itself, seeks to be, and confront it with what it is. (Adorno, 1969/1976, p. 69)

In Habermas’s thinking, the term “Ideology Critique” spells out the need to reveal endogenous potentials for societal change through a critical analysis of social realities themselves. Change does not come from above or outside. But whereas Habermas first of all sees the key in deconstructing observation and reflection of “petrified social relations” and the societal institutions that make up the guises of power, social inequality and reified relations, Lorenzer looks for the potentials in socialized psyche, in the dynamics between the conscious and the unconscious. This brings the argument back to the text (in its widest sense: the symbolic representation of social interaction).

Lorenzer’s theoretical deliberations point to social taboo, degenerate lifestyles and utopian moments of social practice that, while being unconsciously maintained, also emerge to influence (our) consciousness—for example, with the help of literary texts. Their provocation, according to Lorenzer, lies in the fact that they transport aspects of the collective unconscious, which forces itself into the conscious.

In the 1970s Lorenzer’s work was widely cited and read, both in Germany and abroad (notably Scandinavia), and today his ideas continue to inform a vigorous tradition of cultural analysis and social research (Leithäuser, 1976; Leithäuser & Volmerg,

1988; Lorenzer, 1970a, 1970b, 1971, 1972, 1974, 1977, 1981/2002, 1986, 2006; Morgenroth, 1990, 2010; Prokop, Friese, & Stach, 2009). A number of Scandinavian, especially Danish, researchers have published work (mostly in Danish) directly referring to this tradition, or using the methods more or less in accordance with it. (For an overview, see Weber, 1996, 2007, 2009, 2010; Salling Olesen, 2004, 2007a, 2007b, 2011; Olesen & Weber, 2001; Weber & Olesen, 2002.) However, Lorenzer is little known outside German-speaking communities.

Danish, German and British groups have been working together since 2001 in the form of an annual conference, research seminars, joint Ph.D. supervision, mutual guest teaching and other activities gradually—but carefully—expanding our membership, with colleagues from several European countries. The group was organized by Kirsten Weber and our colleagues from Roskilde University in 2001 to create a meeting place between our own empirical research into learning, gender and work, and two main inspirations for our work. One is a German tradition of cultural analysis on a psycho-societal ground, generally inspired by Lorenzer and sociologists/social philosophers like Adorno and Negt. The other is a U.K.-based tradition that comes from psychology and social work, and strives to establish the psychic dimension of social organizations and behavior; it draws on Kleinian psychoanalysis, experiences from the Tavistock Institute and the cultural studies tradition (Birmingham School).

All are engaged in critical research—in the form of empirical studies in important areas of contemporary societies (beside education and learning also social work, health, work life at large) and/or in participatory research where researchers engage directly in interaction with their research fields and the people whose life experiences and futures are being researched. In this way we are united by the ambition of drawing experiences from the most fundamental theoretical and methodological discussions into very profane research practice. Our work format, sharing interpretation practices and examples, has been also based on the idea that critical social science will—as a basic principle—be concrete because utopian horizons and transforming agency is always based in specific historical situations and experiences.

#### FINAL REMARKS

It was not possible to give a proper introduction to In-depth Hermeneutics, neither the key concepts—interaction forms, engrams, experience, symbolization, language game, utopian imagination—nor the practical implementation as method. What can only be briefly indicated in this paper is that it is a carefully elaborated methodology for the interpretation of subjective aspects of social interaction, which reveals conscious as well as unconscious meanings, drawing on psychoanalytical experiences and insights. We have transferred the ideas to analyses of “profane” everyday life—including work life, learning and social work. We have renamed our approach a psycho-societal approach to avoid the connotation that the methodology aims only at a psychodynamic level of meanings.

I think this inspiration may help address some of the questions left behind in state-of-the-art learning theories: it may help us recognize the specificity of the individual learner-subject while recognizing that (s)he is shaped by a social life experience. It may help connect specific societal environments with subjective engagements of learners in everyday life, providing a productive point of departure for understanding the interplay between embodied sensual experiences and linguistically mediated knowledge.

It is essential for this regenerating of the method, but also in line with Lorenzer's theory of socialization, that the unconscious levels of meaning are socially produced in the interplay between the individual's sensual life experiences and the entrance in/participation in cultural language games. This dynamic between sensual experiences and linguistically mediated social knowledge enables a new, much more sophisticated view on the learning of practical competences, which include bodily engagement by either practical actions or by relational involvement. The "Cartesian" paradigm of practice as applied abstract knowledge can be replaced with a more sophisticated concept of knowledge and learning embodied and embedded in social practice—a very important perspective in work and learning research.

Further, my intention here was to offer an approach to subjectivity in learning processes that can connect the subjective processes of everyday life with the utopian imagination of societal change—e.g. the societal organization of work, a political economy of working people. The strictly materialist framework of Lorenzer's theory accounts for the embodiment of collective/social unconscious insights and fantasies in the bodies and the social practices in a way that make them invisible—at least temporarily and in certain situations—while remaining virulent in people's learning and consciousness-building. Aware of the many misunderstandings concerning the nature of psychoanalytic interpretation and the complexities I could not attend to in this article, I strongly recommend the thematic issue of *Forum for Qualitative Social Research*, in the hope that readers will learn more about the potentials of this approach by finding out more about the theory, and also by studying some of the empirical examples and case studies related to work life and learning (Olesen, 2012).

#### NOTES

Negt and Kluge used the German expression "eine politische Ökonomie der Arbeitskraft"—Marx used similar expressions as counterpieces to the political economy of capital—e.g. "political economy of the working class" or ". . . of work." I have earlier translated them into "political economy of labor;" following Marx' logic as well as Negt's interpretation, I think the best might be "a political economy of living work." This is both a translation problem and an issue of understanding Marx's multilayered intellectual idea—delivering a critique of (i.e., revealing) the political nature of the economy organized by capital—and his notion of capital as a relation between "dead labor" and "living work."

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**UCZENIE SIĘ A PSYCHO-SPOŁECZNY CHARAKTER  
PRAKTYKI SPOŁECZNEJ:  
ŚLEDZĄC NIEWIDOCZNE SPOŁECZNE WYMIARY PRACY I UCZENIA SIĘ**

**ABSTRAKT:** Artykuł przedstawia psychospołeczne podejście do empirycznych badań nad uczeniem się, w którym materialistyczna teoria socjalizacji splata się z hermeneutyczną metodologią interpretacyjną. Artykuł skupia się na jednostkowej podmiotowości, a także podmiotowych/subiektywnych aspektach interakcji społecznej. Pojęcie „podejścia” wskazuje na nieodłączne powiązanie teoretyzacji empirycznego przedmiotu, procesu badawczego i epistemicznego podmiotu. Metoda praktyczna polega na zastosowaniu procedury interpretacyjnej, opartej na transkrypcji wywiadów lub notatkach z obserwacji terenowych. Poprzez interpretację wypowiedzi i interakcji z perspektywy subiektywnych znaczeń, jakie mają one dla podmiotów i rozmówców, metoda ta dąży do zrozumienia uczenia się jako podmiotowego/subiektywnego procesu doświadczania rzeczywistości społecznej. Szczególnie dla niej ważna jest relacja między tym, co „widoczne”, a tym, co „niewidoczne”, tj. tkwiące w zbiorowej nieświadomości znaczenia, które można wysledzić w tekstach i interakcjach na drodze wrażliwej interpretacji.

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** podejście psychospołeczne, metoda jakościowa, teoria uczenia się, socjalizacja, doświadczenie, gra językowa, neo-marksizm.

