Emotion and Affect Across Varied Contexts and Genres

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This exciting and diverse issue of *Mind, Culture and Activity* includes a commencement address; articles on corporal punishment in South Africa, expansive learning in community-based citizenship classes in Ohio, and exploratory talk in peer supervision groups in a university in Norway; five articles composing a symposium on Spinoza; and a book review. In various ways, all the materials touch on themes of emotion and affect and how they may be conceived within cultural-historical activity theory.

In June 2018, Ray McDermott delivered a commencement address, “In Praise of Schoolchildren,” to the Stanford University Graduate School of Education. McDermott discussed the neoliberal takeover of American school systems that pit one child against another in fierce competitive contests, creating a destructive endgame of “winners” and “losers.” But, notes McDermott, the United States has a strong tradition of righteous ideas about education developed by our poets and philosophers, including John Dewey, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Walt Whitman. “Early American ideas on democracy and learning were more promising than the crass input-output models that dominate today’s schools and research agendas,” says McDermott (p. 288). It is imperative that we return to our ideals. The ethos of advanced capitalism elevates competition, declares greed a virtue, and requires allegiance to narrowly conceived metrics of success. These harsh prescriptions penetrate to the youngest and most vulnerable among us (whether through social class or being labeled, e.g., “learning disabled”). The rigidity of hierarchy and privilege are “first-order assumptions” in our schools, McDermott reminds us.

McDermott’s commencement address is particularly pertinent given today’s unsettling political and economic context in which nationalisms are surging and neoliberal principles continue to pervade and polarize teaching and learning. We hope McDermott’s work encourages authors to pursue inquiries into the place of schooling in the reproduction of inequality, “success” and “failure,” oppression and democracy.

The article “Malicious to the Skin: The Internalisation of Corporal Punishment as a Teaching and a Disciplinary Tool Among South African Teachers” takes us to a different kind of oppression in school, namely, the remarkable persistence of corporal punishment in South Africa, despite its having been made illegal two decades ago. Simangele Mayisela examines why teachers continue to believe that corporal punishment is useful. Mayisela argues that teachers internalize their own experiences of corporal punishment and have come to believe that it was a factor in their personal development and success. They thus believe that they should deliver its benefits to the children they teach. Mayisela notes, “The historical background of teachers suggests the hostile manifestation of structural violence as well as the symbolic violence that was perpetuated through oppressive state policies which were enacted by the police as the state instrument under the Apartheid system” (p. 303). These historical circumstances induced an acceptance of violence. Just as McDermott points to advanced capitalism as the ultimate mechanism of the skewing of educational practice in the United States toward competition with its inevitable crop of losers, Mayisela grounds her analysis in the stark historical conditions of Apartheid in South Africa in which violence permeated policy and culture.

In “Partially Shared Objects and the (Elusive) Potential of Expansive Learning: The Case of “Jury” in Community-Based Citizenship Classes for Nepali-Speaking Bhutanese Refugee Elders,” Brian Seilstad examines the difficulties of displaced persons learning to become citizens in a new country as they take citizenship classes in central Ohio. Using the concept of “leading activity,” which connotes an activity that is “more dominant at a certain stage in life” (p. 320), Seilstad indicates
that many Bhutanese refugee elders have rarely experienced school learning as a leading activity, which has sidelined some potential sources of expansive learning in the citizenship classes. Seilstad shows how even “a multilingual, multicultural team of teachers and researchers with a specific goal of engaging with learners’ funds of knowledge” struggled to leverage “the cultural-historical understandings of a marginalized group in a way that would be relevant for not only the [citizenship] test but also broader participation in American society” (p. 320). Seilstad notes that his analysis troubles the “funds of knowledge” approach in revealing how power asymmetries between multiple activity systems mediate expansive learning opportunities in unexpected ways.

In “Creating Shared Spaces: Developing Teaching Through Peer Supervision Groups,” Thomas de Lange and Anne Wittek studied cross-disciplinary teaching faculty in Norway who used techniques of peer supervision to improve their teaching. In many cases, peer interactions were less effective than they might have been as the interactions were “overly friendly and not sufficiently challenging to the participants” (p. 337). Disciplinary boundaries created opportunities for gaining new insights, yet participants held friendliness and politeness in such high regard that they hindered honest, critical feedback. De Lange and Wittek note that peer supervision activities may need more time for participants to develop sufficient trust for honest communication. The “positive” affect of friendliness and politeness ironically led to poor peer learning outcomes.

The Spinoza Symposium, with four articles and its own Introduction, needs only brief mention here. Several issues of long-standing interest to MCA readers converge in a symposium on the relevance of the ideas of Baruch Spinoza for fundamental issues in contemporary studies of the relation between emotion and cognition in human psychological functioning. The symposium, comprising an international collection of scholars, debates the role of Spinoza in the thinking of L. S. Vygotsky and the ways that Spinoza’s monistic materialism can inform the future of cultural-historical activity theory scholarship.

Our book review of Yrjö Engeström’s *Expertise in Transition: Expansive Learning in Medical Work* was written by Alan Bleakley, Emeritus Professor of Medical Education and Medical Humanities. Bleakley says that *Expertise in Transition* is the best book he has read on medical education, far ahead of other efforts of which he is aware. *Expertise in Transition* is based on research at Engeström’s Center for Research on Activity, Development and Learning. Activity theory is not well-established in medical education, and widespread adoption of the ideas will require time and work. Bleakley explains the particular ways in which Engeström’s findings are useful for his field but cautions that Engeström’s calls for change may not be heeded anytime soon. For instance, Bleakley tells us that a major blockage is that “historically, while medical culture deals every day with ambiguity, its stated aim is to reduce uncertainty through certainty of diagnoses, prognoses and treatment plans,” even though “such certainties are … confounded daily, especially in an era in which more patients are being diagnosed with ‘borderline’ mental illness such as anxiety and depression” (p. 392).

Finally, we offer many thanks to Ivana Guarassi, who created an e-mail list of current and emeritus Editorial Board Members so that we can better communicate with one another.

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