Beyond Context

Education 545, Fall 2010

Mondays 12-2PM, 3700 Walnut, Room 427

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Context is invoked in some form or other by most accounts of human phenomena. “It depends on the context” is almost always an appropriate observation. But “context” is defined in heterogeneous ways, and it is often invoked without adequate exploration. This seminar considers how context has been (and should be) invoked in accounts of knowledge and education. In each of these domains, Enlightenment accounts envision a decontextualized ideal. These ideals have been challenged over the past century or two by accounts that celebrate context, even to the point of sacrificing any sense of justified knowledge and formal education. Readings for this course engage with the decontextualized ideal and the responses in each domain. The larger goal is to explore whether we can retain some stable concept of knowledge and education while acknowledging the power of the critiques. Another central goal is to move beyond vague invocations of “context” to more systematic accounts of what context is and how it matters. This is a seminar devoted to exploring the nuances of important texts in the field, more than articulating a pre-established argument. Each class will focus around the meaning of the texts assigned, asking questions about the author’s account in its own terms.

Readings (All books are available at the Penn Bookstore):

September 13: Packer, M. The Science of Qualitative Research, Chapters 7 & 8; Taylor, C. Hegel, Chapter 1 (both available on blackboard).


October 4: Lave, J. Cognition in Practice; Rosch, E. “Reclaiming Concepts” (available on blackboard).

October 11: Bourdieu, P. Outline of a Theory of Practice.

October 18: Dreyfus, H. Being-in-the-world.


November 8: Butler, J. Giving an Account of Oneself.

November 15: Csordas, T. Body/meaning/Healing.


November 29: Latour, B. We Have Never Been Modern.

December 6: Cole, M. Cultural Psychology.

December 13: Wortham, S. Learning Identity.

Assignments:

Students will write seminar papers for selected classes during the semester: October 4, November 1, November 29. These papers should reflect on the larger questions of the course in light of the last several weeks’ readings.

Students will write a final paper that takes a position on the central question: can we coherently both acknowledge the importance of context and maintain faith in schooled knowledge? Papers must take up at least three perspectives represented in the course and provide an argument defending an answer to the question. Papers should be 20-30 pages and will be due December 15.