

Critical evaluation of young people's learning in context of learning theory assi...

[Education](#)



A critical evaluation of young people's learning and development, with specific reference to the student's own role in working with young people
Shaun Higgins Introduction The aim of the assignment is to discuss & define my critical-standpoint on theories of learning & adolescent-development, in relation to how these inform as well as challenge my youth-work practice.

In summary, it will discuss: an understanding of adolescence; the relevance of an understanding of adolescence to meeting young-people's developmental-needs in youth-work practice; the relevance of identity to empowerment; wider issues of empowerment in practice; facilitating informal-learning; and the challenge of theory in practice. What is Adolescence? Kehily (2007), in exploring the history of ideas of adolescence, emphasises the existing difference between an idea of adolescence and an idea of youth, each having emerged from different research-traditions.

At the turn of the twentieth-century, G. Stanley Hall described adolescence as “ a transitional period in the journey from childhood to adulthood, characterised as a period of ‘ storm & stress’” (Kehily on Hall, p. 13): a time of extreme moods, thoughts & actions, engendered by physiological change and bodily development. Expanding on Darwin's concept of evolution, he created a biogenetic psychological theory of recapitulation: one where, from birth to adult, each individual passes through the same stages that humankind has itself passed, in its evolution.

Assuming that adolescent-development is determined by biological processes, and in making no account of environmental influence, his theory outlined an inevitable, predetermined, universally-applicable process;

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uninfluenced by society or culture (Muuss, 1996, p. 16). The more-recent sociological idea of 'youth' centres its concern on the influence of culture on the development of a young-person: not only in terms of how youth are defined or positioned by society, but also how youth choose to respond to this positioning & define themselves.

It is from this ideological-interaction that a 'youth-culture' evolves: a space where young-people can participate in cultural-practices as a way of making meaning of themselves, their world & find a sense of belonging; and through this process of self-discovery, develop & grow. It is also from this standpoint that youth are able to question, influence & possibly redefine the ideological & social forces that attempt to define them – stimulating healthy social-change (Kehily).

In contrast to the idea of transition, this period can be acknowledged as a time of life in its own right – in turn, acknowledging young-people as a social-demographic (not just simply 'adults-in-the-making') and offering youth a sense of place, identity and therefore a voice. Coleman and Hendry (1999) draw-upon both of these positions, accepting youth as a period of transition into independence, but also identifying how the nature of this transition, at any given time in history, will be affected by current social & political context.

Importantly, Coleman and Hendry also argue that this transition need not necessarily be seen as a period of "storm & stress": that, although difficulties may arise, it is the timing & number of difficulties that can lead to stress; that young-people find ways of coping and that youth is equally a

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period of joyful discovery, creativity & self-expression. The Relevance of Transitions & Youth-Culture to Youth-Work Practice Coleman and Hendry's overall standpoint corroborates the key-purpose of youth-work:

To work with young-people to facilitate their personal, social & educational development, and enable them to gain a voice, influence & place in society, in a period of their transition from dependence to independence (NYA, 2008)

With regard to youth-culture, an awareness of this context in practice not only highlights a spectrum of adolescent developmental-needs, but also insists that, to meet need, youth-work must take-place in this cultural-space.

Delivery contextualised by youth-culture in form & content allows structured-activities to be made meaningful & relevant to young-people's interests & lives (for example, using sports as a means of allowing young-people to enjoy sharing & participating in cultural-practice, whilst experiencing the purpose & benefits of rules and team-work).

Also supporting & encouraging young-people to take responsibility for the decision-making & organisation of such programmes, enables young-people to not only self-discover, but also become active in shaping, defining & owning their cultural-space; potentially leading-on to young-people interacting with and challenging wider cultural-forces from this standpoint that wish to compromise that space (for example, young-people advocating for themselves & others at decision-making forums within community-development).

With regard to transitions, Coleman and Hendry highlight the challenge of defining independence, when such a condition involves so many strands. However, if we assume independence to be the condition upon which an individual has the power to independently or interdependently meet their own individual needs (and by this equate independence with self-empowerment), youth-work becomes part of “ the process of enhancing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and transform those choices into desired actions & outcomes” (NYA, 2008).

In other words, the process by which young-people are empowered to empower themselves. Identity & Empowerment Bandura in his Social Cognitive Theory (Muuss, p. 281) and Erikson in his Theory of Identity Development (Muuss, p. 42), both explore how a sense of personal identity is formed through an interaction with the social-environment. In healthy adolescent-development, this sense is not just a clear awarenesss of self; but also of the world; what is possible in the world; and of what the self can achieve & make-possible in the world.

Bandura coined the term “ Self-Efficacy”: The belief in one’s capabilities to organise & execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations ... influencing the choices we make, the effort we put forth, how long we persist when we confront obstacles, in the face of failure, and how we feel (Bandura 1994) This is the outcome of Reciprocal Determism: that the ongoing-experience of one’s own behaviour & one’s own social-environment mutually influencing each-other, determines the sense of one’s own power to affect difference (Bandura).

Erikson's stage-model outlines the "ground plan" by which an individual's identity becomes "successively differentiated", as a result of interaction with their social-environment. Contrary to Coleman, Erikson sees conflict as the driving-force of adolescent development. At each stage, the individual experiences a social-crisis, from which two outcomes are possible. Both of these outcomes ultimately need be experienced and synthesised for the individual to develop healthily at that stage (Muuss, p. 45), and become fully-eficacious in that regard.

Identity & Self-Efficacy are therefore inextricably-linked to each-other and Self-Empowerment. The healthy result of this ongoing-process is a confident ideological-basis upon which the individual may effectively discriminate & make realistic judgements about self, world & personal-eficacy; leading to high self-esteem, well-adjustment & productivity. The unhealthy result produces unconfident, misunderstanding, undirected & unmotivated individuals, making ineffective or unrealistic judgements that interfere with further development; possibly manifesting itself in adjustment-problems or even poor mental-health. Muuss, p. 46) Wider Issues of Empowerment From a youth-work-practice perspective, empowering young-people deeply-entrenched within & restricted by the culture of povertous social-contexts is problematic – such as that found in isolated-pockets of the community on low-income housing-estates, for example. Within such contexts, not only are young-people at greater-risk of forming potentially ineffective senses of self, world & efficacy, but this collectively-shared disempowering ideology, experienced in relative-isolation, becomes an unchallenged norm.

Individuals within this context also become fearful of those who wish to question or change, as this forces them to confront the limits of their comfort. Where there is little outside influence from other cultures, there is also little understanding, space or reason to question the wider ideological & social forces that have played their part in defining this culture, leading to unhealthy stagnation. Poorly-adjusted young-people discovering a sense of identity affirmed by anti-social thinking & behaviour, become of even-greater concern.

When finding a sense of place & self-esteem from the company of other anti-social individuals, such young-people place themselves at odds with wider society as well as the law, occupying a severely-disempowering space from which little negotiation or transition to other cultural-contexts, can take place. An example of a marginalised young-person from a low-income estate crossing some of these condoned cultural-barriers is described in Appendix A. Here, I met “ J”, a known young-man, engaging with other peers outside of his usual context.

He had made the brave move of stepping beyond his usual sphere, but his behaviour was still inappropriate for the situation, as acknowledged by other young-people. I wanted to support him in managing his behaviour to ensure that this opportunity would become a gateway into wider cultural-experience. However, although I had worked with him in group-work sessions for some months prior, trust was still an issue. He was obviously seeking wider-experience, but had not necessarily seen the need to change his behaviour or wanted me to support him in that.

This lack of trust in myself as a youth-worker, or even the youth-work process, stems from a number of sources. J has been involved with a number of different services, many of which have enforcement powers, and youth-workers are seen by him as just another aspect of this authoritative pantheon. Myself challenging J has also required him to step-out of his comfort zone, which was difficult when he & his accompanying peers during group-work sessions were not consistently-supportive of the process, reacting negatively towards anyone showing desire to question or make change.

These challenges were also a threat to a lifestyle & identity he thrived on which have had little punitive-outcomes for him at fourteen. Young-people are willing to engage in youth-work only once they have at least: some understanding their own needs; or of what youth-work is; trust in youth-workers; and/or believe that youth-work can support them in meeting their needs. In this moment with J, I wanted to intervene to give him at least the opportunity to momentarily reflect on his behaviour, that may have led more towards him being motivated to change his behaviour.

However, the opportunity was missed, which I discuss more below, alongside how a young-person can be motivated to engage in youth-work. Facilitating Informal Learning in Context of Learning Theory As already implied through previous discussion, my personal position on the nature of adolescence/youth and its relation to youth-work concerns itself with the interaction between the young-person, their developmental political & social

context, the processes by which they make meaning of their world and how they can be self-consciously engaged in shaping themselves & that world.

A similar position is taken in relation to learning-theory. In focussing on learning as an experiential process, as opposed to a product of experience, learning becomes less an absorption of commodified knowledge and more the means by which we understand & make sense of our world (Smith, 1999). It also indicates that youth-workers may facilitate learning via the structure of their delivery, shaping the informal content presented & owned by the young-person.

In context of Experiential Learning Theory, youth-work can provide contexts where young people can experience “ a ‘ direct encounter with the phenomena being studied rather than merely thinking about the encounter, or only considering the possibility of doing something about it. ‘ (Borzak, 1981). Just as Experiential Learning emphasises learning from direct-experience, the motivation to learn equally arises as a result of experience, itself (ie that our experiences & realisations always lead to further questions – as illustrated, for example, with Dewey’s Model of Experiential Learning).

In ‘ working from the known’, youth-workers begin with what young-people present and build new learning upon existing understanding. This is part of what it means to be young-person centred and, in terms of motivating young-people and making learning meaningful, is as its most effective when young-people are part of the process of identifying their own learning needs (Tight, 2000, p. 109). Engaging people in a dialectical educational-process is a cornerstone of the work of Freire.

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Just as the self is formed in dialogue with its environment, self-empowerment through education is achieved by the educator not acting upon but working mutually with the learner; where the learning is motivated by fulfillment of the needs self-identified by the learner. Fundamentally, the underlying aim is to raise consciousness, deepen understanding & give voice to the oppressed, so that they may have the power to transform themselves & their reality (Smith, 1997, 2002).

Freire's method is to "problematise" the lived-experience of individuals: raising questions that lead the learner to reflect upon their current situation from a wider perspective, realise their needs and be motivated to seek a solution. As with Experiential Learning, if the facilitator & the process are trusted by the learner, and the learning offers a tangible, achievable means of empowerment relevant to their world, then the learner will be utterly motivated to learn.

Freire does not see the educator as the source of knowledge, but that learners have the solutions & resources to their problems themselves. Learners are the experts on their own lives and any solution sourced by the learner can then be independently replicated again at a later date (Tennant, 2006). This process of transformation is one of achieving 'conscientization' (or self-awareness), self-efficacy and therefore self-empowerment: the development of a clear awareness of self and of what the self can make-possible in the world. The Challenge of Theory in Practice

I have chosen to discuss Freire last, as his theory throws-down an important practical challenge. Freire's emphasis on 'praxis' – or action informed by

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values - follows on from conscientization and is what makes a difference in the world. My praxis as a worker has a direct-impact on the young-people I work with (as a part of their environment) and places great emphasis on how I respond in-action to young-people. With reference again to Appendix A, my desired aim with J was to raise his consciousness concerning his social-behaviour.

In that moment, were I to have used the opportunity to ask a question, rather than simply give a response: to have problematised that moment for him (even if he was to then still walk-away as a result), I would have at least given him a momentary insight into his learning needs. Also, in saying that I would have to call the Police, I actually paralysed myself with the authorities that he is so mistrusting of, so did nothing to improve my image as a practitioner wanting to offer him respectful & equal engagement.

So, in effect, I offered no possibility of dialogue and was therefore not empowering at all. Although I have a clear knowledge of Freire's theories, this is not always manifest in my praxis. This is the difference between knowledge and understanding and is the practice-challenge brought to me by this theory. Conclusion Essentially, my theoretical & practical standpoint focusses itself upon raising individual consciousness in order to bring-about social & political change.

I view young-people as being self-directed individuals who, with support, can be self-consciously engaged & empowered to identify & fulfill their own needs & desires, and positively shape themselves & their world. Learning occurs as an interaction between an individual and their developmental

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political & social context. As a youth-worker, I see informal education as providing activities offering authentic personal- & cultural-experiences from which young-people can autonomously draw the learning they need.

It is by operating within the realm of youth-culture that youth-workers can explicitly-link the personal and the cultural in ideologically healthy ways, foster conscientization and with it positive self-identity, self-efficacy & self-empowerment; acknowledge young-people as individuals in their own right and make meaning of their current lives, whilst growing into independence for the future. My personal challenge is to take-hold of every opportunity to facilitate this in-action (especially as a detached worker) as, once gone, those opportunities are lost.

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