

Enculturation: Contemporary Use in the Learning Sciences from a Historical Perspective

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Abstract: We are working on an extended literature review to create a useful framework that elucidates the complex process of enculturation for the learning sciences. The purpose of this poster is to present our progress based upon issues and dilemmas that have come up in disciplines that have examined enculturation, with the goal of applying them to educational contexts. Such a framework can inform current learning sciences researchers as they appropriate this fundamental learning concept.

Background

Enculturation is one of the foremost constructs describing how cultures evolve over time, from generation to generation. Since the mid-twentieth century, it has had significance in anthropology and sociology, where it was conceived. Despite its widespread use and obvious importance as a construct, or perhaps because of it, there are multitudes of definitions describing how the process works. It is clearly complex and has conceptual ambiguity (Shimahara, 1970).

Along with the impact of Vygotskian thought, which is the basis of the recognition of socio-cultural processes in learning (Wertsch, 1985), the learning sciences field emerged in the early 1990's. Innovative ways to view learning that took into consideration a community perspective (Brown & Campione, 1994; Lave & Wenger, 1999; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1994) became new focuses in educational discourse. Fundamental behind many of these ideas was the view of learning from a metaphor of participation (Rogoff, 1994), showing that the learning sciences had adopted enculturation as a key concept (Brown, Collins, & DuGuid, 1989).

While enculturation has been widely accepted within the learning sciences at a macro-level, the conceptual ambiguity that it carried from other disciplines has still not been adequately theorized in educational settings. Recognizing that the enculturation process, on a micro-level, has unique characteristics within learning environments compared with the culture-at-large, the learning sciences community can benefit a great deal by refining the contemporary use of enculturation from a historical perspective. In this poster, we propose a preliminary perspective and inquiry process to investigate the contemporary use of the concept. Development of this framework can give consistency and clarity of use in the learning sciences given this conceptual ambiguity.

Guiding Questions

We seek to develop a framework that can articulate the various perspectives that learning scientists have taken about the enculturation process at the micro-level. To do this, we ask the following questions:

- What issues surrounding the concept of enculturation existed or currently exist in other disciplines (e.g., sociology and anthropology)?
- How is this concept, as is used in the learning sciences, applied today?
- In what ways is enculturation different or the same whether in educational contexts or when considered from a broad cultural perspective?
- What framework can be applied to help learning scientists think about enculturation?

Inquiry Process

We propose an extended inquiry process to answer our guiding questions. We will start by examining the conceptual ambiguities of enculturation from different disciplines. Thereafter, we will investigate how they are dealt with in the uniqueness of educational contexts. As part of the inquiry process, we will investigate the differences between related terms, such as acculturation and socialization. Similarly, we will address cases where enculturation is not explicitly defined, but is taken for granted (e.g., Heath, 1983). We will conclude our review with a synthesis of uses of enculturation within the learning sciences.

A Preliminary Perspective

Our work thus far has led us to recognize several dimensions and open issues that are involved in conceptualizing the enculturation process. Table 1 summarizes various preliminary dimensions that we have appropriated from our review of relevant literature, with a lens on distinguishing between natural, professional, and educational settings.

Table 1: Preliminary dimensions comparing enculturation in different disciplines and settings

Dimension	Enculturation in everyday life	Enculturation in Educational settings	Enculturation in the workplace
Context	Everyday life (with the many cultural practices or behaviors, often contradictory)	Schools (depends upon clarity and consistency of school culture)	Work (depends upon clarity and unification of organizational culture)
Size	Culture or community (usually large)	Classroom or school community	Organization; workplace (usually small)
Age	Extends from day 1 to end of life.	Children (3-18) and adults (higher education and adult education)	Typically adult
Duration	Generation to generation	Semester, school year, several years in a school	Lifespan of a person's employment
Intentionality	Generally ambient	Designed	Generally ambient

In addition to these dimensions, there are also numerous open issues regarding the conceptual ambiguity of enculturation. We have identified three main analytical axes: a) uni-directionally versus bi-directionality; b) stable versus dynamic nature; c) descriptive versus prescriptive notions. Directionality refers to whether enculturation is viewed as a one-way street, from culture to individual, or if the individual also influences the culture. Stable versus dynamic refers to how and whether enculturation is conceptualized as something that undergoes change. Finally, descriptive versus prescriptive notions refers to whether enculturation is different in designed versus emergent settings.

We hope to further examine these issues and refine our preliminary framework as we continue with our extended literature review. This can ultimately contribute to how learning and becoming in practice, otherwise known as the process of enculturation, is theorized in the learning sciences.

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