

“Don’t Know Much About History” and it’s NOT a Wonderful World

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Institutions are rules: rules that constrain and afford behavior, rules to inspire some beliefs and depress others, rules establishing and maintaining relations of power among persons within and outside an institution. Institutional rules evolve over the history and pre-history of an institution and continue to evolve in moments of interaction among persons, who are neither cultural nor judgmental dopes. Persons are both norm-abiding rule followers and self-interested rational actors with histories of their own. Personal histories are rarely considered in the analysis of institutional interaction, yet personal histories are the source of enduring dispositions to feel, think, and behave in institutions.

In this presentation I focus on the institution I know best – classrooms in United States schools – and I will argue that personal histories of learners and teachers provide new insights into classroom discourse. What learners and teachers do and don’t do, what they say, how they say it, and what they don’t say are revealed in a practice-theoretical approach inspired by Bourdieu, de Certeau, Goffman, and Foucault and illustrated in recent studies of:

- The situated experiences of bilingual students from Texas in Spanish heritage language classrooms
- Reports by working-class students of their experiences in foreign language classrooms
- How a learner of Spanish and her tutor co-construct symbolic knowledge of culture symbols and histories
- Comparisons of novice teachers’ previous experiences as learners with their current discursive practices as teachers
- Collaborative consciousness-raising by learners with technical knowledge and those with folk knowledge

The song “What a Wonderful World” begins with the line “Don’t know much about history.” I argue in this presentation that if we don’t bring personal history into account, we cannot fully understand institutional discourse.