



Pedagogy in Higher Education: A Cultural Historical Approach

Wells, Gordon; and Edwards, Anne, eds.
Cambridge University Press, 2013

Book Review

Tags: administration | higher education | higher education history

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This book poses a central question: “What can Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) contribute to the solution of the problems facing higher education today?” For faculty teaching in theology and religion, there are further questions: do faculty agree on what the authors propose are higher education’s problems? Is CHAT theory valuable as an organizing resource in our field? And if so, is this the book that will be most useful to faculty for their work?

Wells and Edwards have assembled contributions from scholars from all over the world, many in education and many with some interest in sociocultural approaches to teaching and learning. They take a long view on changes in higher education: “[I]n the past two centuries, there have been several specific changes in the ways higher education has been expected to perform its functions for the benefit of the larger society” (1). For example, higher education now functions more like a business than it has in the past (which diverts faculty energies to grant-writing and its associated research). There is more student diversity, although “several categories of young people are still largely excluded” (3). In larger universities, huge class sizes create teaching that amounts to little more than “delivering the curriculum” – which then affects not only pedagogical strategy, but student learning outcomes as well.

The editors call for different kinds of pedagogy to meet the new kinds of learning that are needed, such as active learning, undertaken in collaboration with others, in which relationships, emotions, and motivation are taken into consideration as much as cognitive dimensions (4). Higher education should be “not only a preparation for a career but also a basis for lifelong learning as an informed and engaged contributor to the wider society” (4).

The book has two main sections. The first section is focused on teaching and learning, the second on “relations between institutions of higher education and the professions for which they prepare their students” (12). This is where some of the disadvantages of this text for theological educators become apparent. First, there is a heavy emphasis on undergraduate education - and enormous lecture classes are not necessarily the context in which most teach. Second, the lens through which educational trends and needs are explored is a somewhat esoteric theory (CHAT) not widely discussed in theological education circles. Finally, the majors the authors use in their examples are not related to theology and religion.

When a book costs as much as this one, it needs to be worth the cost. For most faculty in theological institutions, this is probably not the best investment to make. That is not to say this is not a good book; it simply is not the best investment when choosing teaching resources tailored for theological school contexts.

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