It is often said that learning, as an aspect of knowledge acquisition and transmission, is at the very core of the anthropological discipline and the concept of culture (Friedman-Hansen, 1982: 189; Lave, 1982). While specific anthropological attention to learning is relatively recent, anthropology’s broader concern with the ways in which individuals acquire the skills, practices, values and beliefs that enable them to become productive participants in their society takes many forms and dates back to the early stages of the discipline.

Anthropological theories on learning are as varied as the discipline itself, encompassing perspectives from evolutionary and biological anthropology (Bock, 2010; Flinn and Ward, 2005; McElreath, 2004; Leigh, 2001), linguistics and archeology (Locke and Bogin, 2006; King, 1999; Ochs, 1998; Schieffelin and Ochs, 1986; Crown, 2010, 2007), and socio-cultural anthropology (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Comitas and Dolgin, 1978; Wolcott, 1982). While these sub-disciplines bring a range of theoretical conceptualizations to the issue of learning, they also share common assumptions about anthropology’s approach to learning. These commonalities will be considered in the final section of this chapter.

This chapter will focus on the perspective from cultural and social anthropology, whose initial engagement with the issue of learning has been hugely influenced by research in psychology. A brief overview of the theoretical trends and approaches that have informed and shaped anthropology’s interest in learning will be followed by an examination of some of the key issues and concerns that underpin anthropology’s contemporary engagement with the issue of learning.

Anthropology and learning: a brief background

One of the most important theoretical trends that has informed contemporary anthropological theories of learning is the ‘developmental approach’. Based on the idea of natural growth, the most influential figure in the construction of this model of learning and cognitive development is Jean Piaget (1926, 1998), who was concerned with the growth of intelligence and children’s cognitive ability to learn and more accurately render the world around them. In brief, this theory revolved around the emergence and acquisition of mental structures or ideas of how one perceives and organizes knowledge about the world around them. In Piaget’s work, child development is characterized by a series of distinct, predetermined stages, through which children progress until they achieve adult rationality. Of interest to anthropologists was Piaget’s use of detailed observations to demonstrate that children’s ideas were fundamentally different from adults’; instead...
of being passive recipients of adults’ ideas, children were actively involved in constituting their own conceptions (see Toren, 1999a). But Piaget also assumed that the processes of cognitive development were universal, and that children from all cultural groups and societies followed identical stages of development. He was not interested in the cultural variations that informed cognitive development and gave little consideration to children’s social life and experiences, to the social or cultural context, or to the distinctions that these reveal in respect of the learning process. While anthropologists have appreciated the recognition given to children’s active role in the learning process, they have been very critical of the assumption of universality, and of the ways in which cultural variation and social context were given little attention. In spite of such criticisms, however, this model of learning and development has had tremendous influence on anthropology’s initial forays into the issue of learning.

Around the same time that Piaget’s developmental stage theory was becoming increasingly influential in the 1930s, the American ‘culture and personality school’ (which is considered by some to be less a ‘school’ than a ‘movement’) was gaining prominence. Its origins are associated with the American linguist and anthropologist Edward Sapir: who worked in the first half of the twentieth century and argued that ‘the more fully one tries to understand a culture, the more it seems to take on the characteristics of a personality organisation’ (1985 [1927]: 594). This school of thought, best represented by the work of anthropologists such as Margaret Mead (1928) and Ruth Benedict (1934): was concerned with understanding the role that culture played in psychological development and emotional patterns. Mead, who was also influenced by Piaget’s stage theory, came to be the chief representative of the ‘culture and personality school’. While her extensive body of work revolved around teaching and child rearing more than learning, Mead was perhaps the first anthropologist to acknowledge the importance of learning as a point of anthropological enquiry into the transmission and continuity of dominant cultural forms.

Owing to charges of psychological reductionism, inadequate ethnography and methodological demands that were impossible to achieve, the culture and personality school did not last much beyond the 1950s, although it did lay the basis for research into the sub-field of ‘psychological anthropology’. This school also made important contributions to the broader discipline of anthropology, including a critique of universal theories about child development and learning and, more broadly, the importance that anthropology can bring to the understanding of psychological development. This school, finally, contributed to the burgeoning sub-field of cognitive anthropology, a recognized sub-discipline within anthropology that, since the 1950s, has focused on the relationship between human culture and thought, and that is concerned with cognitive organization of material phenomena and experience. This important sub-field uses methods and theories from the cognitive sciences to explain patterns of knowledge transmission, cultural innovation, and shared knowledge over time.

Unsurprisingly, anthropology’s engagement with the cognitive sciences, particularly with respect to the subject of learning, owes much to Jean Piaget’s theory of universal stages of cognitive and intellectual development. Critical of Piaget’s universalizing assumptions and inherent Western bias, anthropologists began to look at children’s cognitive development in non-Western settings (Cole et al., 1971, Cole and Scribner, 1974; Dasen, 1977). Such research found, among other things, that children in non-Western societies performed less well on formalized cognitive tasks than those in urban, Westernized environments. Explanations for these findings included unfamiliarity with test methods, inferior formal educational levels and inexperience with the discourse associated with formal education (Rogoff, Gauvain and Ellis, 1984; Lave, 1988; Munroe and Gauvain, 2010). While children in non-Western settings performed poorly in formally organized and abstracted cognitive tasks (the sort of calculations carried out in a school mathematics exam), their cognitive performance was found to be very high when measured in the context of their everyday experiences and activities (such as street vending, which requires complicated abilities to measure quantities, weights, calculate change, etc.).

One of the important outcomes of this kind of research was the recognition that cognitive performance is fundamentally informed by the social context: children in both Western and non-Western
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societies demonstrated high levels of cognitive functioning, but this functioning is evident when measured in the context of the activities and skills that were practised and valued in the culture (see Munroe and Gauvain, 2010: 47). These studies also highlighted several other important features that are critical for anthropology’s substantive engagement with learning, including the need for a more explicit understanding of the learning process, the recognition of the impact of different cultural practices and values on learning, and an acknowledgment of the importance of comparative, cross-cultural studies. Finally, these studies reminded researchers of the different ways that formal school education can impact upon cognitive development and the learning process.

Socio-cultural anthropologists, influenced by the culture and personality framework up to and beyond the 1950s, retained a conventional view of socialization and the acquisition of culture as a moulding process carried out by adults. Here, socialization can be defined as the process by which the cultural values, beliefs, knowledge and skills necessary for the performance of social roles are inculcated and replicated in successive generations. It is widely recognized to be an important learning process that commences shortly after birth and carries on throughout the life cycle. This notion continues to be used by anthropologists and others within the social and human sciences to describe the process by which children (and adults) learn the appropriate behaviour and skills that will enable them to participate productively as a functioning member of society.

Numerous ethnographic accounts of how children acquire cultural knowledge ‘through socialization practices’ began to appear from the 1930s onward (Dennis, 1940; Firth, 1936; Fortes, 1970; Raum, 1967 [1940]; Richards, 1956; Whiting, 1941; etc.). One of the more well-known studies on socialization was spearheaded in the mid-1950s by John and Beatrice Whiting. Focusing on six different cultural settings, this project provided detailed ethnographic accounts of socialization practices and child rearing, and highlighted the varied social contexts in which learning takes place (Whiting, 1963; Whiting and Child, 1953, Whiting and Whiting, 1975).

Learning wasn’t the specific focus of these ethnographies, and indeed little attention was given to the actual learning process itself, apart from the recognition that socialization and child-rearing practices led to appropriately socialized adults. Moreover, in these and classic socialization accounts that continue to be published within anthropology, it is assumed that what children learn are the categories and behaviours that are manifested in adult behaviour. In other words, ‘learning’ is not understood to entail any creative contribution, negotiation or transformation of the ideas encountered. Rather, the ideas and practices of the older generation are by implication transmitted unchanged to the younger generation.

The process of socialization, then, is an essentially passive process, where the child is treated as the passive recipient of adult knowledge, rather than being thought of as actively involved in the process of making sense of adult ideas. Even in contemporary anthropological writing, socialization remains one of the dominant assumptions about how children learn: children, it is assumed, will eventually become what adults mould them to be. This is due in part to taken-for-granted assumptions that revolve around processes of ‘socialization’, whereby culturally appropriate roles and norms, bestowed upon passive, malleable children, are automatically replicated in successive generations. As Toren (1993: 461) has noted, anthropologists have regularly assumed that ‘the endpoint of socialisation is known’, and that the study of children therefore has no bearing on our analysis of the practices and beliefs that inform largely adult cultures and social relations (cf. Morton, 1996: 9; Reynolds, 1989: 1–4; Toren, 1990, 1999b). Little attention, in other words, is given to the differences or kinds of understanding that children may acquire themselves about who they are vis-à-vis others and the world they live in.

Recent trends within anthropology, however, not only suggest that children do not necessarily replicate the ideas of adults, but that children can be understood as social actors whose perspectives are different from adults’, and who come to represent cultural information in their own way as they learn and make sense of the world (cf. Hirschfeld, 2002: 615). In spite of its criticisms, in other words, the concept of socialization and classic socialization studies remain important predecessors for an anthropology of learning.
Indeed, contemporary work on the issue of how children become competent members of their culture has adapted an ‘interactive’ view of socialization, whereby children are seen to be active participants in the process of socialization as they contribute to and even transform this process (see Jung, 2007; Corbett, 2007; Olwig and Gulløv, 2003; Göncü, 1999; James and Prout, 1990).

This growing recognition within anthropology that children must be understood as active participants in their own processes of learning has been influenced, in part, by a more explicitly cognitive developmental orientation that began to appear in anthropological studies of socialization during the 1970s. Once again influenced by research in psychology, the primary contribution here has been the work by Lev Vygotsky (1978). Writing in the 1920s and early 1930s, Vygotsky was a Russian psychologist whose work did not become translated or known outside Eastern Europe until the 1970s, after which it has had a huge impact on social and developmental theories of learning – including those within anthropology. Vygotsky was particularly interested in how child development and learning was informed by the role of culture and social interaction with significant people in a child’s life (particularly parents). Anthropologists engaged with processes of learning draw particularly on one of his most famous theories, the zone of proximal development (ZPD), defined as the distance between what a child or learner has already mastered (the ‘actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving’) and what he or she can achieve when provided with educational support (Vygotsky, 1978: 86). Within the concept of the zone of proximal development, social interaction is thus the basis for cognitive growth and development. The basis for the attraction of Vygotsky’s theories for the anthropologist of learning, which continues today, is twofold: the fact that learning is acknowledged to be fundamentally social and the way in which learning takes place gradually, in familiar contexts.

Current anthropological perspectives on anthropology and learning

As evidenced by this brief historical foray, anthropology’s interest and theoretical engagement with learning owes much to other disciplines, especially to psychology. It has only been since the 1970s–80s that anthropology began to pay dedicated attention to learning and the actual processes by which cultural knowledge, skills and beliefs, values and ideologies were understood, interpreted, and transformed by children and other learners. Current anthropological research that considers processes of learning has attempted to engage more substantively to the perspective of the learner and can be seen in a range of different work (see, for example, Willis, 1978; Morton, 1996; Foley, 1994; Toren, 1999b, 1990; Jung, 2007; Corbett, 2007; Lancy, Bock and Gaskins, 2010). Since becoming a more dedicated object of enquiry, several key assumptions have emerged to distinguish anthropological perspectives on learning from other disciplines. I consider three of these assumptions below.

The first of these is that learning is considered to be fundamentally social. While the physical, neurological and cognitive capacities for learning are understood to be universal and the result of natural selection, it is largely recognized by anthropologists that the way in which these capacities develop to inform processes of learning takes place through interaction with cultural, social and environmental contexts and experiences (see Bock, 2010). Our physical and cognitive development, particularly in respect to our ability to learn, depends on cultural influence and social interaction. In other words, learning is fundamentally embedded in social processes that may not formally or obviously be geared toward learning. Within socio-cultural anthropology, this kind of learning is often referred to by the categories ‘informal’ or ‘non-formal’ learning, which can be juxtaposed to the category of ‘formal’ learning.

Such categories form a well-known dichotomy that continues to underpin the anthropology of learning. The assumptions that underlie this dichotomy have been a point of implicit criticism within anthropology since at least the 1930s–40s and the ‘culture and personality’ school (e.g. Firth, 1936, Fortes, 1970, Mead, 1928), and have been explicitly criticized within the anthropology of education (Akinnaso, 1992; Lave, 1982; Strauss, 1984) for being too broadly conceived, for propagating a false distinction, and for being
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The characteristics that continue to drive these assumptions commonly correspond with the style and characteristics associated with school-based learning that were developed in and then exported from the ‘industrializing West’ (cf. Strauss, 1984: 195). With respect to ‘formal’ learning, these include ideas of the ‘deliberate’, ‘decontextualized’ form of education that is removed from the daily routine or familiar context and transmitted by trained authorities appointed by the wider social group. ‘Informal learning’ processes, in contrast, are assumed to occur in closed social networks (e.g. the kin group), embedded in the context of everyday activities, transmitted by members of the kin group and acquired through observation and imitation (cf. Akinnaso, 1992; Lave, 1982; Strauss, 1984; Pelissier, 1991: 88): the very sort detailed in the kind of early socialization studies noted above. Such forms of learning are also frequently correlated with different kinds of societies – ‘industrialized’ vs ‘non-industrialized’, ‘developed’ vs ‘developing’, ‘literate’ vs ‘non-literate’, etc. – and give rise to assumptions about different forms of knowledge – practical or embodied vs abstract, expert or specialized. The perpetuation of this dichotomy has not been helped by the kind of societies that have traditionally attracted the most attention from socio-cultural anthropologists, which tend to be those that do not possess, or have only recently come to possess, formal educational institutions and practices (e.g. schools). Lave and Wenger’s (1991) seminal work on ‘situated learning’, where learning is understood as a process that takes place in relation to participation and practice with others in different social contexts, has been the most successful in moving theories of learning beyond this traditional dichotomy. However, this problematic distinction remains very much in use throughout much of mainstream socio-cultural anthropology.

A second key assumption shared by anthropologists concerns the issue of cross-cultural variation. While individual human ability to learn is universal, there is enormous variation across cultures in respect to all aspects of the learning process, including:

- The specific kind of knowledge that is learned and transmitted: As anthropologists have observed throughout the history of the discipline, there is considerable variation within and between cultures’ belief and value systems, in their political, economic and cultural institutions, and in their social practices and structures. This is equally true of the kind of knowledge, skills and beliefs that are transmitted and learned within any given culture or society. This variation is also affected by how (and by whom) knowledge is understood, defined and valued within any specific culture.

- The context and setting in which learning takes place: As noted above, the dominant distinction within anthropology with respect to the learning process continues to be underpinned by the ‘formal’ / ‘informal’ dichotomy. This dichotomy extends to the setting in which learning takes place, which can vary from formal contexts where deliberate, intentional instruction occurs, to more informal settings, where learning takes place incidentally or as a byproduct of another activity. Whereas the classic socialization studies mentioned earlier in this chapter focused on the latter type of setting (the home, the family, the village, the street), it is educational institutions (namely, schools) that are by far the most common setting in which formal, intentional learning is assumed to take place. Anthropological research into school education, particularly since the anthropology of education emerged as a sub-field in the 1950s (Spindler and Spindler, 2000), has contributed a great deal to our knowledge of the different ways in which learning is organized, practised and conceptualized across different contexts (see Moore, 2010).

- The category of learner: Some of the variables that influence the issue of who gets to learn what may include gender, economic wealth and social status. Take gender, for example. Anthropologists have often found that different kinds of knowledge and skills, along with access to different kinds of learning processes, are determined or restricted by gender (Montgomery, 2010). Anthropological studies in both ‘traditional’, agrarian societies and more ‘modern’, industrialized societies reveal that the kind of learning in which girls and boys engage is often differentiated from early childhood. Girls will engage in learning processes and activities that are associated with the household and domestic space, and will be
taught by their mothers or other female members of their kin group or community; boys will increasingly engage in learning activities that take place outside the house or village, alongside their fathers or male relatives. Anthropologists have also noted the pattern of how girls are generally expected to learn and assume greater responsibilities related to the reproduction of the household at a much earlier age than boys, who spend more of their time engaged in playing. Girls, finally, are more apt to be withdrawn from formal learning opportunities (e.g. formal schooling) at an earlier age than boys. Equally, anthropologists have often noted the advantages that those of higher social and economic status have in respect of existing learning opportunities.

- The agents of knowledge transmission: The individuals through whom (or processes by which) learning takes place and knowledge is transmitted vary widely across cultures. Those who may be categorized as ‘teacher’ are often, but not always, adults or elders. But agents of transmission can also be peers, siblings or age-mates. By the same token, the period or age during the lifecycle in which learning takes place, or the period of life when certain forms of knowledge is acquired, also varies widely. For example, anthropologists have broadly found that, outside industrialized societies, the capacities for infants to learn, and indeed ideas about the abilities of infants to learn, are ignored. Instead, infants are viewed as not ‘ready’ to learn (Lancy and Grove, 2010: 147), or lacking the ability or maturity ‘to know’. Within the anthropological record, in other words, it is most common to find that learners occupy the position of ‘child’ or youth – categories that also vary cross-culturally. But they can also be adults, or individuals who occupy a more senior position or status within society. What anthropologists do agree upon is that – whether adult to child, elder to youth, senior to junior, peer to peer – knowledge is transmitted by those ‘who know’ to those ‘not in the know’: by the expert to the novice.

A third assumption shared by different anthropological perspectives on learning relates to the way in which the learning process takes place. Learning through observation and participation in the course of everyday life is documented in virtually every ethnography produced since the inception of the discipline, and is recognized by anthropologists (along with other theorists of learning) to be a universal learning strategy during childhood and into adulthood (Gaskins and Paradise, 2010: 85; Mead, 1962; Bandura, 1977; Lave and Wenger, 1991). Such learning can be organized around ‘intentional’ or deliberate, instructional activities involving directive teaching – of the sort commonly found in school educational settings. But such learning is often ‘unintentional’: instead of taking place through actual instruction or teaching, learning is a byproduct of the child or person’s participation in other activities that are embedded in everyday life. It is partly because learning through observation involves unintentional learning that it is often difficult to identify or separate out from other activities or contexts like play or work (see Chick, 2010). The kind of learning and educational processes described in early socialization studies in ‘traditional’ societies invariably noted how learning in the context of everyday activities was geared around observation. Most importantly, however, learning through observation is socially situated and culturally varied. Some cultures, for example, provide formal settings and opportunities for learning through observation, and rely more formally on this kind of learning as a means of cultural transmission (Chick, 2010: 86). The formal school setting is one such example; initiation ceremonies and rites is another. Learning through observation generally entails some form of participation or active engagement in the learning process.

In sum, anthropology’s attention to learning since the 1930s has been broadly informed by early studies of child rearing, socialization and child development. Many of these early studies depicted children as passive recipients of cultural knowledge, rather than as active participants in their own learning processes. As Wolcott (1982: 83) has observed, it is perhaps understandable that anthropologists have shown more interest in what transmitters try to transmit than in how and what learners are attempting to learn, given that the former lends itself more easily to the anthropologist’s traditional task of observation and description. Part of the reluctance within anthropology to devote its attention to such processes can also be attributed to the traditional (but outdated) discourse that, as anthropological concerns should remain at the
level of group behaviour, they should leave learning – which was assumed to be fundamentally individual – to other disciplines, namely psychology (cf. Wolcott, 1982; Spindler, 1959). Indeed, where the content of learning (sometimes called ‘culture’) has been left to anthropologists, the study of the learning process has been confined to psychologists (Lave, 1982: 185), whose focus has centered on the individual. More recently, anthropological interest in learning has been influenced by research on learning and development in the cognitive sciences and development psychology. In all of this research, the importance of cross-cultural, comparative analysis has been emphasized, and there are increasing calls for a more child-focused approach that would consider children’s perspectives on their own learning process.

It is worth reiterating, finally, that anthropology’s perspectives on learning revolve around the idea that the learning process is a life-long, fundamentally social process that occurs in the context of participation in both everyday, informal activities and environments, and in formally organized settings that are specifically tailored to the objective of learning. It is a process that is informed by culturally derived notions about the kind of knowledge that is learnt and transmitted, the particular context or setting in which learning takes place, and the category of learner and the agent of knowledge transmission. Whilst learning through observation is considered to be universal, the resulting knowledge that is acquired through this kind of learning is culturally variable.

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