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Changing Practice

Jean Lave ^a

^a University of California, Berkeley, USA

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ESSAYS

Changing Practice

Jean Lave

University of California, Berkeley

This article is based on a keynote address given on the last day of the 2011 International Society for Culture & Activity Research (ISCAR) Congress in Rome. The first part reflects on the kind of work being presented at the conference. It was exciting and stimulating to learn about a rich range of new research in many different venues during the week. It also seemed important to reflect on what seemed to be missing, omissions that were common across the many themes and discussions. The second part of the article explores concrete examples of research, both in theory and in practice, which I hope may suggest to ISCAR participants some unusual possibilities for changing their own research practices between now and the next ISCAR congress in three years.

The genius of the International Society for Culture & Activity Research (ISCAR) may well lie in the long-term, theoretical/empirical engagement of its conference participants in crafting historical, material, and dialectical theory—theory that is concerned with the person (in practice, in the world), across generations, and across national and disciplinary boundaries. These efforts, at once theoretical and practical, are based on concerns about what is needed for engagement in a political struggle for a different, more inclusive, just, and habitable world.

Theory of activity, philosophy of praxis, and Marxist theory in its other various historical developments all embody a very broad vision of the production of social life. This is a vision not just of the mind, or of an historical institution, or of language as a thing in itself. Concentrating on the participation of these three in producing persons in practice historically implicates all of them in relation with one another. This mutual implication was reflected in ongoing efforts in Rome to broaden the scope of their social analysis across conventional conceptual and disciplinary boundaries, trying to bridge these boundaries, working to make connections that might change them, or at least to reassure participants that as theorist/practitioners we *do* share common theoretical and political concerns.

Having just visited the Sistine Chapel, this irresistibly suggested Michelangelo's central painting on the ceiling of God and Adam reaching out, their hands almost touching. I admire the serious, difficult reaching out of ISCAR participants—it is a collective theoretical/practical stance of great value. The gaps among the questions that absorb us are not new or surprising: theory and practice, person and world, psychology and education versus “other” disciplines including anthropology, linguistics, and social studies of science. In the sessions I attended there were Vygotskians and activity theorists focusing with intensity on subjects, learning and developing, in sophisticated traditions of cultural-historical psychology. Here, in fact, lay the preponderance of the research presented at ISCAR, its starting place and ending place being the person. But there were also accounts of the same relations from other, different angles, starting from the social world and its constitutive practices. In her keynote address Lucy Suchman laid out arguments for reconsidering, critically, and in cultural-historical terms, old arguments about “the machine/human interface” (Suchman 2007, 2011). Elinor Ochs likewise argued, by means of a critical analysis of the historical divisions among linguistic subdisciplines, for a relational understanding of the irreducible commonality of language and life (Ochs, 2011). Yutaka Sayeki (2011) made a similarly historical and dialectical argument for viewing apprenticeship in Japanese traditions of craft mastery as a relational process, by which artifacts and artisans are produced in a single, and singular, manner.

I was struck by an observation made during the Congress by longtime ISCAR participants Mariane Hedegaard and Seth Chaiklin. They commented that over the last decade they had noticed that many empirical research projects presented at ISCAR have moved away from functionalist accounts of, for example, “the role of play in child development” to descriptions of processes of playing in developing children, in practice. This shift reflects, whether the theory is clearly understood or not, historical-dialectical commitments to pursuing questions of process about social being, asking, “How are lives, persons, and practices *produced* in ongoing everyday practice?” That seems a difficult—good—collective step forward. Drawing descriptive studies of ongoing practices into closer productive relations with increasingly historically specific dialectical theorizing seems to me a crucial next step in the collective project of ISCAR.

If one of the deepest of the historical-theoretical divides that plague us is that between person and world—or what often amounts to the same thing, between psychology and the social disciplines—what was on display at ISCAR might be summed up in terms used by Martin Packer in the session on The Concrete Psychology of Particular Kinds of Persons (Packer & Tibuduiza Sierra, 2011a, 2011b). In introducing the session he pointed to the significance of Vygotsky's reflection in 1929 that while he had been developing an abstract psychology, he wished in the future to develop a *concrete* psychology. Characterizing research as a process of rising to the concrete is another way of describing the implications of assuming the unity of theory and practice. Surely the efforts to reach across old boundaries offer conditions for the possibility of pursuing a concrete psychology and historical social analysis as one and the same. In short, what *divides* us is open to critique but at the same time seems to be propelling creative efforts to reach across old boundaries.

More worrisome was what seemed to be broadly *shared*, a collective silence. What was missing? Briefly, historical specificity and political analysis. ISCAR stands for a cultural-historical approach to research, yet I heard many acknowledgments of the historical character of persons in practice in the world in terms that were merely fleeting and abstract. I hasten to point to notable exceptions, for instance, Kawatoko's specific historical-ethnographic account

of Matsusaka Cotton production in a small community in Japan (Kawatoko, 2011). She shows us how cotton weavers become narrators of a long and changing community history, as they become weavers in specific historical relations.

For the most part there was a great silence about our political situations and struggles. There were only a few references to political engagement during the Congress. On the first day, ISCAR president Marilyn Fler commented that most ISCAR members find themselves alone as the only representative of their theoretical/practical stance in their home departments. Surely this raises immediate political-historical issues. And when introducing Clotilde Pontecorvo's keynote lecture, Marilyn told us about Clotilde's characteristic and admirable political activism. Then, think about Professor Avallone's (2011) opening speech on the first day of the Congress. Vice Rectors are supposed to open Congresses with a few formal words of welcome, but Professor Avallone instead discussed the economic and ecological crises we face each day in our lives. That was the only time during the Congress that I heard either one of these mentioned, yet they are deeply part of the relations that constitute us as persons, teachers, and researchers. At the same time, they constitute the world as the historical process of which our endeavors, and we ourselves, happen to be part.

How we can engage in critical social research, in political struggle, and in specific historical processual analysis are complex issues of theory and practice. They require serious, persistent debate and development. The remainder of this article concerns the historical and political dimensions of our practices as researchers. But, rather than treat this as a matter of summing up the Congress so as to put it behind us, I imagine that all of us will have returned home to form reading groups, to take part in political discussions, demonstrations, and struggles for change in our universities and communities more broadly, and to engage in critical analysis in order to change our own research practices. It seems likely that it lies within our own power to change some of the constraints that keep us from reaching across our divisions. Making such changes, however modestly, could contribute to more creative social politics in the current historical moment.

REVOLUTIONIZING PRAXIS

To establish something of an agenda for considering the issues I have raised there is no better place to start than Marx's third Thesis on Feuerbach. I quote (subject to changes in the sexist language of the standard translation):

Thesis 3

The materialist doctrine that people are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed people are products of other circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that it is people who change circumstances and that it is essential to educate the educator her/himself. Hence, this doctrine necessarily arrives at dividing society into two parts, one of which is superior to society.

The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionizing practice. (Marx, 1845)

An important methodological/theoretical inspiration for the project of revolutionizing practice that Marx says is necessary if we are to change both our circumstances and our activity is offered, I suggest, by Antonio Gramsci's writing. For those who are put off by a sort of vague popular assessment of Gramsci—probably either a weak Althusserian critique or an acceptance of Perry

Anderson's (1976) old assessment, or Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) superficial reading, or just weak Gramscianism itself (Thomas, 2009), there are new resources at hand. Peter Thomas (2009) has produced an extraordinary historical-philosophical exposition of Gramsci's philosophy of praxis, in his recent book *The Gramscian Moment*. This work draws on a new generation of compilation and translation of Gramsci's work, which offers the advantage of being able to move beyond thematic excerpts from the Notebooks (e.g., Forgacs, 1985; Hoare & Smith, 1971) to Gerratana's (1975) complete transcription, and now an English translation of the entire *Notebooks* (Buttigieg, 1992, 1996, 2007). Buttigieg is also an editor, along with Borg and Mayo, of a pertinent 2002 book on *Gramsci and Education* (see also Giroux, 1999). But Gramsci's influence has been present in ISCRAT/ISCAR in the past. The work of Colucci, Georg Ruckreim, and others offers a good place to start so as not to reinvent the wheel. Meetings of the Gramsci Society have drawn together scholars to explore relations between Gramsci's theory of praxis and, among others, activity theory, theory of praxis, and critical social psychology (cf. Colucci, 1995). However, I did not find Gramsci in the titles of any presentations at ISCAR 2011, and I found only one presentation that drew on Gramsci's conception of transformative action (Kontinen 2011).

In his book, Peter Thomas underscores the importance of the Theses on Feuerbach, especially Thesis 3, for the development of Gramsci's philosophy of praxis. I can't think of a philosopher other than Gramsci who has put more effort into exploring the ramifications of "educating the educator," or who has located discussions of education in the context of changing practice, or who has given us as rich an account of what might be meant in Thesis 3 by "revolutionizing praxis." Gramsci's philosophy of praxis *is* a theory of learning and education. Philosophy of praxis aims to articulate commonly held sense from the stances of subaltern classes and is itself part of the struggle to give coherence to political work aimed at progressive change. For Gramsci, philosophy of praxis is also always political practice. Gramsci redefined politics, Thomas (2009) suggests, "not in terms of institutional power but as the reality of the transformation of human social relations and practices" (p. 97).

Stuart Hall concurs with Thomas' analysis, arguing that organic crises erupt not just in politics or the economy but "in a wide series of polemics, debates about fundamental sexual, moral and intellectual questions—hegemony is contested and won on many different sites." One thing that Gramsci did, says Hall (1987), was to "give us a profoundly expanded conception of what politics itself is like, and thus also power and authority" (p. 5).

Gramsci's political account of learning and education (and everything else) grew out of his analysis of the "absolute historicism" of philosophy of praxis. He pointed to the central engagement of state and private institutions of education in inculcating and defending dominant hegemonic relations of consent. That is not all that is going on in our complex contradictory world, of course. But because virtually all ISCAR participants do the work of these institutions, we also need to carry out the political analysis that our positions call for (cf. Rockwell's [2011] historical-political analysis of schooling). Gramsci articulated, with a rich language, the confusing and contradictory politics of our political locations and practices as academics, teachers, and researchers, and identified its core paradoxes and central questions. Are we traditional intellectuals? Are we democratic philosophers? Are we engaged in the philosophical work of organizing subaltern ideas for alternative hegemonic ideologies/world views? How is it that we are, or might be, educators getting educated—what indeed does that mean? Gramsci had a lot to say about engaging in epochal struggles like those of our times—in fact, he might have said that they should be at the basis of our activity if we engage on his terms in philosophy of praxis. In our rapidly

changing political times we need to be direct and serious about our own locations, activities, and the political effects of these on, and with, other people.

These rapidly changing political times include hopeful, but deeply uneven, economic change in Brazil, India, and China; new political openings in the Middle East; environmental disaster and its multiple wounds in Japan; and rightward-moving political economic destruction in the United States and Europe. More specifically, in the United States and in European countries, national, state, and private neoliberal forces are attacking the right to an education, rejecting the ideas that educated citizens are a public good and that research results are public goods (equating “the public good” with the commercialization of research findings). In direct and indirect ways neoliberal political and educational leaders are advancing scholarly and educational programs that will support and endorse profoundly conservative, plutocratic, and corporate goals. Tuition increases at public institutions of higher education have been so steep as to restrict this education to a small, wealthy elite. Steps are being taken at many universities to reduce fine arts, humanities, and the social sciences in favor of the “profit centers” of biology, engineering, physical sciences, and medicine. Within the social sciences, reorganization has given power and priority to positivist, conservative political scientists, sociologists, and economists, making ethnographic research difficult to defend and making it more precarious than ever to engage in politically challenging research on gender, race, and sexual orientation. A common technique (e.g., forced on Danish universities by their Ministry of Science [now the Ministry of Higher Education]) is to define narrowly (by majority vote of department faculty) those research journals that are deemed legitimate in assessments for promotion. The result is a narrow range of journals that completely or mostly excludes those that ISCAR participants read and for which they write. And I haven’t even mentioned the privatization of primary and secondary schooling, which is turning public schooling into a dismal residual institution. ISCAR members and others who are committed to critical approaches are, or should be, struggling for far different educational institutions and practices.

This struggle is made more difficult by the fact that most of us stand alone in our academic homes as the only critical social-historical voice. In some countries there are openings in universities for hopeful new initiatives, new research, and expansion. But in the neoliberal world of academic life in Europe and the United States, there is a pressing need to fight for the *right* to engage in critical social research, as well as to search for new visions for the conditions in which we labor to produce honest and serious research (Gosselain, 2011b).

There are also subtle, indirect, and intimate ways in which in our technical practices as social-historical researchers we are political actors. Consider Danish philosopher Uffe Juul Jensen’s concept of “just in time” philosophy, an idea that informs his interpretation of the “revolutionizing practice” central to Thesis 3. Jensen addresses the question of what our political locations and practice could mean to us, and he speaks to the argument that it might be fruitful to experiment in how we go about research:

We have the possibility in practice to experience and interpret how some practices may constrain other practices. We transcend particular standpoints (for example the standpoint of civil society) through processes of challenging or changing such constraints. Change-directed activities will contribute to widening the understanding of both the practice of civil society and the more or less oppressed practices in which people act to achieve something of universal worth. I think this encapsulates the idea of revolutionary activity expressed by Marx in “The Theses on Feuerbach.” (Jensen, 1999)

We too often dismiss—or deny—that our research practices play out historical, political choices and commitments, arguing that we are “just academics” and do not, indeed *should* not, stain our

research with “politics.” The point that Jensen makes, however, and that I want to emphasize here, is that research carried out by *anyone* is a political-historical process. How we conduct research, the form of research we fight for the right to do (in a world where much research is financed by government and corporate interests), how we decide what project to undertake—these are all ways in which we exercise political responsibilities and possibilities. It matters where we stand theoretically. It matters how our theoretical stance shapes our inquiry into the points of view, the interests, and the locations of other people. Of *some* people, and not of others. Think, for example of the practices of comparative research. Whether explicitly or implicitly, these practices involve assumptions about the legitimacy of standards, power, and value (cf. Lave, 2011; Verran, 2001). In short, it matters *which* politics our research efforts represent—and which history. Gramsci insisted on the specificity of historical processes, and thus on the need for a method of specific historical, comparative research. This crucial aspect of Gramsci’s philosophy of praxis is, I believe, deeply relevant to ISCAR. It is undoubtedly a good thing that ISCAR is an international organization, because this means that we can consider specific national historical differences in our struggles as academics, teachers, and researchers.

PRACTICAL REVOLUTIONIZING RESEARCH

On one hand, then, we have ISCAR’s strength in persistently trying to make persons, in activity, in the world the irreducible focus of analysis, in the face of conventional modes of separating them (and us). On the other hand, we have Uffe’s argument that changing the challenges and constraints that shape our own research practice *is* a way to engage in practical revolutionizing activity. I turn now to suggest specific ways to bring together these two themes. What follows is a series of examples of research that explore ways to change research practice in theoretical-empirical terms. These examples highlight the practical revolutionizing possibilities afforded by changing constraints on the scope and kinds of relations investigated in our research practices.

I have deliberately selected examples of research that challenge the constraints on common conceptualizations of “learning,” by focusing on learning that in conventional terms is assumed to lie “outside” institutional arrangements of “schooling,” whether focused on ethnographers, artisans, or the conduct of everyday life. But another “next step” in changing research practice would explore learning in historically varied school contexts as an unexceptional candidate for the same sorts of analysis.

I have been arguing for years (along with other ISCAR participants) that our biographies and professions make it all too tempting to project academic, conventional theoretical assumptions about learning and knowing onto “the rest” of the world. It requires careful effort to resist theoretical and empirical research practices that treat “learning” as if it were

1. A concept of individual, internal mental exercise.
2. Only ever produced as a result of typical bureaucratic, institutional arrangements and trajectories of schooling.
3. Produced in particular through teaching, viewed as a prerequisite for learning.
4. Something that can only be studied from a third-person perspective, thus producing accounts of learning only as something done to others.

5. Above all, as if “knowledge” (viewed as some complex elaboration of “information,” or of “concepts” about knowledge acquisition, knowledge consumption, knowledge production) is the purpose, content, and result of what life and “learning” are all about.

Surely these assumptions are derived, at least in part, from the conduct of our particularly knowledge-obsessed professional lives. I believe that addressing these assumptions critically, and engaging in research from an ethnographic point of view, can have a practical revolutionizing effect. Critical ethnographic research can be a powerful tool for changing our understandings of learning, making it possible to adopt a political stance that moves closer to historically specific analyses of persons in their practices.

Critical social psychologist Ole Dreier’s theoretical/practical approach to what he calls “the conduct of everyday life” provides a particular example of such work, and anthropologist Tim Ingold’s arguments about craftsmanship offer another. Both these researchers ground their work in relational, historical accounts of situated practice.

PERSONS IN MOTION: THE CONDUCT OF EVERYDAY LIFE

Ole Dreier is a well-known member of ISCAR. He recently retired as Professor of Personality Psychology at Copenhagen University. Although not an anthropologist, he approaches research in ways closely related to ethnographic practice. In his book *Psychotherapy in Everyday Life*, Dreier (2008) laid out theoretically, and through his day-to-day inquiry, a deeply considered theoretical and empirical account of “the conduct of everyday life.” He insisted on examining what it means for persons to engage in the changing day-to-day trajectories of their lives. He showed how these unfold as people participate, differently and partially, in their everyday lives. Dreier does for theories of situated practice, what J. J. Gibson (1986) did for perception: He insisted on setting persons, in practice, *in motion* across and through their daily contexts. This shift in assumptions about the fundamental conditions of possibility for participation in social life radically challenges our customary site-constrained research practices. Here are just a few illustrations:

Dreier’s theory/practice contrasts sharply with common habits of limiting our research practice to one or two settings and looking at activity only within one setting at a time. He insisted that tracing persons’ movements across the various contexts of their everyday lives is necessary for understanding how participation changes in changing practice. Furthermore, this leads him to explore how persons are not “the same” in different situations: Their identities are partial and plural. Dreier’s approach also makes it clear that moving from one everyday life context to another is not the only way persons try to, and do, connect and affect activities in the different contexts in which they are participants. His perspective challenges educators’ theories of “learning transfer,” and it invites us to ask instead a question with different political implications than the customary ones: “How is going to school a (relatively small) part of the conduct of everyday life?” Dreier’s work also makes us critically aware of the extent and the limitations of theorizing professional practices of all sorts from the location and perspective of only the professionals. He focused instead on the “first-person perspectives” of all concerned, including clients and other subalterns. His approach is rich in challenges that lead to fresh possibilities for revolutionizing research practice.

CRAFTSMANSHIP: SONG AND IMAGINATION

Interestingly, anthropologist Tim Ingold also begins with J. J. Gibson's theory of perception. Ingold's ethnographic and theoretical work has been focused for many years on the interface between evolutionary biology and anthropology. He has argued that evolution is not an individual, genetically programmed natural evolutionary process but rather that change is immanent in *developmental* processes that extend across persons, practices, and lifetimes. This theory deserves careful attention for its relations with developmental psychology and beyond. Here I discuss only one of the ways that Ingold develops this broad theoretical stance. It is notable that he consistently *rejects* conventional polar distinctions in favor of relational conceptions (and with them conventional politics of social Darwinism in its many guises). His work exemplifies changing constraints that produce new research questions. Ingold (2000) has acknowledged that in recent years, "Neo-Darwinian biology, cognitive science and psycholinguistics have conspired to produce an extremely powerful approach to understanding the relations, in human evolution, between technology, language and intelligence" (p. 407). But against this focus Ingold proposed instead "a radically alternative claim: Suppose . . . we set ourselves the task of examining the relation, in human evolution, not between technology, language and intelligence, but between craftsmanship, song and imagination. The resulting account, I suspect would be very different" (p. 408). Very different indeed. Ingold's approach surely challenges claims, ones with political roots in dominant hegemonic practices including our own. His work offers possibilities for educating ourselves by changing our circumstances and activities as Thesis 3 recommends.

Embodied skill is central to Ingold's explorations of language, art, and technology as varieties of craftsmanship. For instance, Ingold (2000) argued,

We "feel" each other's presence in verbal discourse as the craftsman feels, with his tools, the material on which he works; and as with the craftsman's handling of tools, so is our handling of words sensitive to the nuances of our relationships with the felt environment. (p. 414)

He illustrated this point in his own cello playing, and in the lassoing of reindeer by herdsmen in Northern Finland:

Working a lasso, like playing a musical instrument — involves an embodied skill, acquired through much practice. It carries forward an intention, but at the same time, it is continually responsive to an ever-changing situation. . . . The herdsman's handling of the lasso is inseparable from his attention to the movements of the herd in the enclosure. (p. 411)

Ingold concludes that when a person becomes skilled this is a consequence of his or her involvement in a social matrix that is entwined with the natural world, a world that is not so much mastered as is it is revealed through deployment of the skill:

As properties of persons, developed in the contexts of their engagement with other persons or person-like agencies in the environment, technical skills are themselves constituted within the matrix of social relations. Hence, insofar as they involve the use of tools, these must be understood as links in chains of personal rather than mechanical causation, serving to draw components of the environment into the sphere of social relations rather than to emancipate human society from the constraints of nature. Their purpose, in short, is not to control but to reveal. (Ingold, 2000, pp. 289–290)

Each phrase in this discussion of technical skills could provide an agenda for inquiry into processes and practices of learning: For one thing, let us accept Ingold's proposal that we are all craftsmen. What are the implications of this? How do craftsmen feel with their tools the material on which they work? How is the handling of tools sensitive to the nuances of our relationships with the felt environment? How could we examine how the use of technical tools *reveals* our world?

Ingold summed up "five critical dimensions of any kind of skilled practice." They offer challenging research questions for studies of learning in practice:

1) Intentionality and functionality are immanent in the practice itself, rather than being properties, respectively of an agent and an instrument.

If so, experience of both intention and function are deeply imbricated in the practice of one's craft. That may be thought of as a specific relation of learning.

2) Skill is not an attribute of the individual body in isolation but of the whole system of relations constituted by the presence of the artisan in his or her environment.

Question: How could we understand skill as an attribute of systems of relations? I discuss an example shortly.

3) Rather than representing the mere application of mechanical force, skill involves qualities of care, judgment and dexterity.

This critical dimension might encourage us to ask, How do these qualities of care, judgment, and dexterity fashion life more broadly, and how are they made in life more broadly?

4) It is not through the transmission of formulae that skills are passed from generation to generation, but through practical, "hands-on" experience.

Here is an agenda for what to look for and how to analyze it, when people arrange circumstances of learning in the name of "transmitting knowledge."

5) Skilled workmanship serves not to execute a preexisting design but actually to generate the forms of artifacts. . . . It is the pattern of regular movement [that] generates the form.

Question: How would we go about empirical/theoretical inquiry into "patterns of regular movement that generate forms?" (Ingold, 2000, p. 291). This question offers us a clue for "how to look" and "what to look for" in research on learning. Let's pursue it a little further.

At one point Ingold was concerned to show what it means to say that a herdsman's animals, or a farmer's crops, are grown rather than made. Then he took up the suggestion that artifacts, too, may be grown, and that in this sense they are not so very different from living organisms. He illustrated this suggestion:

Consider the weaving of a coiled basket. Conventionally, we regard weaving as a kind of making. Could we not, however, reverse the argument, and regard making as a kind of weaving? The effect of this reversal . . . would be to place the emphasis on the skilled character of the form-generating process rather than upon the final form of the object produced. (Ingold, 2000, p. 290)

Surely this is exactly what Ole Dreier's approach to analyzing the conduct of everyday life is all about. He has studied the ways people weave their settings together into a coherent life.

Thus, one important implication of Dreier's work is that from the perspective of the conduct of everyday life, there is no unitary, born, or cultivated "person-ality." Persons, as participants conducting their everyday, multicontextual lives, are laying down partial coherences of self to self and others that might be called identities. It takes this ongoing work to lay down—to weave—a relatively coherent sense of self across the multiple contexts that are our everyday lives. We could do worse than think of what we do as the study of those weaving processes.

It will be evident that the work of Dreier and Ingold is not *only* about "learning." To address the theory/practice of learning with respect to their work requires two things, then. First, we need to ask *how* learning *works* in the world *through* the conduct of everyday life (or dwelling, or skill) and, second, we need to ask how conducting everyday lives, or craftsmanship take the forms and relations they do *because* they are in part practices of learning.

CRITICAL ETHNOGRAPHIC PRACTICE: APPRENTICESHIP IN PRACTICE

To answer questions such as these requires detailed study of the processes of everyday living and doing. But if relational theory insists on the historical, processual character of human praxis, and on the inseparability of theory and practice, this poses a difficult methodological challenge.

This concern shaped the structure of my book *Apprenticeship in Critical Ethnographic Practice* (Lave, 2011). The idea was to look at theoretical practical relations of apprenticeship *in practice*. The title of the book sums up its several concerns. It is about the practice of apprenticeship among Vai and Gola tailors in Liberia in the 1970s, learning to make trousers and becoming master tailors. It also explores the process of ethnographic inquiry that unfolded over five years, furnishing an example for apprentice ethnographers of sustained and changing ethnographic work—*itself* also a kind of apprenticeship.

I chose to concentrate my ethnographic research on tailors' apprenticeship originally in opposition to roughly the five commonsense assumptions laid out above. These assumptions are often encapsulated in comparative binary characterizations of informal education as the devalued foil for Western schooling, styled "formal education." In the book I described, analyzed, and theorized my improvised exploration of the everyday lives of tailors and their apprentices in Liberia, and the false starts by which my efforts were channeled over and over back through the very commonsense comparative theory I opposed (e.g., assuming early on that teaching must be the key to apprenticeship, or almost five years later beginning a new round of ethnographic research on quantitative relations in the tailor shops, only to realize that I was still looking for "school math" problems). Clearly, "critical" research in any simple sense was not powerful enough to break out of those channels.

Each chapter ends with a commentary on the changing process of the research, especially its welcome breaks into unanticipated lines of inquiry as the critique became clearer and the empirical work suggested or forced new possibilities. Focused and told through the unfolding process of tailors' apprenticeship and the unfolding process of ethnographic fieldwork, it was possible to show how the two were simultaneously theoretical and empirical endeavors, and how reading each one through the other offered unexpected understandings. The notion of "critical" ethnographic research is developed throughout the book. In brief, for me the term refers to the craft of ethnographic inquiry integral to a historical materialist theoretical stance. Gramsci's view of "critical" thinking has been summarized by Monasta (2002):

According to common sense, criticism is a sort of opposition against what we do not want; on the contrary, “critical thought” is not, for Gramsci, a theoretical game which opposes one theory with another, one ideology with another, or the “idealistic illusion” that theory, culture, and therefore, education could be “independent” of their historical “material” base. For Gramsci, critical thinking is the continuous research and discovery of the material bases of theory, that is, criticism of the ideological use of theory. (p. 80)

I focus here, albeit briefly, not so much on the tailors’ apprenticeship, but on that other “apprenticeship”—the ethnographer’s long process of learning. In the book I trace this improvised practice through my own research in Liberia. It certainly takes practice to come to inhabit a critical ethnographer’s craft. The day-to-day practice of fieldwork is deeply empirical, but critical ethnographic practice is just as deeply a matter of theoretical formation. My project did not stand still theoretically. It too involved changing practice. Over years of field research interspersed with periods of struggles to make sense of it, I moved (as the project moved me) from one theoretical—ontological, epistemological, and political/ethical—stance to another, which of course changed the direction of field inquiries, which further changed theoretical concerns. This implies that apprentice ethnographers and apprentice social theorists are really one and the same. I think about this, over the long term, as “being an apprentice to one’s own changing practice.”

A relational analysis is always partial. For example, I chose to explore learning, craft, and ethnographic method as a relation of apprenticeship, but of course I could have focused on some other relation of which learning, craft, and/or ethnographic practice is a part. This brings us to another register of political participation that characterizes our work. As a craft, and as always partial in addressing the world, our practice requires us to think through our reasons for doing the research we do. Judgment is involved—serious political judgment about what needs illuminating in the world, and how a particular investigation might contribute to its illumination. (I think of this as the Seth Chaiklin principle.)

I am focusing my discussion of changing research practice on ethnographic research, in part because I believe the theoretical, social, and political intentions of many of ISCAR’s participants would be well served by experimenting with critical ethnographic practice, or something similar. At the same time, I know it is not easy to engage in such a research practice in universities and disciplines that are dominated by a positivist, empiricist hegemony.

SUBSUMING KNOWLEDGEABILITY AND SKILL IN RELATIONS OF IDENTITY

Relations between knowledgeability and identity making have been of interest to all the researchers whose work I have described, including my own. I was recently encouraged by a visit to Ana Maria R. Gomes’ anthropology and education group in Belo Horizonte in Brazil. They offer an inspiring example of what is possible, as they have developed an anthropological approach to the anthropology of education and invested in a strategy of boundary-breaking *deslocamento* (dislocation) in designing research projects (Gomes, 2007). They intentionally shift the subject of their research in ways that dislocate the usual foci of educational research and make it possible to explore robust practices of changing skill elsewhere than in schools. One example is a recent doctoral research project investigating how it is possible to grow skillful at falling into trance while participating in a local religious cult (Bergo, 2011). Another explores the way

boys learn to play soccer in trajectories located almost entirely outside school (Faria, 2008). Ultimately, after Faria had come to know the children's trajectories intimately, she found it easier to understand their efforts to deflect schools' attempts to teach them to play soccer. In efforts such as these, the ethnographers are using their research to shift the stances from which they address schooling. That is, they are changing the constraints on research, engaging in revolutionizing praxis in order to understand the changing world of participants in fresh ways.

Another researcher exploring these relations in innovative ways with colleagues is anthropologist Dorothy Holland (Holland, 2010; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998; Lachicotte, 2002). Their research looks at the way the cultural production of identities in social movements creates new conditions of possibility for persons to act in the world. They are developing changing relational conceptions of the making of contextually imbricated partial identities. In doing so, Holland has been developing a theoretical framework that among other things avoids the commonplace ways in which we too easily collapse "learning" into "acquisition of knowledge," as a decontextualized end in itself. When we take a relational perspective, "knowledge" or "knowledge-ability" must be understood as part of, and as taking meaning from and for, persons engaged as apprentices to their own changing practice across the multiple contexts of their lives.

In discussing Ingold's dimensions of skilled practice I promised an example of research on skill as an attribute of systems of relations. This example is provided by the work of anthropologist Olivier Gosselain of the Université libre de Bruxelles. He is an archeologist and ethnographer of material culture, working in West Africa, in Cameroon and Niger. Gosselain's research has focused on pottery making and potters' identity-making as "social materializations," each making the other, in the course of years of everyday engagement in potting. In a recent paper he analyzed the social relations that shape pot-making techniques but shape different parts of those techniques differently and different facets of identity with them (Gosselain, 2008, 2011a.). Further, he both observed potters and asked them to talk about how they learned their craft. He found that potters in different countries with different social and economic structures of pottery making narrated virtually *identical* accounts of how they learned. This is a great puzzle, for Gosselain's own observations of learning pottery making found that they are quite different from the potters' common descriptions of them. He argued that in fact potters' accounts describe relations of *identity making*, not the material steps in learning how to make pots:

What I was told, therefore, was not "Here is how I actually learned the craft", but rather: "Here is who I am, because here is my technique, and here are the ancestors from whom I inherited it."

This strikes me as providing a serious cautionary tale for researchers inquiring into processes of learning, and it offers yet another challenge to common constraints on how we conduct research on long-term processes of learning. In Gosselain's analysis:

Knowledge—including skills—is not envisioned anymore as a focal point but, more realistically, as a component among others in a broader process that sees individuals gradually transform their identity. (Gosselain, 2011a, p. 1)

Gosselain has examined identity making among other potters in Niger, and found how gendered distinctions are inflected in pot making in ethnic areas where both women and men pot; he described distinctions in the stability or flexibility of pot shaping techniques between those who are "born to the craft" and those who "learn it on the road." (That is surely a good

distinction to consider in investigating learning processes of all sorts.) He made nuanced observations about the differences in identity making in different aspects of pottery production. For instance,

Digging and transporting clay, preparing temper, collecting fuel for firing, and helping to organize the firing structure are the first operations in which beginners take part. . . . Although none view this phase as an actual learning process they obviously acquire knowledge through participation. What matters is that such knowledge is the product of a mutual—and often tacit—agreement between participants; only rarely does it bear an idiosyncratic dimension. . . . It has more to do as a “moral” expected duty to play one’s part in communal activities. (pp. 2–3)

By contrast, in interviews the potters do not make reference to this aspect of their apprenticeship: “When asked about learning to pot they never discuss anything but learning to *shape* pots, which is conceived of as the heart of pottery-making; a step that encapsulates what it means to be a potter” (p. 3). He went on:

We are now in a better position to understand why shaping techniques seem to change at a slower rate than other steps of the manufacturing process, and why their variations frequently coincide with social boundaries such as language, socio-professional affiliation, ethnicity, or gender . . . [the social relations of potting, in pots] results from the very meaning attributed to shaping technique, which pertains to the inherited dimension of identity. (p. 6)

I have singled out examples of research in which learning is analyzed as part of crafting everyday life or everyday craftsmanship and in which, at the same time, these various ongoing forms of practice are understood to be partially phenomena of learning. The researchers whose work I have briefly described ask how craft practice can be construed as learning, and learning as craft. They do not focus on types of identity but instead on identity-making-in-process, in practice (this is one way of talking about two-way readings of practices, and of changing participation with respect to learning). I have suggested that studies like these might make it possible for relational analysis of learning to produce insights into the social, political-economic, cultural, historical world, and so enable us to break through the most basic constraints on our research.

When Ole Dreier sets everyone in motion across their everyday contexts of practice, he changes the questions we can ask about how persons conduct their lives, how this practice changes from context to context, and he shows how the activity of persons in practice is never confined to the place they happen to find themselves at any one moment. This has profound implications for the theories we construct of persons. Tim Ingold upends many commonsense assumptions in order to focus on relations of social practice as inhabiting and growing the forms of our lives. Olivier Gosselain, in his studies of the shaping of identity over years of practice in making pottery, leads us through differences in the *chaine operatoire* of the craft, to the making of persons—and shows how this varies in the different social worlds of which pot making is a part. His work suggests ways of analyzing the production of identity in the process of producing whatever is equivalent to pot making in *our* lives. These and the other examples contain rich resources that can help us ground our own work in relational, historical accounts of situated practice and encourage us to challenge and change the constraints on our research practice.

CONCLUSIONS

I cannot think of a better agenda for each and every one of us, those who attended ISCAR and those who read *Mind, Culture, and Activity*—than setting out to educate the educator—that is to say, ourselves. But how? I began this article by suggesting that, as part of changing our activity in changing circumstances, we need to consider the most politically critical sites of political change, that is, we need to make familiar and recognizable our own everyday possibilities for “revolutionary praxis” and take them up in our research practice. I’ve pointed to some of the questions about learning that have grown out of recent ethnographic research, questions that challenge common sense, including academic common sense. These questions suggest some “next steps” in seeking understandings of persons in practice in the world, steps toward combining ISCAR’s strength in keeping people in practice as the focus of research with a recognition that the conduct of research is an engagement in political practice.

But, in the face of our collective “silence” to which I referred earlier, the biggest step may well be that of developing new research that asks what the processes are by which persons are produced and produce themselves in historical and political terms. Then we might become able to take up the same critical concerns with respect to our own circumstances, possibilities, and responsibilities, as researchers and teachers. Consider the modest proposal—made by Gosselain, by Ingold, and by me—that we take seriously the understanding of research as craft, and of both learning and changing identity as aspects of craftsmanship. Gosselain has recently articulated some of our basic commitments and present dilemmas as researchers in a call for Slow Science. This is becoming a popular cause among academics in many fields, in many parts of the world. The Slow Science movement maintains that scientific inquiry is necessarily a slow, methodological, and thoughtful process, one that is directed not toward quick fixes but at the solution of deeper, more troubling, and yet less visible paradoxes and contradictions. Good craftsmanship takes time, and it takes time to become a skilled craftsperson. Each of us has much to learn, but together we can help ourselves and one another to understand more adequately our own political situations and struggles and those of the people whose lives we study. And in Australia in 2014 I hope we can meet to discuss again what we have discovered.

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