

ITLS 6870/7870

Special Topics: Sociocultural Perspectives

[note – specific books vary by semester]

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Course Overview

This course explores core books, both classic and contemporary, that take “Sociocultural Perspectives” on learning, motivation, and identity.

The course structure is simple, modeled as a scholarly reading group. We will read one book per week. Six books have been pre-chosen, and the seventh is a book of your choice (pending instructor approval). Each week we will discuss the books together in a Tuesday evening session (you may participate virtually, on the phone, or in person) in addition to online discussion boards. Writing will focus on weekly book reviews with the goal of each student developing notes and abstracts that will help them think critically and gather notes for writing literature reviews in the future.

This is an opportunity to deepen your understanding of learning theory, an asset whether you are in academia, industry, or K12 education. The instructor will happily help students figure out what parts of books should be read more or less carefully based on their personal interests. Learning how to read for both breadth and depth is an excellent skill to develop.

Course Objectives

Upon completion of this course students will:

- Gain a broader understanding and appreciation of sociocultural perspectives of learning, across history and internationally.
- Develop specific skills and competencies in reading core academic, educational texts.
- Learn to analyze and critically evaluate ideas, arguments and points of view in regard to sociocultural theories of learning.

Course Format

We will meet weekly for a synchronous discussion on Tuesdays from 7:30-9:30 p.m. (we will discuss the time the first week). This participation is required. By signing up for this course you are committing your participation in this group. We will explore options for this, mainly through WebEx (which allows you to call in as well as to video chat in) or alternatively through Connect.

We will also participate in online discussion forums throughout the course as well as peer review each others' book notes.

Asking Questions about the Material

Questions are best asked on a discussion board. Many students will benefit from hearing your questions and others' responses. If you have a question, it is very likely that others do too. The discussion board is a great place for us to learn from each other, sharing questions, answers, experiences, perspectives. Questions regarding personal concerns may also be sent to the instructor via email, but most questions should be posted online.

Required Course Readings

- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society* (M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner, & E. Souberman, Eds.). *Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.*
- Rogoff, B. (2003). *The cultural nature of human development*. Oxford University Press.
- Dewey, J. (1934). *Democracy in Education*. New York: Putnam.
- Engeström, Y. (2015). *Learning by expanding, Second edition*. Cambridge University Press.
- Holland, D. C., Lachiotte, W., Skinner, D. & Cain, B. (1998). *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Heath, S. B. (1983). *Ways with words: Language, life, and work in communities and classrooms*. Cambridge University Press.
- **Book of Choice** (instructor approval required, recommendations are available).

These textbooks are available through the USU bookstore and also through online retailers (where they are often less expensive).

Optional texts. If you have already read *Mind in Society* you may read Vygotsky's *Thought in Language*. If you have already read *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds* then you may read Wenger's *Communities of Practice*.

Note: One book is of your choice, with instructor approval. You need to submit your idea for your book of choice by **October 22** to allow adequate time for reading and ordering. If you're not sure what to read, consider the two alternate books listed above: *Thought and Language* or *Communities of Practice*. Those are perfectly adequate. Other authors include Edward Hutchins, Geoffrey Saxe, James Wertsch, James Polman, Yrjo Engestrom, Michael Cole, Mikhail Bahktin, and many more...

Course Requirements

You are expected to check with the course website regularly and meet all posted deadlines. You are also expected to follow the order of the assignments listed in each learning module, unless otherwise posted.

How much time should I be spending on this class? A general rule of thumb for graduate work is to spend twice as long on homework outside of class as you do in class. For a 3-credit graduate course that amounts to about 9-10 hours a week per class. Students often ask me if they're spending too much or too little time on the course. *That is at your own judgment.* However, here's one guideline:

- 10-12 hours reading per book
- 3-5 hours writing per book
- The amount of writing vs reading is up to you based on your own interests and needs.
- It is of course up to you how much time you spend on the course, and the above is just a rule of thumb by the instructor who cannot possibly tell exactly how many hours you are putting in. *You are always welcome to contact the instructor or bring up for class discussion* the issue of time spent.

Discussion (50%): Face-to-Face and Online

The main form of this course is in the style of a book group, if a particularly academic one at that. We will have two forms of discussion: online and face-to-face.

- Online, you are expected to participate in discussion forums each week, submitting comments, questions, thoughts, and responding to your peers' comments, questions and thoughts.
- Face-to-face we will meet Tuesday nights for 2-3 hours to discuss the book of the week.
- You should participate in all discussions actively.

If you tend to be quieter or more shy, be assured that the questions you have are probably in the minds of others. If you tend to speak up frequently in classes, keep in mind that others have things to share and that they may need some space to share them.

Writing Assignments (50%) – 15 points each

Each book you are also expected to turn in writing assignments by 5:00pm before class. The main point of these is to give you notes and writing that you could use in the future, either in your own literature reviews, scholarly work, or in your teaching or design practice. So make these useful!

Each writing assignment should be include:

- Writing assignment:

- What are some of the main premises of this book that the author(s) argues for?
- Why is this author/book famous? Why were these ideas important at the time he/she/they were writing?
- What is the relevance for these ideas today?
- Favorite quotes or sections
- Personal reflections
- Sections like ‘this is relevant for’ or ‘things to keep in mind when I teach next...’ or ‘notes for dissertation/paper I’m working on’
- *These notes are for you, and we will provide an opportunity for you to share them with your classmates. They will be graded not by quality per se but to ensure you have them for the future. You might type out a quote that you like and write something like ‘ooh, remember this for ___ paper.’ Or you might write about something you don’t understand and note what you think it’s about but a question you want to remember to post.*
- Some of these notes you could cut and paste into discussion forums to get feedback from other class members.
- A **1-2 page reflection** (single-spaced, typical formatting, 2 pages are okay) on the main things you got out of this book. This should be reflective and critical. Doctoral students are expected to have more critical and nuanced thoughts based on the level of their experience.
- **3-4 pages of sporadic notes** from the book.
- **Summary for Grandma:**
 - The goal of this is for you to figure out how to put in your own words (not academicese) what the book is about and what you’re taking away from it.
 - A 3-5 sentence summary to your grandmother/aunt/dad/little sister [i.e., non-academic family member] of the main ideas this author/book conveyed.

If you think about it, as a scholar, you should be able to associate a few key, main ideas with each author. These are important theoreticians in the field of education, and you should know what ideas they introduced, why they were important at the time, and why they might be relevant for you now. You don’t necessarily have to agree with all of their ideas, but you should be able to summarize them.

Course Timeline

Book discussions will take place on the day they are scheduled below. You should have read each book and submitted your writing assignment before class each week.

Be prepared for each class discussion with questions, comments, ideas, and/or reflections.

Week 0 Course intro

Weeks 1-2 Lev Vygotsky, *Mind in Society*

Weeks 3-4 Barbara Rogoff, *The Cultural Nature of Human*

Development

Fall Break NO CLASS

Weeks 5-6 John Dewey *Democracy in Education*

Weeks 7-8 Yrjo Engestron *Learning by Expanding*

Weeks 9-10 Dorothy Holland, William Lachiotte Jr., Debra Skinner, & Carole Cain, *Identity and Agency in Figured Worlds*

Weeks 11-12 Shirley Brice Heath, *Ways with Words*

Weeks 13-14 Book of Choice [instructor approval required]

Grading scale

There is no curve for the class. Grades will be assigned based on the scale below, with your final grade rounded to the nearest tenth of a percentage point.

Grading scale	
A	93 – 100%
A-	90 – 92.9%
B+	87 – 89.9%
B	83 – 86.9%
B-	80 – 82.9%
C+	77 – 79.9%
C	73 – 76.9%
C-	70 – 72.9%
D+	67 – 69.9%
D	63 – 66.9%
D-	60 – 62.9%

Resubmission Policy

Resubmission of assignments on which you lost points is possible by two weeks from the date I submit feedback, or Tuesday, **July 17**, whichever comes first. You only get to resubmit once per assignment. You may only resubmit if your original submission is complete (i.e., if you submit a partial lesson plan by the original due date, you do not get a chance to resubmit). If the original submission was late, then you cannot resubmit. You may only do this for up to

USU Criteria for Make-Up of Missed Assignments or Projects

Students will be allowed to make up assignments or projects at full credit only if they meet one of the following criteria:

- Incapacitating illness prevents a student from attending classes for a minimum period of two weeks,
- A death in the family,
- Financial responsibilities requiring a student to alter a schedule to secure needed

employment,

- Change in work schedule as required by employer (with verification) or,
- Other emergencies deemed appropriate by the instructor.

If there are extenuating circumstances, a student may petition the instructor for time beyond the deadline. Documentation of the circumstances cited to justify the make-up is required.

Academic Integrity - “The Honor System”

Each student has the right and duty to pursue his or her academic experience free of dishonesty. The honor system is designed to establish the higher level of conduct expected and required of all Utah State University students.

The Honor Pledge: To enhance the learning environment at USU and to develop student academic integrity, each student agrees to the following Honor Pledge: “I pledge, on my honor, to conduct myself with the foremost level of academic integrity.” A student who lives by the Honor Pledge is a student who does more than not cheat, falsify, or plagiarize. A student who lives by the Honor Pledge:

- Espouses academic integrity as an underlying and essential principle of the USU community;
- Understands that each act of academic dishonesty devalues every degree that is awarded by this institution; and
- Is a welcomed and valued member of Utah State University

Plagiarism

As stated in the USU Student Code, plagiarism is “the act of representing, by paraphrase or direct quotation, the published or unpublished work of another person as one's own in any academic exercise or activity without full and clear acknowledgment. It also includes using materials prepared by another person or by an agency engaged in the sale of term papers or other academic materials.” Plagiarism is harmful both for the author of the original work and for the plagiarizer. Any individuals involved in plagiarizing work will receive an automatic fail for the assignment or project and will be immediately reported to the university administration.

All assignments must be original work

Plagiarism will result in a failing grade. The preferred style for bibliographic referencing is APA (*American Psychological Association*). You can find details about APA documentation on the following helpful website: <http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/DocAPA.html>. For educational research, the most popular database is ERIC (*Education Resources Information Center*). This can be found online at: <http://www.eric.ed.gov/>.

Persons with Disabilities

Students with documented disabilities who are in need of academic accommodations should immediately notify the instructor and/or contact the Disability Resource Center at (435) 797-2444 and fill out an application for services. Accommodations are individualized and in accordance with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1992.

Incompletes

In accordance with University policy, incompletes are not to be given for poor performance. There will be no incompletes given except for conditions beyond the student's control, including:

- Incapacitating illnesses that prevent a student from attending classes for a period of at least two weeks
- A death in the immediate family
- Financial responsibilities requiring a student to alter course schedule to secure employment
- Change in work schedule as required by an employer

Other, *unexpected* emergencies may be considered on a case-by-case basis. Regardless of the cause for the incomplete, appropriate documentation of the circumstances is required for an extension to be considered.

Written Assignments

Unless otherwise advised in advance, all written assignments are to be completed in the following format:

- MS Word file with **your name** and assignment type in the file name.
- 8.5 x 11, single-spaced.
- Times or Times New Roman, 12 pt. font, **your name** on first page.
- Submitted by electronic copy through email.

10 Pointers for Good Academic Essay Writing

- A good general rule to follow in the structure of your papers is “tell them what you’re going to say, tell them, then tell them what you said”. In the introduction, provide a roadmap of what you are going to say in the paper. It will help your own organization and organizes the paper for the reader to follow your arguments along.
- Be explicit about your questions, thesis, perspective and put it up front in your introduction. It’s best not to leave your reader(s) guessing what the paper is about.
- Provide signposts or points to your roadmap, e.g., “in this section, the following point...” or “to summarize” or “having covered the...we will now turn to...”
- Section titles are also good as signposts but be sure that the content of the section reflects the title of the section.
- Use transition sentences that build from previous information and connects to the next.
- Explain terms. Don’t put them in quotes and assume the reader will know what you mean. Try very hard not to make assumptions about what the reader knows even though you know who the reader is and he/she might be an expert in your topic. The point is for you to demonstrate that you know the material.
- Be consistent with your bibliographic referencing style.
- Be careful not to over-generalize, e.g., “many theorists...” when you are only referencing one study.
- Don’t assume everyone sees or agrees with your perspective, you need to convince the reader of your perspective.
- Summarize in the conclusion, what you wrote about in the body of the paper. Tie your conclusions back to your original question...how have you proven, answered, shown, presented information that addresses it. Don’t introduce new information in the conclusion. It detracts from the cohesiveness.

