Chapter 2

The Dialectics of Collective and Individual Transformation: Transformative Activist Research in a Collaborative Learning Community Project

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Introduction

In this chapter we describe the implementation of a transformative activist research project designed and carried out in collaboration with students in a community college in the New York City metropolitan area. The inspiration for this project was the critical need to expand current educational approaches for community college students, many of whom struggle in college. Guided by ideals of democracy and social justice, our aim was to move beyond instrumentalist conceptions of higher education that seek to only prepare students to fit in with existing social structures by meeting the expected demands of the job market. Inspired by cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT, see Leontiev, 1978; Vygotsky, e.g., 1997, 1998a, 1998b) expanded by the transformative activist stance (TAS, Stetsenko, e.g., 2008), we collaboratively implemented a project in which both students and faculty/researchers endeavored to move beyond the goals of adapting to the world to instead develop activist projects of social transformation in college and beyond. The specific goal was to work in solidarity in striving to break away from a narrow, commodified educational agenda focused on utilitarian learning outcomes geared toward future employability. Our method was based on co-constructing with students, based on critical-theoretical pedagogy (Vianna & Stetsenko, 2011), a collaborative space and tools for activist learning and development to expand active engagement in transforming alienating and oppressive educational practices in the college and in their community practices. Thus, this project consisted in bringing together students and researchers to collaboratively investigate and promote the development of their transformative activist stance, through the tools of learning, by expanding the contribution of each participant to a widening range of community practices, sociocultural practices and discourses. In other words, we invited our participants to engage in the collective project of developing a genuine learning community committed to dialectically changing
institutional practices by changing and empowering themselves as activists who understand and commit to their indispensable role as agents of social change. The implementation of this project illustrates the core notion of TAS about the dynamics of individual and collective layers in collaborative projects as ontologically co-extensive, mutually co-evolving, bi-directionally related, and synergetically defining and sustaining each other. As we discuss below, this project integrates some elements of, but also radically transcends constructivist-inspired educational models that are fast becoming the hallmark of institutional reform in postsecondary education.

By describing the co-evolution of this project at the intersection of mutually embedded transformations in multilayered practices and the emerging activist agendas of the participants, our aim is to shed light on the dynamics of individual and collective levels of “collectivudal” (as defined in the next sections) transformations within such collaborative projects. Thus, we describe how the emergence of activist agendas of the participants, though instantiated at the level of individual agency, was supported by, and at the same time itself supported, changes at the level of collective dynamics as part and parcel of an emerging collaborative activist project understood as a unity of individual and collective layers. In other words, as unique individual contributions to the collaborative project, the growth and expansion of individual agency was both called for and realized as the expansion of the collaborative project and vice versa – the collaborative project was both called for and realized as the expansion of individual agency embedded within the project development. It is the development of this indissoluble synergy and mutual constitution of individual and collective learning and agency that we aim to capture in this chapter.

In order to provide a contextualized account of the developmental dynamics of this collaborative project, we will first situate it in the context of competing educational agendas that have shaped the organizational structure and practices of community colleges. We will also briefly discuss how the liberal education reform movement currently underway in American postsecondary education has impacted higher education agendas, which has led many colleges to revise their mission and organizational structure (AAC&U, 2002). Because our project was situated in a community college whose leadership fully embraced the liberal project of educational reform, we will briefly describe how this movement has drawn on constructivist principles to address gaps and contradictions in higher education institutions that arguably create barriers for student learning and development. This brief overview will highlight the unique positioning of our project vis-à-vis this constructivist reform as it dialectically, both embodied and contributed to this reform agenda while radically reconstructing it, based on a transformative activist stance. We will