

## Researches on China Teachers' Training Problems and Strategies Based on Situated Learning Theory

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### Abstract

As the concept of situated learning has been disseminated to pedagogy area, traditional teacher training continuously conflicts with the essence and realization of teacher's situated learning. In China, there are many "decontextualized" phenomenon in teacher's training, which is mainly manifested in training goals, procedure, approach, and Evaluation. The situational learning theory can make up for the shortcomings, because the theory holds that it is no real sense in divorcing from teacher's life-world, and only through their interaction with the situation in teacher's training process, the teacher's teaching ability can be improved.

**Key words:** Situated learning theory; Teacher training; Practice field; Practice community; Training strategies

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### INTRODUCTION

What is the essence of learning? This is a key issue for any learning theory. Formation of different styles of learning

theory lies in different interpretations and responses to this question. After nearly a century, learning theory has gone through three paradigms: "stimulus-response" learning theory, cognitive learning theory, constructivist learning theory. Due to the effect of anthropology, critical theory, ecology, sociology, and schooling divorced from reality, since the 1990s, situated learning theory has aroused general interest of the Western scholars. It emphasizes individual's interaction with physical and social scenes, believes that learning can not be generated out of the specific situation, and the whole situation is an important and meaningful learning component, and the result of learning is also affected by specific situation (Yao, 2003). However, in China, the current teacher training is far from the teachers' life, so it is necessary to improve the quality of teacher training under the guidance of the situated learning theory.

### 1. THE ESSENCE AND REALIZATION OF TEACHER SITUATED LEARNING

The situated learning theory is rooted in pluralism or conversion theory. It believes that a dynamic system is formed between individuals and external environment, and the individual's mental activity and the surroundings are indispensable parts of the system. The essence of learning is that individuals involve in the practice, interaction with others and situation, and developing the ability of participating in practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In other words, the core element of learning is the individual involved in practical activities and environment interactions, and it is interactive and indivisible between individual's mental activity and the social environment. The metaphor about learning in the situated learning theory is that learning is a social negotiation and the process involved in the community practice, taking part in the practice, and maintaining an

active and dynamic adaptation to the environment. Then, the teacher's situational learning is that the teachers actively take part in the practice, maintaining a dynamic adaptation to the surroundings. The result of learning is neither determined by the teachers themselves nor the environment only, but teachers in the practice field or community interacting with the environment.

### 1.1 Teacher Learning in Practice Field

In the practice field, the situation is virtual and imitated, and specially designed to support teachers learning. To get the best result of learning, teachers had better learn what they need in what context. To learn useful teaching skills, teachers must be trained under the real, virtual or imitated situation, and examine their learning effect in the actual utilization. Knowledge rarely exists in the abstract, and its meaning construction is usually constructed in a certain environment. Conceptual knowledge is extracted in the use of knowledge. To some extent, knowledge should be the product interacted with the relevant activities, background and culture, otherwise it is "sluggish knowledge." Therefore, teachers must actively explore knowledge from the real classroom activities or for virtual teaching practice field.

### 1.2 Teacher Learning in Practice Community

"A practice community includes a series of individual sharing, mutual explicit practice and belief, the pursuit of common interests for a long time." it is not the simple combination of people to accomplish the same task, and the key is to be in touch with the community, through the participation in a community to give a legitimate role to the learner or a real task (Wang, 2004). Therefore, the teachers should be active in the community as legitimate participants, also be in the context of the practice community, rather than a passive process. At the same time, they should learn through the observing outstanding teachers, or discussing with them and peers.

In general, the practice field and the practice community can avoid "decontextualized" phenomenon in teacher's training. Whether in practice field or practice community, all the teachers learn around a specific target, in which they have the opportunity to complete construction of sense actively by practice.

## 2. THE TEACHERS' TRAINING PROBLEMS UNDER THE PERSPECTIVE OF SITUATED LEARNING THEORY

Situated learning concept has changed our understanding of the traditional teacher training, prompted us to reflect various problems of teacher training, and reconsider the existing teacher training in China.

### 2.1 The Training Objective of "Intellectualism"

The information age emphasizes people's all-round development, including the ability of transferring knowledge, adapting to change, lifelong learning, innovating, the spirit of cooperation, and the quality of self-realizing. So the goal of training teacher is to improve the overall quality of teachers and make them good teachers with innovative ability, professional skill, and high moral standing. However, under the influence of traditional educational idea, the Chinese teacher training mainly teaches basic theory and specialty knowledge, too much emphasizes the basic theory and knowledge of education, but ignores the teacher's ability of solving practical problems.

The teacher's training with the intellectualism educational goals can meet the needs of imparting knowledge to teachers, and to some extent adapts itself to the needs of teachers' short-term development. But in the long term, it is a phenomenon of a serious misunderstanding and deviation from the target, which will affect the teacher training quality and sustainable development of the teacher.

### 2.2 The Training Process Separated From the Real Experience of Teachers

In most cases, knowledge exists in a certain scenario or cultural tradition in the form of tacit understanding and people cannot master it directly. More often than not, it is the hidden rules embedded deep in the social cultural tradition that manipulate people's real behaviors, so we can only really grasp the real rules that exist in the form of tacit knowledge through sharing the concepts, symbols and knowledge system among them, that is to say, we can only obtain the real knowledge through integration into the practice. In the vision of anthropologic research, both the concepts of the social practice and social life are put forward due to the different understanding of the concept of "learning". There is no special "learning" in the daily experience of life and what we have is only the participation of practices which constantly change on the basis of difference in the cultural background; and the course during which you gradually change your understanding is learning. Among the community engaged in practice, the different identity of learners is developed and produced in the real practice. Human kind's understanding stems from his own experiences in life and can't be isolated from the external world; it is a tool for us to explain the world we live in, and at the same time it depends on the background of our survival. Only the cognition coming from the practical experience of life can be integrated and unified with order.

The theory of situated learning believes that the person who learns must be personally in the concrete situation related to the object to be known and the situation contains not only the details of the object, but also the circumstance of the cultural practice in which the object exists, and

at the same time the existence of the learner should be integrated with the circumstance of the object. The learning environment offered to the learner must contain rich real experiences which guarantee the integration of the learner into it. However, the present teacher training program is in fact separated from the real life world of the teachers in China. The really effective teacher training should be based on the real life of the teachers. What we should do is to analyze the issue of teacher training and learning in line with the development requirement and connect the actual life with the training in order to realize the real improvement of teachers.

### **2.3 The Training Approach Lacking in the Awareness of Community**

Meaning consultation is one of the important characteristics belonging to the community of practice. The individual members participate in the activities among the community and become a part of it; each individual has responsibility and obligation for the things in the community, and his (her) behavior includes two aspects: one is about the action (the course of participation in the things), and the other is about the relation (the relation with others). The practice of participation in the community would finally reach the identification with his (her) own identity through the meaning consultation.

The goal of learning moves towards the construction of identity from cognitive development, which seeks to include cognitive development into the construction of identity based on the expanded outlook of knowledge instead of belittling the cognitive development of the human kind. A person having a certain identity not only means he (she) possesses some knowledge in the brain, but also means he (she) knows to take certain action under situation; what is inlaid in the identity is not only the knowledge a person can have, but also the cognition which shouldn't be separated from the person who takes the action and makes the practice. (Zhao, 2006, p.90)

The activity of learning is that of constructing the meaning of the objective world, that of exploring and molding self and that of weaving the relation between oneself and others (Sato, 2004, p.38). In order to change the teacher to be trained into the active "explorer" of knowledge from the passive "receiver" of knowledge, the training institution should make efforts to construct a practice community between the teachers and students and form a new mechanism for cooperation and exchange between the teachers and students to offer a larger communication space in the cultural background for the teachers to be trained, thus improving their initiative and enthusiasm. However, in the process of the present teacher training in China, this kind of community is still not obvious and the weak awareness of the community is a common problem in the teacher training programs. First, the training institution gets used to doing its job according to its own thinking which basically adopts the form of the expert or teacher giving lectures and the trainees listening, and it seriously hinders the trainees'

independent learning and at the same time influences the exchange and cooperation between them; second, the contents and activities of the training are mostly arranged by the teacher or administrator who are responsible for it and the trainees, namely the teachers to be trained, have less opportunities to participate in the choice of them, that's to say, they have no right of participation and discourse power, which makes it very difficult for them to realize the construction of identity and participate in the activities of the community. As far as distance education is concerned, the development of the IT industry has provided a wide space for the teacher training programs and the teachers' learning activities are no longer restricted by the space and time. But in the course of real training, there is still the problem of obstacles hindering the interaction between the trainers and trainees. Although essentially self-study reference books, mentoring manuals and audio-visual materials are provided for the trainees in the present teacher training program, a multi-level and multi-dimensional self-study network of teachers has not been formed yet.

### **2.4 The Training Evaluation Seriously Lacking in Subjectivity**

The traditional evaluation for the teacher training program ignores the subjectivity and pluralism. As the subjects of the evaluation for teaching, the administrators and trainers control such important principles as the evaluation criteria and implementing process. The teachers trained (trainees) are totally in a passive position, lacking the essential say, which, plus a narrow range of specialties in the evaluating personnel and a more random set of evaluation criteria often resulting in problems like inconsistent criteria or items for evaluation in the implementation of evaluation, is very difficult to achieve the purpose of "improving the training effects through evaluation". Meanwhile, as the trainees, the teachers have extensive purposes and varied ways in learning, and more importantly, they, as adults, have already formed the awareness of self-discipline and accumulated rich experience of life, so they have the ability to judge the choice, implementation and result of their own learning activities.

At present, in China, the formulation of teacher training evaluation criteria is most determined by the existing experience of the experts or training institutions which is often separated from the real life of the teacher, ignores the individual difference and doesn't evaluate the teachers who are trainees in a view of constant development due to the mere emphasis on the final learning outcome and ignorance of the development of the teachers in the whole course, so it focuses on the teachers' remembrance and grasping of the knowledge. However, the training evaluation should, in my opinion, pay close attention to the understanding, thinking quality and active improvement demonstrated by the teachers in the real situations.

### 3. THE STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING TEACHER TRAINING BASED ON THE SITUATED LEARNING

Teacher training should be a practical and highly contextual learning activity. Its purpose is to change the teacher's teaching behavior, and promote professional development for teachers. However, the Chinese present teacher training is not satisfactory due to separation from the real teaching situation. So the teacher's training strategies need to be improved based on situated learning theory.

#### 3.1 Setting the Training Goal of Comprehensive Development

Comprehensive training goal is to develop teacher's lifelong development, focusing on teachers' knowledge acquisition and skills enhancement, and emotional literacy cultivation. "In the training objectives, learning is not simple knowledge accumulation or mechanical memory, but existence in their learning experiences, knowledge, cultural interpenetration, and bringing changes to their own life attitudes, values, and the whole spiritual world personality" (Wang & Pei, 2007, p.177). We believe that the overall goal of teacher training is reflected in three aspects: teachers' knowledge, teaching skills and cultural literacy and so on.

First is to promote teachers' professional knowledge acquisition. So teachers have the necessary teacher's professional knowledge, namely extensive cultural knowledge, the subject knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge (PCK). The degree of access to and use of knowledge is an important symbol to measure the level of teacher's specialization.

Second is to improve teachers' professional skills. We should cultivate the teaching basic skills in teacher's training, such as understanding the students, determining the teaching objectives, formulating teaching plans and programs, classroom organization and blackboard-writing, demonstration and experiments, organizing extracurricular activities as well as stimulating students' learning enthusiasm. About the training mode, besides the use of multimedia technology to improve the training, the Chinese teacher's training should take full advantage of all kinds of training skills, such as discussion-based style, study-based style, and enrich the training content, in order to enhance the ability of teachers, especially finding problems, analyzing problems and solving problem.

Third is to cultivate teachers' humanities. The humanistic quality is the central part of the teacher overall quality, determining the meaning and value of the teaching profession, and it will enable teachers to bear important historic mission of teaching. Therefore, in teacher's training we should raise the trained teachers' humanistic quality, such as promoting their

ideological and ethical standards, understanding social expectations for teacher, and developing their love and dedication to their work. The teachers can really know the world around them and understand life. As a result, it will have a positive effect on teacher's cognition, emotion, intellectual development of thinking, as well as the whole life in the future.

#### 3.2 Paying Attention to Creating Situations in the Training Process

M. Knowles, as a famous adult educator, thought, "adults do almost anything based on their experience, so adult education should start from the learner's experience." The significance and value of experience are very important in the situated learning, the learner's experience should be fully understood and respected, especially for the acquisition and application of new knowledge. The teachers as adult have fulfilled much obligation and responsibility in the society and accumulated rich life experience from the real-life, which is involved deeply into their individuality and personality. Thus, experience is not only the foundation, but also the resource of teacher learning; not only the premise of understanding their knowledge, but also the basis for application of knowledge; not only the condition of sharing their experiences, but also the source of their knowledge innovation (Gao & Ye, 1997, p.54). The teacher's own knowledge accumulation and ability can also be seen as a part of the experience. Bridge-building between teachers' experience and training contents can make the training process simpler, reduce the difficulty of accepting knowledge, and realize the meaningful learning. Therefore, during the creation of situations, one hand the trainer should take full account of cognitive process and previous experience of teachers being trained, and strive to accord with "zone of proximal development"; on the other hand, the trainer need stimulate their interest in learning according to teacher's mental regulation, and select situation with training content, in order to enable teachers to experience what they have learned.

In addition, the age of the internet makes it possible to create a virtual context through network technology. There are two main implementation forms: First, under the present teacher's training environment in China, trainers can make use of multimedia technology to establish practice field, help them learn more effectively. Multimedia as a specific environment has an advantage of combining traditional teaching with modern teaching methods, which can make effective learning and teaching come true. During the training process, the trainers should make full use of multimedia technology to make courseware with picture, text, sound and so on, based on the study of cognitive characteristics and knowledge structure of teachers. Second, computerized long-distance training networks enable us to overcome the barriers of time and distance, which are



the successful training form. Hypertext, fictitious reality technology and network communication tools can make teachers trained (trainees) free of geographical restrictions, and thus self-dominated study more effectively. According to the characteristics of adult learners, around the teacher training theme, the trainers should design all kinds of multimedia courseware with the creation of diverse situations, which are chosen by the teachers being trained with their own experience.

### 3.3 Creating Practice Community Based on the Internet

In modern society, it is becoming more and more common for people to communicate through networking tools. Many teachers often take in information on the internet, and exchange views about certain issues on the website. If a new teacher wants to learn how to teach well, he (she) can surf the internet and join an online forum about teaching. It is equivalent to a virtual practice community online with a common goal to improve teaching skills. There are many teachers in this community, including outstanding teachers, ordinary teachers, students and so on. They usually discuss the problems in the teaching, share each other's experience, then practice in the actual classroom. After a period of communicating and studying, the new teacher will probably make good progress at teaching, even to the extent that he may become an outstanding teacher as a teaching professional in the online forum eventually.

Therefore, in China, the trainer should organize the teachers being trained to join a practice community in the teacher training process, such as online forums, learning communities, MOOCs, interactive courses and so on. Its purpose is to make a learning environment redesigned, in which they can practice in a virtual community, with a rich and efficient way of conducting legitimate peripheral participation. In short, learners can learn what they need as much as possible in the situation (Merriam, 2006, p.74).

### 3.4 Emphasizing the Subject Evaluation of the Teachers Trained

Stufflebeam did indicate that the most important intention of evaluation was not to prove, but to improve. "In most cases, helping teachers develop is more meaningful than determining their work." (Shen, 2002, p.126). Scientific teaching evaluation can specify deficiencies of the teacher's training, providing a feedback platform for trainers and teachers in training activities. Therefore, in

China, the trainers should establish scientific evaluation idea of teacher training, improve the quality of teacher training, and ultimately promote teacher's comprehensive development. During the evaluation of training based on situated learning, the teachers trained (trainees) should not be graded mechanically, but focusing on teachers' ability to apply knowledge according to the performance of resolving the real problems. In view of the characteristics of the teachers trained (trainees) as the main body, the ability of teachers should be the major content of training evaluation. In addition, teachers being trained should be encouraged to participate in the formulation of teaching evaluation, and develop the ability of self-evaluation by participating in the evaluation process.

Teacher training's goal is to promote development of teachers. The training objectives and processes should be closely around the needs of teachers, close to their lives. Training evaluation is an essential part of teacher training activities, and its implementation can not be divorced from teachers. So we need go in teacher's real work situation to investigate the effect of teacher's training.

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