The Future of the Social Turn:
Social Minds and the New Capitalism

James Paul Gee
Department of Curriculum & Instruction
University of Wisconsin

Over the last several decades, in a wide variety of disciplines, there has been a massive “social turn” away from a focus on individual behavior (e.g., the behaviorism of the first half of the 20th century) and individual minds (e.g., the cognitivism of the middle part of the century) toward a focus on social and cultural interaction. Movements as disparate as ethnomethodology (Heritage, 1984) and conversational analysis (Goodwin & Heritage, 1990), the ethnography of speaking (Gumperz, 1982; Hymes, 1974), discursive psychology (Harré & Gillett, 1994), sociohistorical psychology (Wertsch, 1998), situated cognition (Lave & Wenger, 1991), anthropological psychology (Strauss & Quinn, 1997), cultural psychology (Cole, 1996), science and technology studies (Latour, 1991), modern composition theory (Bazerman, 1989), evolutionary psychology (Clark, 1997; Dawkins, 1982), critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992), and sociocultural literacy studies (Barton, 1994; Gee, 1990/1996), among others, have all stressed the ways in which patterns of behavior, as well as cultures and institutions, are produced and reproduced as by-products of “on the spot,” moment-by-moment, adaptive human social interaction.
These movements have all stressed, as well, how language-in-interaction constructs the local, social, institutional, and cultural contexts that simultaneously give it meaning (i.e., meaning and context are mutually constitutive).

There are, however, several divides in the “social turn” body of work. First, some movements have stressed the bottom-up (re-)production of social and institutional order, and other movements have stressed the top-down constraining properties of that order once it is, however partially, achieved. Second, some movements have left the mind out of the picture altogether—stressing instead how things like knowledge, memory, and emotion are publicly construed, negotiated over, contested, and transformed in verbal accounts and interactions—whereas other movements have sought to integrate individual minds (and, more recently, biology) into the emerging social-interactive perspective. Third, some of the “social turn” movements are overtly political, directly concerned with the workings of power and the quest for social justice, and others are not.

The first two of these divides are beginning to disappear under the influence of various “pattern-recognition perspectives” on the mind emerging in contemporary cognitive science (perspectives such as “connectionism;” e.g., see Clark, 1993; Gee, 1992). Those with such perspectives argue that the thinking is not a matter of following general rules and engaging in logic-like computations on abstract representations (the viewpoint of more traditional cognitivist perspectives). Rather, those with pattern-recognition perspectives argue that the mind stores connected “images” of actual experiences, solves problems through finding patterns in that experience, applies these patterns in a “customized” (adapted) way to understand new experiences, and dynamically changes these patterns in the face of those new experiences. Think, for instance, of your “image” of a prototypical bedroom—you form a compendium (something rather like an edited videotape) of your many experiences of bedrooms, linking, at a lower level, many smaller images, such as types of beds and carpets, and linking, at a larger level, to other sorts of images, such as types of adjoining bathrooms and closets. Now what happens when I tell you the bedroom has a small sink and refrigerator in it? You immediately transform your image and “customize” it for this new setting, forming, perhaps, an image of something like a college dorm room.

Pattern-recognition views of the mind fit nicely with the “social turn” for this reason: All of us have had a great many unique and different experiences and are capable of finding a great many different patterns in
those experiences. Thus, if we are ever to be able to think and act with others, we need to be “socialized” in two respects. First, someone or something must ensure that we have the sorts of experiences and find the sorts of patterns in them that are considered “right” by the social groups to which we seek or are forced to belong. Second, someone or something must keep “norming” our experiences and patterns so that we do not deviate too far from the norms of the social groups in which we are members. Think of something like a bird-watching club. If newcomers are to recognize birds in the field in ways like “insiders” do, those insiders must see to it that the newcomers have appropriate experiences, both in terms of type and range. The group must also see to it that newcomers or insiders who, for example, put dodos on their life list, are “corrected.” Of course, neither of these socializing processes can ever be “perfect,” and human uniqueness and creativity flourish in the cracks and fissures of these processes.

Pattern-recognition views of the mind also mitigate the divide between a bottom-up focus on order produced out of local interactions and a top-down focus on institutional or cultural order (partially) determining the flow of interaction. Pattern-recognition views of the mind stress the ways in which order in the material and social world is mutually constitutive of order (patterns) in the mind and how both are mediated, transformed, and sustained by the active work of people in interaction with others and with various tools and technologies (“mediating devices”).

If the rapprochement of our first two divides is on the horizon, the third is liable to get sharper. One of the salient aspects of the “social turn” has been the way in which it has become central to the so-called “new capitalism” (Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996), which, in fact, arose in much the same period as the “social turn.”

The old capitalism was interested in the most efficient organization of individuals as individuals. Knowledge and skills were broken into bits and pieces. Each individual, on an assembly line, for instance, did his or her piece of the work process as an interchangeable cog in the machine, without knowing or needing to know the “big picture.” Only the “managers” were supposed to be able to put the bits and pieces of the work process back together. In the old capitalism, it was dangerous to treat individuals as social beings with collective interests, because that might have further encouraged unionization and collective organization. Cultures were dangerous, too, because their specific ways and mores could stand in the way of the standard procedures and norms needed for large, secular,
modern, and “rational” businesses. In the old capitalism, work was meant to have as little social, cultural, historical, and political context as possible, much like knowledge and meaning in traditional psychology.

The new capitalism is the product of massive global and technological changes that have made competition global and hyperintense. Under these conditions, businesses need to outcompete their competition by producing the highest quality product or service as quickly and efficiently as possible at the lowest price (Boyett & Conn, 1992). As more companies compete on this basis, across the globe, something else happens: Products and services are less and less distinguishable based on cost, and more and more distinguishable by the “knowledge work” that has gone into designing, producing, and marketing them “on time” and “on demand” for just the right “niche” in the market (Drucker, 1993; Frank & Cook, 1995).

The highest and most important form of knowledge and skill in the new capitalism is sociotechnical designing, that is, designing products and services so that they create or “speak to” specific consumer identities and values (niches); designing better ways to organize the production and delivery of products and services; designing ways to shape consumer identities and values through advertising and marketing; and designing ways to transform products and markets based on those consumer identities and values (Hammer & Champy, 1993; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Peters, 1994; Smith, 1995).

In turn, the highest and most important form of sociotechnical designing involves designing new workplaces and new workers. New workplaces are designed to leverage knowledge from workers’ day-to-day practices. In the new capitalism, thanks to changing technology and the pace of innovation, the knowledge that “front line” workers gain in ongoing practice as they flexibly adapt to new circumstances is more valuable than explicit knowledge based on theories and past practices, both of which go out of date too quickly.

There are, however, several essential paradoxes built into the new capitalism. New capitalist workers are supposed to know the whole work process with which they are involved. They are supposed to fully leverage their practical knowledge for the company. They are supposed to actively transform, improve, and adapt their work practices to fast paced changes in markets and technologies. What, then, prevents them from (a) using their newfound knowledge and status to critique the company, or, indeed, the new capitalism itself?; and/or (b) walk off with their newly important knowledge (now that they, indeed, have something of their own to sell)
and sell it to the highest bidder? Furthermore, (c) how is knowledge that is continually gained in practice—often tacit, and transformed quickly—going to get stored and passed on for the company’s benefit (it won’t do to write manuals; they require explicit knowledge and, further, can go out of date before the ink is dry)?

These three paradoxes (a–c) are “solved,” in the new capitalism, by the sociotechnical device of a “community of practice” (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Peters, 1994, pp. 174 ff; Smith, 1995), also a core notion, it so happens, of several of the “social turn” movements. Workers, on a rather egalitarian basis, engage in a “whole integrated process” involving many functions (and roles) that they distribute among themselves and across their tools and technologies, but in overlapping and collaborative ways so that the practice can continue if the community is “lesioned” by a person or tool gone missing. Further, since knowledge is distributed across multiple people, specific social practices, and various tools, technologies, and procedures—and is not stored in any one head—the problem of people “walking” with their knowledge is, more or less, solved. The knowledge is in the community of practice, which “belongs” to the company, not in the individual.

Newcomers (“apprentices”) are “trained” by being scaffolded in “joint practice” with those already adept at the practice (a very Vygotskian process), not (just) through overt instruction that cannot carry the full load of “tacit knowledge in practice” and goes out of date. Everyone in the community of practice gains knowledge through immersion in the collaborative practice, knowledge that they may not be able to explicate in words, but which they can pass on through the socialization of new members. Within a community of practice, all members pick up a variety of tacit and taken-for-granted values, norms, cultural models, and narratives as part of their socialization into the practice and their ongoing immersion in the practice. Tacitly accepting these values, norms, cultural models, and narratives (in mind, action, and embodied practice), and sharing them with others, is just what it means to be a member of the community of practice. This, by and large, solves the problem of critique.

It is readily apparent that a great many of the themes in the “social turn” movements are fully recruited in this rehearsal of the new capitalism and its paradoxes. It is striking, as well, that the “social turn” and the new capitalism’s interest in sociotechnical designing of new work practices arose at the same historical juncture (and, to take but one example out of many: The digital computer was debunked as a theory of mind by
the “social turn” movements just as new connectionist/networking computers offered the new capitalism an important new technology for integrating work processes and leveraging knowledge built up out of practice/experience).

What’s so wrong with the new capitalism? What’s wrong is this: The new capitalism, as both former Labor Secretary Robert Reich (1992) and new capitalist theoretician Peter Drucker (1993) have argued, leads to good, if risky, rewards for those who have sophisticated sociotechnical knowledge to sell (the people Reich calls “symbol analysts”). It leads to fairly meager financial rewards (though, perhaps, more control and meaning at work) for those who can work in sociotechnically designed environments by the canons of new capitalist work teams—people Gee, Hull, and Lankshear (1996) called “enchanted workers.” However, a developed economy needs—and, in a “lean and mean” environment,” can pay for—only so many symbol analysts and enchanted workers (Reich says about two fifths of the population). Large numbers of less fortunate souls must be exploited in order to make a company, region, or country “hypercompetitive” in our global economy. Thus, for large numbers of people in the developed world, and many more in the “less developed” world, the new capitalism is leading to, at best, very poor pay and work conditions in “service work,” “temporary work,” “brute work,” the remaining backwater jobs of the old capitalist businesses, and multiple jobs that do not together add up to a living wage.

At the same time, the new capitalism has created cultural and class-based affiliations among the wealthy across the globe, while simultaneously undercutting feelings of “co-citizenship” across class lines within local, regional, and national communities. Reich (1992) has argued that it is harder and harder to know what would constitute an argument that “symbol analysts” (who affiliate, both in real time and cyberspace, with other symbol analysts across the country and the world) bear any social responsibility toward their fellow, less-advantaged, “local” citizens.

However socially knowledge may be defined in the new capitalism, defining human worth in terms of “value added” to a business process is dangerous. Even business gurus like Charles Handy know this: Handy (1994) has argued that it is imperative that we imagine notions of human worth, status, and community outside of financial rewards and markets even as he acknowledges the tendency of the new capitalism to co-opt all spheres of private and public life in the name of commitment to economic productivity (far beyond what was typical in the old capitalism).
The future of social interactionist work may, then, even as it closes several other important divides, display a great divide between a new sociocognitivist theory linked to sociotechnical engineering, on the one hand, and a sociocultural critical theory of such engineering. More and more, in fact, the field of education is displaying just such a divide in arguments over pedagogy and curricula. On the other hand, the future might see this divide close, if we all saw reflection on the social and mental order that social interaction (re-)produces, and the uses institutions make of that order, as a central part of our “science.”

REFERENCES


