

# Editorial

The article by Mariana Valverde in this first issue of the fourth volume of Outlines was given at a conference on “Drugs, Health and Subjectivity” that we organized together with the Center for Health, Humanity and Culture in December 2001 and from which we expect to publish other contributions in the coming issues. Valverde’s approach to ethical subjectivity is inspired by Foucault’s later work, but she pledges for a more humble postmodern attitude towards first-person narratives and for using low-status texts by ordinary people. In this paper she studies writings about intoxicated lives in order to shed light on how these people create a personal truth – rather than a general, scientific truth – about themselves and their addiction as well as on which relations they construct between this personal truth and their intoxication. In so doing, they do not, she argues, presuppose the unified, autonomous, authentic self so prevalent in modern theories of the self, but a more situated, pragmatic, and ad hoc relation to themselves. Their autobiographies show a variety of practices of the self, techniques of life, and truth telling which we may appropriate as cultural resources for our self-understandings and conduct of life. Valverde links the one-day-and-one-step-at-a-time approach described by these people to an understanding of addiction as a dysfunc-

tion or disorganization of time in their conduct of everyday life.

Lave and McDermott do a detailed reading of Karl Marx’ essay on “Estranged Labor” to explore what it may teach us for a theory of learning, especially, alienated learning and education. In doing so, they contribute to a critique of the social relations and theories of education and learning. To study alienation means to focus on complex qualities of social practice which are not obvious, or preferably ignored by just plain folks and scholars alike. This obscurity is not primarily due to a lack of reflection as the socio-cognitive and interpretative fashion of our day would have it. Rather, it emanates from particular features of our societal relations and arrangements and from the contradictions and exigencies of living in them. How, we may ask, might such problematic features be addressed by a situated, postmodern approach as Valverde’s? According to Lave and McDermott it is necessary to incorporate such problematic features in a situated understanding of social practice, and their social practice approach to theorizing lies behind the way they relate Marx’ theory of alienated labor to a theory of learning and education. They do not just compare and translate them concept by concept, but by comprehending both as theories about par-

ticular features and arrangements of social practice so that their practical, structural and theoretical commonalities and differences become understandable. What is more, Marx's theorizing inspires them to produce many striking ideas and an open-ended theoretical move in relation to theories of learning and education. Their article reminds us of the value of the work of reading rich and profound texts in a social practice of scholarship preoccupied by writing assessed publications.

The article by Edwards, MacKenzie, Ranson and Rutledge stems from the Second Nordic Baltic Conference on Activity Theory in Rönneby in September 2001, hosted by our Swedish editor Berthel Sutter. They take up other societal, institutional and personal aspects of learning: the appeal to lifelong learning in policies of social inclusion as a multilevel response to problems of social cohesion in late capitalism. Becoming able and being capable are keywords here, and learning is adopted as a means to solve social problems. It is thought-provoking to compare this with Lave and McDermott's pinpointing of alienated learning. Edwards et. al. emphasize that different social fields are dominated by diverse discourses of learning and that the "responsible" departments and professional agencies work in a fragmented manner. They have turned to activity theory as a promising conceptual resource for their study and consider it in need of development because of certain conceptual confusions and insufficiencies, e.g. the recognized difficulty of connecting individual and collectivity. By way of a case study of family learning in communities they argue that personal identity and a disposition to engage must be at the core of lifelong learning and ask how identity is manifested in intentional, deliberative action. They also ask how new patterns of participation developed in one setting are

carried forward into other settings. In searching for an answer they argue for a variable personal disposition to engage in different settings and for a strengthening of the overlaps between settings by means of the nature of knowledge and of professional accompaniment across them.

Hyysalo's article also goes back to the Rönneby-conference. It is a case-study of the development of the design of an electronic device to be used especially in the care of elderly and disabled people. He emphasizes how the artifact and the expertise to design it are co-constructed over time in the practice of design and highlights the transformation both of the understanding of the technology involved and of the social relations and contexts in which it is to be produced and used. Like Edwards et. al. Hyysalo draws on activity theory considering it a particularly powerful framework of analysis and, also like Edwards et. al., seeks to develop it further on the background of the constructive critique that his materials makes him articulate. In particular, he delivers a detailed and thorough analysis of the concepts of motive and object of activity suggesting that a collective activity is characterized by a heterogeneity of different motives and objects. And he holds on to the materiality involved in operating with a concept of object while highlighting the transformation of that objectivity in the course of an activity. Furthermore, Hyysalo insists that it is important to distinguish between different levels of concepts in relation to data. While activity theory may provide concepts at a more abstract level, more specific concepts must be developed on the basis of a strong sensitivity to the peculiarities of the phenomena studied – as he does in his case-study of the practice of design.

*Ole Dreier*