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**Communities of Practice, Figured Worlds and Learning Initiative in the  
Second Language Education of Immigrant Students**

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## **RIIM**

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**Communities of Practice, Figured Worlds and Learning Initiative in the Second  
Language Education of Immigrant Students<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract:** This paper analyzes quotidian practices in two classrooms, wherein Punjabi-Sikh immigrant children are guided by peers and teachers to accomplish classroom tasks. Vygotsky's (1978) conviction that learning is social reconstruction of culture in a variety of social configurations and activities, has been critically helpful in charting new directions for second language learning research, and that perspective underlies this research. The theoretical frame utilized is sociohistorical theory about communities of practice and activity to understand events in these classrooms in which children are learning a second language. In one classroom, the teacher encourages and rewards children for guiding other children; in the second classroom, such assistance is not encouraged. We will argue that one of the products of learning activity might be future orientation toward learning, or as Zuckerman (1999) puts it, learning initiative. Zuckerman argues that learning initiative, i.e. the ability to draw an adult into joint action, is a prerequisite for children to solve difficulties they experience in novel learning tasks. On the basis of experimental findings, she argues that "the more consistently and systematically the children are taught to interact *with one another* in the solution of learning problems, the more effectively their ability develops to establish learning relations with [...]adult[s]"(p. 244) (our emphasis). We explore this argument with reference to the learning communities in which we have gathered data.

## Introduction

[Vygotsky] argued that children through their acquisition and use of language come to reconstruct a social world that contains within it the experience and knowledge of prior generations. Thus children's socialization must be understood as a social and collective process, whereby children do not construct their knowledge 'in solitude' but they do it as a 'multiple voices' endeavor, in multiple communities of practice with adults and peers who share their sense of belonging to a culture. (Carugati 1999, 226)

Vygotsky's conviction that learning is social reconstruction of culture in a variety of social configurations and activities has been critically helpful in charting new directions for second language learning research. In this paper we will consider how socio-historical theory about communities of practice and activity are helpful in understanding events in classrooms in which children are learning a second language. We will argue that one of the products of learning activity might be future orientation toward learning, or as Zuckerman (1999) puts it, learning initiative, and illustrate this with respect to data collected in classrooms of young children learning English as a second language.

Lave and Wenger's (1991) term "community of practice" provides a way to identify social groups on the basis of participation in particular activities or practices, and it encourages theorists to consider multiple, overlapping and shifting membership in groups that are smaller than what "culture" used to refer to. Defining social units on the basis of participation in activity is congruent with post-structuralist notions of shifting identities, multiple memberships and it also contests essentialization. Lave and Wenger recognize that persons are differentially situated within activity systems and that these are not systems in which all persons are participating in exactly the same actions. More recent work by anthropologists Holland, Skinner, Lachicotte and Cain (1998) develops the notion of "figured worlds" as "socially and culturally constructed realm[s] of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued other others" (p. 52). Theorizing the unit of analysis as a "realm of interpretation" is helpful in recognizing that actors are differentially situated within them and the meanings of these placements are constructed specifically in the figured world. Holland et al. emphasize that in figured worlds, actors reproduce cultural knowledge and products, but they also may innovate, improvise and reconfigure the norms, the tools, the practices and all aspects of their social and cultural lives. We are interested in how persons are guided in their replication of community products but we are also interested in how learners produce new artifacts in learning activity and how this production might have effects on future learning.

Learners receive social guidance as they come to participate in community activities. Bruner (1978) developed the concept of scaffolding to describe the contribution of adults or more skilled partners to children's learning. Many other researchers have subsequently used the metaphor of scaffolding to refer to the activity engaged in when a more experienced participant performs those portions of a task beyond the competence of the less experienced participant, so that the latter can focus on those parts of the task she can perform. Some observers have debated the aptness of the metaphor to describe teaching and learning, arguing that it misleads in suggesting that newcomers or children are passive (like buildings) in the learning process and that agency is centred in the adult "scaffolder" or constructor of the scaffolding.

Barbara Rogoff (1993) and her research team at the University of California at Santa Cruz, in their examination of the limitations of the metaphor of scaffolding, emphasize how learners or children participate actively in the joint involvements they have with others in culturally important activities in their specific locations. They look for example, at how mothers or caregivers in a variety of cultures guide the participation of children in the activities of their communities. In one particular study (1993), they examined how mothers or caregivers of North American Anglo-European descent and Mayan mothers from Mexico teach their children how to manipulate a Russian nesting doll, a novel toy to the children. These observers noted that the skills that were valued, the means of communication, and the extent to which children entered into adult activity versus adults sharing children's activity, were different between the Mayan and Anglo dyads, and argued that these different means are related to the kinds of activities that are valued and necessary for adult participation in the cultural and political institutions of the two societies. For Rogoff (1990), the notion of scaffolding is too static—she doesn't see children learning things passively and then doing them, nor does she see what children learn or how they learn it as disconnected from what their society learns or values. Rather, she emphasizes that children are always participating in the activities of their communities, and their participation is guided by other children and adults at all times, in ways that are connected to ever larger contexts of social participation. Rogoff's attention to the specifics of how adults guide or help children has been fundamental in our interest in the classrooms we discuss today.

We have also found Soviet psychological research on learning activity useful for our analyses of classrooms. In Vygotskian theory, knowledge is not in the world to be absorbed, nor is knowledge latent in our brains waiting to be awakened. Rather, it is generated and constructed by humans acting in the world. Therefore, what needs to be examined are these acts, or *activity*, a goal-directed, tool-mediated set of coordinated actions. Lompscher and Hedegaard (1999) define *learning activity* as "a

special kind of activity directed towards the acquisition of societal knowledge and skills through their individual re-production by means of special learning actions upon learning objects” (p. 12). Learning activity, therefore, involves learners in particular social relationships that are embedded in specific historical and cultural conditions. The qualities of these relationships and the specifics of their historical and cultural conditions are crucial to learning. Galperin (1989) writes:

[T]he popular metaphor of scaffolding is rather misleading. Taking into consideration the tendency of a child to initiate interaction with an adult when this interaction is essential for solving a task, we cannot treat the interaction only as a supplementary and transient element of psychological development, a sort of scaffold for the future individual capacity; this scaffold is deconstructed as soon as an individual capacity is molded. Rather, a child’s ability to initiate and maintain different forms of interaction is valuable in itself; it is one of the major developmental outputs of learning in the social context. (p. 70)

Galperin here explicates an understanding of the social interactions comprising learning that is somewhat different from understandings more commonly available. Many scholars see knowledge as initially transmitted socially, but they are more interested in learners’ eventual internalization of knowledge, their individual capacity to display this knowledge without social assistance. Learning from this perspective is thus how learners take that which is socially and culturally given, and how they internalize (or reproduce) these tools. The Finnish sociohistorical theorist, Engestrom (1999) points out, however, that the Soviets, Vygotsky, Leont’ev and Luria, were also interested in creation and externalization—i.e. not only in the role of given artifacts as mediators of learning, but also in how learners changed culture in creating artifacts of their own in order to facilitate their learning and performance. These theorists believed that learning activity could lead to the creation of “new products” (*novo-obrazovanie*) in development. What are those products? On one hand, we may see the results of learning activity as being gaining specific knowledge, but on the other hand, learning activity could be viewed as activity that creates and constructs an orienting basis for future actions. We believe that an important aspect of learning is creating a new set of products – the ability for future independent learning, but only if the practices in a specific classroom community support this creation. Otherwise, using Engestrom’s metaphor, instead of “learning activity” we will only see “going-to-school-activity” (1987, p. 101).

Zuckerman (1999) examines what she terms learning initiative, as she considers the joint action with adults that children engage in so as to solve learning problems. She argues that learning initiative, i.e. the ability to draw an adult into joint action, is a prerequisite for children to solve difficulties they experience in novel learning tasks. On the basis of experimental findings, she argues that children’s initiative in establishing learning relations with adults is not a function of age. Rather,

she finds that “the more consistently and systematically the children are taught to interact *with one another* in the solution of learning problems, the more effectively their ability develops to establish learning relations with [...]adult[s]”(p. 244) (our emphasis). Children who had attended Russian schools that are traditional (i.e. teacher-centred) in which they were trained to follow teacher’s directions and to copy the teacher’s models of action, displayed less learning initiative than children who attended schools that encouraged children to work with peers on learning tasks.

We are interested in this paper in examining two distinct communities of practice, two classrooms, in which children are guided by peers and teachers to internalize given societal knowledge. In addition to considering this given knowledge, we also wish to examine how learners themselves in these situations may be enabled or constrained in the development of learning initiative, or orientation toward future learning.

### **Site and Methodology**

The site of the study to be described here is an independent school in British Columbia that serves Punjabi Sikh children from kindergarten to Grade 12. The first author was involved in a 3 year ethnographic study at this school in which a group of 6 focal children were observed from the beginning of their kindergarten year to the end of Grade 2. Research assistants and Toohey observed in the children’s classrooms once a week, audio taping children each time; also a trained video ethnographer videotaped their interactions once a month. Teachers and parents were interviewed at least twice each year.

The children who attend this school are all Punjabi Sikh and all enter school speaking Punjabi. Their experience in speaking English varies. Some children are true beginners in English with no previous experience, while others are much more experienced users. Their teachers at the school are all provincially-certified, and are predominantly Anglo-European Canadian, although there were three teachers in the school at the time of the study who were Punjabi Sikh and members of the same temple in which the school was located. The school teaches the regular British Columbia curriculum, with the addition of a half hour of Sikh studies in the temple at the beginning of the day and a half hour of Punjabi literacy classes in the afternoon. The school is located in the basement of the temple, near the temple’s *langar*, or dining hall; thus, many adults, speaking primarily Punjabi, are around the school at all times.

Striking in the data we reviewed from the Punjabi Sikh school, were the variety of ways in which adults and children in classrooms guided one another’s participation. Focusing on the Grade 1 and Grade 2 classrooms, we noted that there seemed to be at least four different structures of



guidance available in them, and each seemed to draw forth different kinds of social relations among participants, and thus, different sorts of language. The four structures were:

1. Teacher asks a child to help another child with a defined school task;
2. Children help one another without teacher direction;
3. Teacher helps children whom she judges are having difficulties;
4. Teacher gives help to a child based on a student request.

We present examples of each below so as to examine what kinds of social relations these interactions establish, and what kinds of language they call for.

## Data

### 1. Teacher asks child to guide another child

In the Grade 1 classroom, the practice of children helping other children was a very common occurrence. As in an audio taped lesson in September, the Grade 1 teacher, Mrs. Sran<sup>2</sup> (a Punjabi Sikh woman and member of the temple) commonly instructed the children: “You can help your neighbour, please. If you have done it, you can help someone.” In audio taped parent-teacher interviews, Mrs. Sran commended several children to their parents, saying that she or he “helped other children.” The following example is from one videotaped morning in Mrs. Sran’s classroom that particularly well illustrates how children guided one another’s participation in classroom activities.

Upon school entry this morning, the children were instructed to work on phonics worksheets at their desks (arranged in “pods”), and while they were doing this, Mrs. Sran worked with small reading groups on the floor at the side of the room. The children working with her shared storybooks with partners and took turns reading aloud. Some children required assistance with their reading and both the teacher and other children provided this help, sometimes reading along in chorus with the reader, and sometimes supplying words or initial letter sounds. Navjeet, who had just returned from an extended trip to India, had been instructed to work individually on a “Math booklet,” and he was having difficulty completing its title page. The title page was to have text on it (“My Book About Six”) and drawings of different combinations of six. He came to Mrs. Sran on the floor and told her he was stuck. Mrs. Sran said to him, “You don’t know how to do that, and Dave will help you; OK, he will help you. Is it okay [that Dave will help]?” (*In a louder voice, calling*) Dave, would you

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<sup>2</sup> This and the other names in this article are pseudonyms chosen by the participants.

please help Navjeet how to do that work because he wasn't here; he was in India and he doesn't know how to do it."

**Excerpt 1.** [*Dave and Navjeet are side by side at a desk. Navjeet is sitting at the desk while Dave is leaning over him and explaining with the aid of his book.*]

**Dave:** Like look Navjeet, like this. I drew the one and five here. And how did they become six? [*looks at Navjeet*] 'Cause you count like this: one, two, three, four, five, six. Here, like that. You know?

**Navjeet:** How are you supposed to do this?

**Dave:** You draw one circle.

**Navjeet:** Right here?

**Dave:** Ya. You do a "t" right there[to finish off the word "about"] You draw five circles now. Are they six?

**Navjeet:** No.

**Dave:** If you add this one? [*Navjeet nods his head.*] Ok, then \*\*

**Navjeet:** Write?

**Dave:** And draw a six. That's how you do it, okay? Okay? You got it now?

**Navjeet:** Where are we supposed to draw it in there [*inside the booklet*] now?

**Dave:** Same thing. Draw it like this, same thing. How can you make another way of six? Okay? Two and four. Look, two and four; one, two, three, four, five, six. [*He counts on his fingers to demonstrate*] Move your fingers.

**Navjeet:** How do you do this?

[*Dave opens his book to check his answers.*]

**Dave:** Two and four, four and two, six and none.

[*Navjeet writes down the numbers and then checks them in Dave's book.*]

In this excerpt, several of Dave's "guidance" utterances ("Are they six?"; "How can you make another way of six?") are exact replications of utterances Mrs. Sran had earlier in the year and earlier that day, used to assist other children in the class. Dave clearly had appropriated the teacher's voice and in effect, could represent in this interaction both himself and his teacher. However, we can also see that Navjeet initiates and maintains joint action with Dave by soliciting Dave's views on what he should do in this learning activity. Navjeet's participation has a product—his continued attempts to ask the questions that will aid him in finding out what he does not yet know, in order to complete the task. Navjeet shows the beginning of learning initiative in Galperin's terms, and this initiative may be the most important product of the interaction—Navjeet getting practice in framing what he does not yet know, and soliciting linguistically the help of a more experienced peer.

After Dave leaves the table, Navjeet examines Dave's book and begins to "help himself" or copy from it. Dave returns to his desk and sees Navjeet copying from his work. He makes no comment and after a few minutes, Dave directs Navjeet: "OK, Navjeet, now get your journal and write about something, write about yesterday, OK?"

In the Grade 2 classroom, children helping other children with school tasks was not as common as it was in the Grade 1 classroom and in examination of approximately 30 hours of videotape, we found no examples of the teacher directing children to help other children, and only a few examples of children helping children.

## 2. Children guide one another

The following excerpt recorded in the Grade 1 classroom shows an example of another common practice: children guiding children without teacher direction.

**Excerpt 2.** [*Devi and Parm are sitting side by side at their desks.*]

**Devi:** We need some help. [*Hits her fist playfully on the table.*]

**Parm:** I don't. I'm going to look at this one.

[*Devi looks at Parm's paper.*]

**Devi:** I'm going to look right here.

**Parm:** You are a copy-cat. Have you found it?

**Devi:** I found it!

**Parm:** Where? [*Devi shows Parm and they both smile and giggle.*] I found it. Here it is. I wish they would put this over here. [*Points at paper.*]

**Devi:** I wish they would put the bell right here. [*Points at paper.*]

**Parm:** [*laughing*] I wish they would put the bells on here. I wish they would put the bells on here. [*Points at different objects on the table.*]

In this excerpt, the children collaborate in completing their Find-A-Word assignment. This type of help was common in their Grade 1 classroom, and it was often, as the written transcript does not fully reveal, joyful and joking. "Expertise" shifts in this example with Devi first declaring, "We need help," and then presenting herself as providing help. A kind of reciprocity about asking for and giving help is here displayed and the girls experience joint focus on the task. They also engage in language play toward the end of the clip, play which sounds quite a lot like a traditional pattern drill. The affect they display however seems quite unlike any pattern drills we've taught to language learners!

In the Grade 2 classroom, as already mentioned, the teacher discouraged children helping other children and children were aware of this, as shown in the next excerpt from that classroom:

**Excerpt 3.** [*A girl and boy are leaning over a desk and speaking in soft voices. She is helping him. Another boy approaches the desk and observes what is happening*]

**Boy 2:** You're not allowed to help him. [*He walks around the other side of the desk.*]  
You're not allowed to help him.

[*The girl stops helping the boy, but she waves her hand in a dismissing way at the second boy.*]

### 3. Teacher guides whom she thinks needs guidance

The third kind of guidance we have identified is when a teacher provides help to a child on the basis of her judgment that the child needs help. Consider this example from the data:

**Excerpt 4:** [*Mrs. Sran is standing behind Aman's desk observing her work.*]

**Mrs. Sran:** You just left the "T" [*she whispers to Aman*]. You need to go backwards, longwards, upwards. [*She points to Aman's paper.*] What you did, this one, does not fit. Like the T,N,I., the letters are the same but this is different. This one is T, I, E, N, not this, okay? [*Aman then goes on to correct her work.*]

In this example, Mrs. Sran corrects Aman's circling of a collection of letters. She whispers her help to begin with and then leans down and points out the error explicitly. Aman erases her work and Mrs. Sran moves away. As is often the case in classrooms, Mrs. Sran must move away because she needs to be surveying other children's work and to be alert to others needing her help. It is not clear from this clip whether or not Aman has been helped in any permanent way, as the videotape's gaze, like the teacher's gaze, is sporadic and incomplete. It is also not apparent that Aman produces much during this activity that is potentially helpful for any future activity. Rather than a "learning activity," this looks more like a "doing school" activity.

### 4. Teacher guides when child requests guidance

The final kind of guidance we wish to examine is that in which a teacher responds to a child's question or request for help. In this example from the Grade 2 classroom, Mrs. Bailey helps a child after he has asked her a question, while she is directing the whole group.

**Excerpt 5:** [*A student asks an inaudible question. Mrs. Bailey is standing in front of the class with her left hand on her hip, waving her right index finger and shaking her head.*]

**Mrs. Bailey:** Not another one of those questions, no, no, no, no, no.

Student A: What one?

*[Mrs. Bailey leans towards the student.]*

**Mrs. Bailey** *[whispering]* Stupid ones.

Student B: A silly question.

*[Mrs. Bailey leans toward this student.]*

**Mrs. Bailey** *[whispering]*: They're stupid ones. *[She shakes her head in disapproval. She walks toward to the student who has the question, while quickly observing other students' work along the way. Mrs. Bailey stands to the side of the student with the question.]*

**Mrs. Bailey:** Don't count the big numbers, all right? *[pointing at the student's paper.]* Don't count the big numbers, all right? You know what the big number is, count the little numbers. Show me the little numbers. *[Mrs. Bailey moves behind the student and takes the student's hands.]* Show me the little numbers. Now, take this finger then point; eight *[She takes the student's finger and points it to the page]* nine, ten, eleven, *[She takes the student's finger and counts the numbers on the fingers of his other hand.]* That's your answer.

*[The student writes the correct answer in his notebook.]*

**Mrs. Bailey:** Now, show me the little number. *[Mrs. Bailey takes the pencil out of the student's hand.]* Show me the little numbers on your fingers. Show me on your fingers three. *[Mrs. Bailey uses the same technique as previously mentioned to count the numbers.]* All right, now eight, nine, ten, oh, flip-flop, wow!

*[The student writes the correct answer in his notebook.]*

*[Mrs. Bailey takes the student's hands again.]* Now, show me the little number. Show me the little number on your hand, five. *[Mrs. Bailey repeats the same counting technique.]* Now, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve. Good boy.

Mrs. Bailey initially responds in exasperation to this child's question, but as was typical for her, she quickly goes to the child and energetically helps him continue to do his work. Again, because the teacher is responsible for helping more than only this one child, she moves away before it is entirely clear that her help has made a permanent difference in his ability to do the work. As well, in both situations of teachers guiding children illustrated here, the teacher is the "knower" and the child has rather limited opportunities for linguistic contributions. In both cases, the teacher stands while the child sits, the teacher directs from behind and in this excerpt, the teacher even guides the body movements of the child. This is not a situation in which the child displays learning initiative beyond the initial question he produced.

## Discussion

These data describe interactions in two classrooms, two distinct communities of practice, or “figured worlds.” Although both use a provincially-mandated curriculum, use many of the same learning and teaching artifacts, are located in similar rooms in the same school, are led by provincially-certified teachers, and involve the same students (albeit in two different years), at least some practices within them are different. In the first classroom, taught by a Punjabi Sikh teacher, the activity of students guiding other students was encouraged, valued and frequently took place. In the other classroom, the similarly-credentialed Anglo teacher commonly discouraged/disallowed such peer interaction, although she was energetic in her own attempts to guide children. In this classroom, peer guidance was infrequent. These are distinctly different sites in which learning conventions, distribution of labour and interactants in some specific practices are different. While both teachers provide instructional communities that fulfill mandates of the provincial authorities, they do so in markedly different ways. Students also produce different artifacts in the different activities in which they are involved in the two sites. It is the learning artifacts children produce, in this case, learning initiative, in which we are particularly interested here.

With peer guidance, illustrated especially in the excerpt in which Dave helps Navjeet, Dave (the more experienced participant) appropriates teacher-like language to guide Navjeet. At the same time that Dave, for example, sounds like a teacher, he is not a teacher, and Navjeet continues to ask for assistance. His questions are not high level, but they maintain the interaction and provide Navjeet with practice in indicating his need for guidance. In Zuckerman’s terms, Navjeet displays some low levels of learning initiative, and this “product” may be the most important outcome of this interaction.

It is worth recognizing that in this peer interaction, Dave knows and Navjeet doesn’t know, but it seems that their power relations are more horizontal than a teacher-student relationship. Dave sits beside Navjeet, so even his physical positioning is similar to Navjeet’s. And finally, Dave has the material resource of his own booklet that Navjeet can copy. Teachers, despite their considerable intellectual resources, don’t often have such material resources to offer.

In the Devi and Parm’s example, these girls assume what appear to be reciprocal relations of power, as they collaborate in finishing their task. They seemingly happily play with language. As Day (2002) observes, when child language learners “play” with language, they can often be seen to be providing for themselves practice in speaking the second language. Also, in so doing, the children display comfort in indicating their need for help, as well as confidence in their ability to approach the task.

In the example of Mrs. Sran guiding Aman and Mrs. Bailey helping a student, we see another side to guidance. In these situations, the children who are helped say almost nothing, and the teachers take all the initiative in establishing the relationship and in structuring the learning task. In such situations, it is impossible to assess whether or not the teacher's guidance has been effective, or if it answers questions the learners are asking.

We believe, like Zuckerman, that when children (and perhaps especially language learners) are encouraged, even directed, by their teachers to help one another with school tasks, to guide one another, their helping practices can be much the same as their teachers' and in some cases they use the exact words of teachers' help. They appropriate aspects of the teacher's voice, to use Bakhtinian (Bakhtin, 1981) terminology. Children see and hear their teachers helping other children in a variety of ways--reading with them, telling them words, taking over aspects of the task and so on. Children's help is thus, using Bakhtinian terminology again, multi-voiced—the child uses teachers' words but those words must fit in a child's mouth, and the child's interlocutors can challenge those words in ways that would not be possible when teachers' words come out of teachers' mouths. Sometimes in such interactions, children provide help that is indeed demonstrably helpful, and as they have done the work themselves (unlike teachers) they have material resources to share that are helpful for the helpee. In other classrooms, or perhaps at particular times in all classrooms, children are discouraged by their teachers from helping one another. At such times, the teacher is the legitimate expert, and children appear to have rather limited opportunities at such times to guide their own learning.

Rogoff et al. (1993) argue that:

For middle-class U.S. children, the skills and patterns of social interaction practiced in school may relate closely to those necessary for eventual participation in the economic and political institutions of their society. (p. 233)

The practices in the two classrooms we describe here are not unusual or extraordinary in any way in Canadian classrooms in which we have observed, or in the literature describing North American classrooms generally. Having children see the teacher as the legitimate guide to participation in the classroom was seen by Waller (1961) as a time-honoured schooling practice. Preparing children for the economic and political institutions of North American society may necessitate them learning that assistance comes from recognized authorities, that "help" is scarce, and that finishing first, or not requiring "help," is a valorized position. Whether or not teachers wish to support these arrangements is another question.

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