

## **SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM (SI) AS A SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY AND ITS APPLICATION TO CLASSROOM LEARNING**

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### **Abstract**

*This work is a discussion paper on the basic principles of Symbolic Interactionism (SI) theory. It analyzed the principles within the action perspective while applying them to the process of learning in the classroom. The theory assumes a social constructivist role for the individual in society in a macro-level approach while seeing the learner applying them on a micro-level approach in the classroom. The learner is seen as a classroom constructivist for whom learning is his responsibility but with a mediator in the personality of an instructor. The paper articulated various recommendations for an enhanced learning process in the classroom based on quality social interactions. It sees quality learning as a solution to the myriad social problems in society.*

### **Introduction**

Generally, sociological reasoning is not just about a body of knowledge but a perspective and a set of tools that can provide an individual with great understanding and the ability to excel in whatever specific area one chooses to direct his or her attention. Of course man's attention is often targeted at finding solutions to the problems that often confront his existence. Indeed, there are numerous problems and challenges, just as there are a variety of sociological schools of thought propounded by man to address them.

These schools of thought range from very conservative ideas to rather extremist reasonings, meant to provide underpinnings to the operational dimensions of society.

In society's attempt to provide suitable conditions for the sustainable existence of people, adverse conditions sometimes emerge. These adverse conditions at times tend to hinder social cohesion or harmony while creating dislocations, thus disrupting social order. Since sociological studies are mostly concerned with the question of order in society, the need to understand these conditions cannot be overemphasized. Thus, the prevailing high rates of social vices in our present generation cannot pass unnoticed if the application of sociological principles in solving social problems is still considered a veritable tool. These social vices ranging from the mild form to do with dishonesty to the extreme cases of armed violence and murder amongst the younger members of society call for concern. This is a demonstration of the high level of social value erosion and significant drift from the well-known cherished and respected norms of society. Most world societies are thus characterized by inept tendencies and ineffectively oriented members. Production levels in most societies seem therefore to be very low ebbed in all fronts. In most developing societies, these phenomena are the most obvious and social stability is indeed far-fetched. Social vices are thus of high magnitude while such societies are best described as inelegant.

This perceived poverty of social norms resulting in social vices can seemingly be

attributed to a weak socialization process particularly in the classroom. Socialization process usually determines the quantum and quantity of cultural heritage conveyed from one generation to another, the effect of which is the determination of the quality of society by the character of its members. To a large extent, classroom learning through socialization sharpens the thinking and action of society. Thus, whatever effort that is meant to improve classroom cannot be ignored.

### **Basic Premises and Approach of Symbolic Interactionism (SI)**

Symbolic interactionism finds expression in the action perspective of sociological enquiry about social life. It is a distinct American branch of sociology which is credited to its major proponent, George Herbert Mead (1863-1931). The emphasis of symbolic interactionism is on the actor's views and interpretations of social reality of the various philosophers who contributed to the growth of the theory. Mead postulates that human beings are distinguished from other animals by their ability to imagine themselves in the place of others and so anticipate their responses. Schaefer (2005), sees symbolic interactionism as a sociological framework for viewing human beings as living in a world of meanings to objects such as material things and non-material things as actions, relationships and symbols.

Blumer, a student and interpreter of Herbert Mead, summarized the perspective by saying that people act toward things based on the meanings which the things have for them and these meanings are derived from social interaction and modified through interpretation. Blumer appeared to have also been greatly influenced by John Dewey who insisted that human beings are best understood in relation to their environment. On the basis of his wide experience, Blumer

(1969), set out three basic premises of symbolic interactionism thus:

- Humans act towards things on the basis of the meanings they ascribe to those things.
- The meanings of such things are derived from, or arise out of the social interaction that one has with others and the society.
- These meanings are handed in, and modified through an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things which an individual encounters.

Thus, people interact with each other by interpreting or defining each other's actions instead of merely reacting to each other's actions. Individuals' responses are not made directly to the actions of one another but based on the meanings which they attach to such actions. Human interaction is mediated by the use of symbols and signification, interpretation, or by ascertaining the meaning of one another's actions (Blumer, 1969).

The emphasis on symbols, negotiated meanings and social construction of society has created specified roles played by members of society. Symbolic interactionism is a micro-sociological perspective which is concerned with the individual face-to-face interaction between individuals.

Generally, the perspective holds that human thought, experience and conduct are mainly socially-oriented as they interact in terms of symbols which are translated into language. Man interacts using symbols with his natural and social emotions. Human interaction and society will therefore not be in existence without symbols as symbolic interaction is a prerequisite for social continuity. This is because no man has instincts to direct his behaviour in a genetically programmed manner so as to react automatically to particular stimuli. Man lives in

a world of symbols which hitherto give meaning and significance to his life and also provide the basis for human interaction because without communication in terms of symbols, whose meanings are shared, the processes would not be possible. Man must therefore construct a life within a world of meaning for his existence.

Symbolic interaction also emphasizes that where meanings of symbols are shared and understood by members of society, it becomes easier for members to take roles which involves them taking on the roles of others by placing themselves imaginatively in the positions of the persons with whom they interact.

### **Symbolic Interactionism (SI) and Classroom Learning**

The theory of symbolic interactionism (SI) has received attention as a relevant philosophical position and mode of analysis for qualitative classroom observation. Blumer (1969),<sup>8</sup> is considered a key theorist in the development of ideas surrounding SI. There are three core principles to this perspective which are:

- i) A principle of "meaning" which contends that people act towards objects (people and things) based on the meanings that they have given to those objects.
- ii) A principle of "language" which provides the tools (symbols) to negotiate meaning.
- iii) A principle of "thought" and assurance of different points of views.

There has been a considerable pool of research activities that reflect on the theory of SI. Though these studies have focused on various social groups, they have linked SI to classroom learning through the notion of social constructivist classroom learning. Social constructionists contend that knowledge is personally constructed but socially mediated. Constructivist classrooms are social places

where actions and reactions to peers and their ideas, particularly in cooperative learning emanates (Johnson & Johnson, 1996) and are conceivably predicted on the symbols that players hold for objects in that learning environment. Thus, cooperative learning viewed within social constructivist classroom can't be successfully achieved without considering factors in SI as vital components. Since symbolic interactionists consider human action on the basis of meanings which they give to objects and events rather than reacting to external stimuli such as social forces or internal stimuli like organic drives, classroom learning in a cooperative fashion can be anchored on its principles to relatively guarantee meaningful learning.

Meanings given to objects and events in a social environment by individuals and groups are based on the backgrounds or orientations of the individuals or groups in a particular society. Where the social setting is a classroom cooperative learning environment, it is reasoned within interactionist understanding that, meaningful learning can but be realized in circumstances where meanings are indeed derived from specific values that are held by members of the social setting. Meanings that are held are often not too static but dynamic given that values are not also static. Cooperative classrooms which give rise to constructivist reasoning are indeed the ideas of interactionists. According to this reasoning, through deductive dimension, constructivist classrooms are basically reflective of the nature of meanings given to objects and events. Thus also, the meanings attached are based on an individual's or group's perceptions which are significantly influenced by the cloud of cultural values underlying behaviour.

Meanings arise from the process of interaction, however to some extent they are

created, modified, developed and changed within interactional situations rather than being fixed and performed. During interaction, actors interpret meanings and even the intentions of others. Thus, categorically individuals are perceived to hold the power to modify or adjust their held meanings to objects and events in particular situations, rehearse alternative courses of actions and subsequently consider their possible consequence by means of the "mechanism of self-interaction".

### **Some Recommendations to Consider in Classroom Learning for Improved Performance Using SI Principles**

The following are thus considered:

- 1) In a classroom situation, symbolic interactionism (SI) has been found to be useful since the teacher interacts with learners on a personal basis. Individualized instruction and monitoring by SI principle is therefore recognized as one that encourages the learner to take personal decisions and construct the social world. The society is thus perceived as a construction of an individual though in a net-worked pattern based on interaction.
- 2) Classroom definitions or meanings already attached or given influence behaviour and task performance. If this is the case, classroom instructors ought to be cautious in giving definitions to objects, situations and events as these will either positively or adversely affect task performance. Interactionists see classroom performance as largely a product of interpretation and meanings which are given by teachers thereby having a significant effect on classroom

interaction and educational achievement. Rosenthal and Jacobson (1980) in their "self-fulfilling prophecy theory" explain that the teacher defines the pupil in a particular way and based on this definition, he prophesies on the behaviour of the learner. Consequently, the learners' self-concept tends to be shaped by the teacher's definition (Haralambos, 1980).

- 3) Adherence to cultural values as the determinants of meanings and interpretations of objects and events. Interactionists have understood that meanings and interpretations are subjected to specific values and norms, thus classroom learning ought to reflect such virtues. The benchmarks for meanings and interpretations are thus based on social values. Thus, meanings and interpretations may differ from one social setting to another. However, there may be common values that run across social settings. Classroom meanings and interpretations must be carefully considered and applied within adaptable cultural norms and values of society. Learners' own social backgrounds are important social variables or drives for enhanced learning performance.
- 4) Schools play a vital role in shaping the way students see reality and themselves. Many interactionists have argued that the authoritarianism prevalent in schools impede learning and encourages undemocratic behaviour later in life. Schools create serious difficulties for students who are labeled as learning disabled.

- 5) Learning according to SI proponents is but a product of cooperative understanding. Infact, the oftenness and quality of social interaction also enhances the height of performance. Though a cooperative classroom, the performance is personal-oriented and social constructivism is indeed self-directed.
- 6) The classroom environment should be activity-packed and as deduced from the ideas of the SI, symbols, objects and events should be brought in. While these are brought in, appropriate meanings and interpretations should be attached. Such should even be modified and altered based on existing social conditions. For instance, the use of teaching aids is always advocated to bridge the gap between abstraction and reality in society.
- 7) The principle of pragmatism which the SI principle identified emphasizes the need to be active and creative in the production of knowledge. Creativity and activeness are essential elements of the SI classroom principles which self-directed activities are considered important for learning progression. Project work, practicum and field work are indeed necessary for skills acquisition in the learning process.

### Conclusion

The characteristics of symbolic interaction (SI) as a sociological theory show much relevance for classroom learning. Indeed, classroom learning is a major activity for the continued existence of society. This theory advocates or demonstrates that the individual member of society has the capacity to so construct the social world and keep it going. The constructivist approach is a

dimension that sees the classroom or social setting as a preparatory avenue for social transformation. The classroom attaches meanings and interpretations to objects, events and situations. These meanings and interpretations are benchmarked by the social values of the society where such activities are considered.

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