A framework for understanding the role of sociocultural issues in instructed learning

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Abstract

This paper zeroes in on the role of sociocultural issues in instructed learning, as part of a larger, exhaustive discussion—presented as the ‘Molenda–Subramony Framework’—of the myriad proximal, distal, and environmental factors impacting the latter. Given that human society comprises a multitude of individual and institutional actors operating within multiple, overlapping environmental settings and contexts, our Framework features key actors—the learner, the facilitator, the learner’s home/family members and peers, and the media—operating within the setting of classroom and school environments, important frame factors, and the larger sociocultural environment. This paper is devoted to examining in detail the sociocultural issues, aspects, and dimensions pertinent to each of the aforementioned key actors and settings.
Introduction

The role of sociocultural issues in learning have, until very recently in the field’s history, attracted very little interest and attention amongst educational technologists; the extraordinary magnitude and all-pervasive nature of this neglect has been documented in vivid, painstaking detail in Subramony (2004), Subramony (2017), and Subramony (2018). As Jamison (1992) described, the roots of this collective blindness goes all the way back to our field’s—particularly its branch that deals with instructional systems design (ISD)’s—origins within the deeply patriarchic milieus of the military, industrial, and medical spheres. These origins prompted it to traditionally look at the stakeholders targeted by our scholarship and praxis as uniform beings suited to uniform solutions; after all, our earliest target learners wore actual uniforms, whether on military bases or on factory floors. ISD thus started off as mere manipulation of content, following linear, restrictive, lock-step models that failed to comprehend the true nature of human learning as complex, multilayered, and messy. To its credit, ISD did eventually evolve somewhat from there; Schiffman’s (1986) classic essay carefully traced ISD’s development from a primitive media-selection approach to a more systemic one that better befitted its instructional systems design moniker.

Molenda-Subramony Framework

Our recently published book (Molenda & Subramony, 2021) presents a pathbreaking new Framework outlining the myriad factors—from proximal, to multiple levels of distal, to environmental—that directly or indirectly impact what we call instructed learning, a term borrowed from neuroscience that distinguishes human learning which occurs as a consequence of deliberate, planned, premeditated instruction from that which spontaneously occurs in response
to various life events/experiences. Fig. 1 below visually represents this Framework, which we call the ‘Molenda–Subramony Framework of the Forces Affecting Instructed Learning.’

Fig. 1: Molenda–Subramony Framework of the Forces Affecting Instructed Learning

The above Framework constitutes a crucial part of our overarching argument that an ecological approach to educational technology scholarship and praxis is a logical next step in the evolution of our field into one that is 21st-century-ready. This entails extending the systems metaphor in a manner that allows us to see personal and social relationships as part of meaning making in an increasingly diverse, interconnected, globalized world; recognizing learning as spanning multiple human contexts, such that ours and our stakeholders’ history, culture, race,
politics, etc. *all* matter and need to be taken into account within our scholarship and praxis; and thus acknowledging that—at the risk of sounding cliched—appropriate instruction truly requires a metaphoric 30,000-foot view, a capability to see the BIG big picture. The Molenda–Subramony Framework incorporates many elements that have traditionally not been taken into consideration by instructional designers, presenting a comprehensive, holistic view of the myriad factors that affect instructed learning—and therefore ought to be taken into account while designing, developing, and implementing instruction.

**Key Actors and Settings**

Human society comprises a multitude of individual and institutional actors operating within myriad, overlapping environmental settings and contexts. The Molenda–Subramony Framework features the following key actors: the learner, the facilitator, the learner’s home/family members and peers, and the media. These actors operate within the setting of classroom and school environments, important *frame factors*, and the larger sociocultural environment. The rest of this paper is devoted to examining in detail the sociocultural issues, aspects and dimensions pertinent to each of the aforementioned key actors and settings.

**Learner**

Let us start by focusing on the sociocultural issues pertinent to the learner, who is the focus of instruction within the Molenda–Subramony Framework. As Fig. 1 shows, two of the three proximal factors that most *directly* impact instructed learning relate to the learner—namely, their Aptitude, and the quantum of Effort they put in towards learning. Directly feeding into these two proximal factors are two ‘first-level distal’ factors also pertaining to the learner—viz., their Psychological Traits and their Psychological State. Taken together, these four factors encompass a wide range of learner attributes, including the learner’s prior achievement, prior
subject knowledge, self-efficacy, locus-of-control, maturational level, personal interests, expectancies, valuations, situational interest, and motivation to learn. In terms of their sociocultural aspects/dimensions, it is important to recognize certain crucially important issues/phenomena when considering the four aforementioned factors.

One of these phenomena that significantly impact the learner is their cultural capital. The eminent Bourdieu (1990) describes how learners with higher socioeconomic status (SES) origins inherit significantly different cultural capital—cultural background, knowledge, disposition, and skills—than those with lower SES origins. Learners growing up in environments where culturally valued activities like reading, travel, museum visits, and concert- and theatergoing are frequently practiced get socialized into the dominant culture that the educational system requires for academic achievement. Schools—where most instructed learning takes place—value and reward the cultural capital of the dominant classes, facilitating their easy translation into superior academic credentials. We will revisit this when discussing the classroom/school environments.

Besides, learners also acquire a distinct habitus—“a subjective but not individual system of internalized structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class”—along with their cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 86). Functioning constantly as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions—as a system of lasting, deeply internalized, and transposable attitudes, beliefs, values, and dispositions integrating past experiences—a learner’s habitus impacts their perceptions regarding self-efficacy and locus-of-control, as well as their interests, expectancies, valuations, and motivation. The learner’s habitus engenders their aspirations—internalizations of objective probabilities that reflect the learner’s view of their chances of success. Lower-SES learners raised in environments
where success is rare are less likely to develop strong ambitions than upper-SES learners inhabiting environments where the connection between effort and reward is infinitely clearer.

Meanwhile, learners’ cultural capital and habitus are closely linked to their privilege and intersectionality—both important sociological concepts that must be comprehended in order for us to better understand where our learners are coming from and how they relate to instructed learning. In her seminal 1988 paper, McIntosh outlined her influential concept of a “knapsack” of privilege, which she formulated as a direct repudiation of the myth of meritocracy that constitutes a basis of modern capitalist society. She characterized privilege—conferred through one’s belonging to a ‘dominant’ group based on any given criterion such as race, gender, sexual orientation, culture, citizenship, etc.—as “an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, codebooks, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear, and blank checks” (p. 1-2) about which its possessor is meant to remain oblivious, and ignorant of his obliviousness. Furthermore, the existence of a matrix of privileges enjoyed by the dominant groups invariably engenders a corresponding matrix of oppressions experienced by the subjugated groups; some take “active forms which we can see” and others take “embedded forms which as a member of the dominant group one is taught not to see” (p. 17).

Logically extending McIntosh’s arguments related to privilege and oppression, Crenshaw (1991, p. 1245) coined the term intersectionality to describe how different forms of discrimination can interact and overlap, and to emphasize the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed. While originally employed to explain how race and gender intersect and compound each other as forms of oppression in the lived experiences of women of color, the concept of intersectionality has since broadened to encompass the entire gamut of pertinent social variables including sexual
orientation, nationality, socioeconomic class, disability, etc. (Emba, 2015). Intersectionality reminds us that our identities based on race, gender, class, and sexuality accompany us in every social interaction (Collins, 1993)—including instructional activities. It helps us understand that human beings are complex beings who experience oppression in ways that are deeply intersected, in ways that cannot be disassembled and their parts analyzed separately; their myriad aforementioned sociocultural identities are thus profoundly interconnected with all other parts of their experiences and identities (Richards & Barker, 2015)—once again including educational experiences. An intersectional perspective allows us to see that we cannot begin to understand the contexts, experiences, issues, and needs of learners if we ignore and fail to take into account some very important parts of their identity and experience as human beings, parts that are inextricably interlinked with every other part thereof.

Furthermore, since the dawn of the current Information Age, a persistent and deeply impactful symptom of socioeconomic inequalities among learners has been the so-called Digital Divide—the widening and increasingly calamitous gulf between those who are appropriately positioned to effectively harness the puissant emancipatory potential of the myriad media technologies that are key to socioeconomic success and upward mobility within Information Age societies and those who are not. Borrowing McIntosh’s theoretical lens, Subramony (2014, p. 7) proposed that the individuals belonging to those social/economic/cultural groups that are located on the “right” side of the Digital Divide could be seen as the largely oblivious beneficiaries of a vast matrix of privileges, unconscious possessors of a significant knapsack of gifts, when it comes to their relationship with media technologies. Evoking Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality, Subramony described these individuals as occupying “happy intersections” of demographic, economic, political, social and cultural factors that make it possible for them to
harness the full emancipatory potential of these technologies to get even further ahead within today’s Information Age socioeconomic framework. In contrast, those on the opposite side of the tracks vis-à-vis the Digital Divide do not possess said knapsack, but instead remain trapped under multiple layers of oppressions.

Meanwhile, the learner’s Psychological Traits and States are substantially influenced by their self-identity vis-à-vis the dominant class/cultural/economic systems that they construct based on their lived experiences within those systems. Willis (1977) saw learners as social agents who view, inhabit, and construct their own world. Some construct self-identities that aspire to upward socioeconomic mobility and comply with dominant rules and norms. Others construct oppositional self-identities—based on their profound insights into the economic condition of their social class—that reject the dominant achievement ideology; they become subversive nonconformists, believing that their chances for upward mobility are so remote under the current socioeconomic power structure as to render any attempts at good behavior and conformity pointless. Giroux presented his theory of student resistance (1983), explaining how students’ opposition and nonconformity towards the educational system were responses rooted in their moral and political indignation and critique of school-constructed ideologies and relations of domination rather than any sort of psychological dysfunction.

Finally, the impact of the learner’s sociocultural environment extends to their prior achievement and subject knowledge (factors of their Aptitude), since prior achievement and mastery of prerequisite skills—including literacy and numeracy—depend on their access to learning resources and ability to extract the benefits of said resources, which again are a function of their cultural capital and habitus, self-identity, privilege, and intersectionality.

Facilitator
Let us now move our focus to the sociocultural issues pertinent to the facilitator, who implements instruction within the Molenda–Subramony Framework. When facilitators possessing socioeconomically more valued cultural capital and more effective habitus are put in contact with learners from socioeconomically marginalized backgrounds, this throws up potential opportunities and pitfalls. Consequently, the facilitator must navigate adroitly and skillfully, figuring out how to nudge learners along pathways to emancipation and empowerment without making them feel devalued or disrespected. This requires the facilitator to check some of their tacit/explicit assumptions with regard to teaching and learning. Two common assumptions among professional educators are that the current ideological, structural, and media/technological frameworks within which most instructed learning takes place are (a) morally/ethically well-intentioned, and (b) culturally neutral.

Critical scholars argue, however, that neither of these assumptions is warranted, and that they both reflect the obliviousness that characterizes privilege. For those unfamiliar with the term critical scholars interpret the acts and the symbols of society to understand how various social groups are oppressed, believing that understanding the ways human being are oppressed enables one to take action to change oppressive forces. These scholars align themselves with the interests of those opposed to dominant order of society, and explore how competing interests clash and how conflicts are resolved in favor of particular groups (Seiler, 2006).

A specific group of critical scholars—whom one may call “social reproductionists”—argue that modern schools are set up and operate in a way that perpetuates the intergenerational reproduction of socioeconomic inequalities, rather than promoting the empowerment and upward mobility of learners from socioeconomically marginalized backgrounds by providing them with appropriate pathways to meaningfully harness the emancipatory potential of instructed learning.
Meanwhile, and this is ever more germane given the increasing time, effort, and material resources accorded to the integration of media technologies into teaching and learning, many professional educators persist in believing that instructional methods and technologies are ideologically objective and culturally *neutral*. However, Bowers—see Bowers, Vasquez, & Roaf (2000)—reminds us of the “multibillion dollar reasons” (p. 184) that the vendors of media technologies have for maintaining the myth that these technologies are culturally neutral. Said technologies in fact encode Western ideals of individualism and a rootless form of existence (Howe, 1988). As Bowers, et al. (2000) explain, the myth of the cultural neutrality of technology was important in hiding the forms of cultural transformation that needed to take place in order to enable the spread of the Industrial Revolution; and technology-mediated learning is currently reinforcing the same modern, Western pattern of individual-centered relations and forms of consciousness—equating greater individual autonomy, consumerism, and technological development with progress—during what is essentially the Industrial Revolution’s digital phase.

That neither of the two sets of issues introduced in the preceding two paragraphs have historically attracted much attention or interest among the dominant, mainstream voices within professional educator communities—especially educational technologists (see Subramony, 2004; 2017)—speak to the privilege enjoyed by the latter. As a gender, sex and sexuality activist within the U.S. computer gaming industry—famously put it, privilege “is when you think that something’s not a problem because it’s not a problem for you personally” (Gaider, 2013). The intergenerational reproduction of socioeconomic class inequalities—and the role of schools in perpetuating it—will naturally not be pressing, foregrounded issues for a given individual if they and their family currently enjoy a high SES and actually look forward to its intergenerational reproduction. Similarly, the cultural non-neutrality of technology will not be negatively
consequential for a given individual if the cultural values embedded in the former are compatible with their own cultural values.

**Learner’s Home/Family & Peers**

Two other sets of actors—Home/Family members and Peers—are represented in the Molenda–Subramony Framework as second-level distal influences, in that we do not see them as affecting instructed learning directly, but rather as underlying the first-level distal factors.

Home and Family values are largely determined by the ways in which learners and their parents/relatives are shaped by their SES and cultural identity. Everything we discussed with respect to the sociocultural issues pertinent to the learner earlier in this paper logically applies to their home/family members as well. Learners acquire a significant portion of their cultural capital from their families, with high-SES children inheriting substantially different, and more valued, cultural capital than low-SES children, whose families are often immigrants, ethnic minorities and/or language minorities (Bourdieu, 1990). Learners also acquire much of their habitus (Bourdieu, 1990) from their families. Family background hugely informs an individual learner’s socioeconomic and cultural privilege (McIntosh, 1988)—or lack thereof—and is a crucial element of their intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991).

Meanwhile, learners’ relationships with peers also greatly hinge on the self-identity constructed by the individual learner vis-à-vis the educational system that represents the dominant class/cultural/economic system (Willis, 1977; Giroux, 1983), as well as the respective self-identities constructed by their peers both within and outside the learner’s own socioeconomic class and cultural group. These relationships are also determined by the learner’s—and their peers’—relative privilege (McIntosh, 1988) and intersectionality (Crenshaw,
1991). Learners also acquire varying degrees of cultural capital and habitus (Bourdieu, 1990) from their peers.

### Media

The Molenda–Subramony Framework sees mass media and social media as third-level influences; that is, they do not influence instructed learning directly but rather underlie the second-level distal factors, which impact the first-level distal factors, which in turn directly influence the proximal factors of Effort by the learner and Instruction by the facilitator.

Mainstream mass media—print, radio, and television, along with the advertising industry—are invariably owned by society’s dominant group(s)—those with economic and political power over the rest of society—and openly embody the latter’s sociocultural values. The phrase “All the News That’s Fit to Print” that appears on the masthead of the New York Times represents a cultural determination and also an expression of power; these most famous seven words in American journalism indicate that a certain group of people have the power to decide—based on their own sociocultural values—what is fit to print and what is not. Mass media by definition engage in the powerful cultural processes of news framing, agenda setting, and priming (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). They routinely stereotype human groups that are socio-culturally distant from themselves (Subramony, 2000), and decide whom to represent or marginalize. When advertisements for socio-culturally desirable products/services across Latin America, Africa and Asia feature light-skinned, light-haired, light-eyed actors who bear no physical resemblance to the target audience of said advertisements, unmistakable sociocultural messages are being transmitted, a logically extreme outcome of which is the burgeoning market for skin-, hair-, and eye-lightening products and procedures across the Global South.
Social media, on the other hand, are more complex in their intentions and efforts. Firstly, Western social media platforms unabashedly serve as agents of *digital colonialism*—extracting data from citizens of the Global South without the latter’s explicit consent (Marker, Vestergaard, & Hendricks, 2019), and subsequently processing and using said data to create manufactured services to sell back to the latter (Kwet, 2019). In terms of peer influences on learners, social media are a well-known source of peer pressure and platform for cyber-bullying (see Subramony, 2018). On the other hand, social media can also be seen as a mode of resistance, a la Giroux (1983); that which is not considered fit to print by the mainstream mass media can be disseminated via social media, thus subverting and undermining the mainstream media’s role in preserving the political, social, economic, and cultural hegemony of society’s dominant group(s).

**Classroom/School Environments**

The classroom and school environments are depicted in Fig. 1 as the two smaller dotted boxes surrounding the proximal and first-level distal factors towards the right-hand side.

The school environment is, at its most basic level, a consequence of (a) how schools are fundamentally conceptualized and structured, and (b) the kind of cultural capital they are set up to reward—both of which are functions of the complex socioeconomic and cultural forces that created the educational system. Bowles & Gintis (1976, 2002) have long upheld a social reproductionist view of schooling; they have maintained that modern public school systems are set up to reflect the interests of capitalist business owners rather than any democratic or pedagogical ideal. In their view, schools (a) primarily serve to socialize future employees to work uncomplainingly within hierarchical corporate structures—by structuring social interactions and individual rewards in ways that mirror workplace environments, while (b) doing
precious little to stop the intergenerational reproduction of social inequality, i.e., to break the cycle of low socio-economic status (SES) children growing up to be low-SES adults.

Bourdieu (1990), in contrast, focuses more on cultural processes as opposed to structural determinism to explain how schools work to foster the intergenerational reproduction of social inequality. According to him, schools embody the interests of dominant classes by acting to reward the cultural capital of said classes while simultaneously acting to systematically devalue that of marginalized classes. Schools thus become the marketplace where the cultural capital of dominant classes is exchanged for the currency of academic credentials, which is subsequently converted back into economic capital via entry into highly remunerated professions—representing a perfectly legitimized cycle of social reproduction. Giroux (1983) puts a finer point on it when he explains that schools reproduce existing power relations “via the production and distribution of a dominant culture that tacitly confirms what it means to be educated.” (p. 87)

Frame Factors

The Molenda–Subramony Framework also takes into account a set of frame factors that indirectly impact instructed learning—namely, (a) Official laws, policies, and regulations; (b) Funding; (c) Official/explicit and unofficial/tacit moral and ethical norms; (d) Physical environment; and (e) Learner health and well-being. In Fig. 1, these frame factors are represented by the second-largest dotted box, located just inside the ‘Sociocultural Environment’ box, and encompassing all of the other elements featuring within the Framework.

The sociocultural facets, dimensions, and ramifications of the aforementioned frame factors should be clearly self-evident to the reader. Consider the impact of the U.S. government’s post-9/11 educational policy changes, assorted travel bans based on religious background and national origin, and recent animus-fueled restrictions placed on international students, on the
learners that these legal initiatives have targeted. Consider the impact of basing school funding on property taxes on learners living in low-income, low-net-worth neighborhoods. Consider whose cultural, moral, and ethical values are reflected by the codes of conduct, honor codes, professional standards, and licensing requirements governing various professions and professional bodies. Consider the physical environment of underfunded inner-city and rural schools—the impact of inadequate heating/cooling/ventilation, mold, and broken/nonfunctioning equipment on student learning. The infrastructural divide between rich schools and poor schools and the Digital Divide between rich students and poor students—along with the unequal health and financial impact upon rich students v. poor students—have all come into sharp, brutal, unignorable focus during the current COVID-19 pandemic.

**Sociocultural Environment**

It will be clearly noticeable from our preceding discussion of the multiple distal factors influencing instructed learning that all of these factors are underlain and impacted by the sociocultural environment within which they are situated. In fact, all of the elements that must come together in order to make instructed learning possible—viz., learners, facilitators, resources, settings, teaching-learning arrangements, and organizational structures—are embedded and operate within a given sociocultural environment.

It is in light of this that Fig. 1 depicts the Sociocultural Environment as the largest dotted box encompassing all of the other elements featuring within the Molenda–Subramony Framework. Our perspective here is congruent with that of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2018, p. 22), who also approach the whole subject of human learning from a sociocultural perspective, pointing out that learning cannot be separated from the culture in which it takes place. “Culture” is defined here in its sociological sense: as a way of life.
of a group of people—the behaviors, beliefs, values, and symbols that they accept, generally without thinking about them, and that are passed along from one generation to the next.

References


