Scholars who study human learning from different traditions tend to focus on different core phenomena and kinds of influences. In a sociocultural historical tradition, learning is theorized as an interaction, a participatory action. In this view of learning, the learner’s identities and positioning (by self and others) within learning environments influences the learning interactions in any given moment and ultimately the learning pathways that can occur across longer timescales. This entry examines a sociocultural historical view of learning and the relationship between learning, identity, and positioning.

**Situated Learning**

Many people automatically associate learning with teaching and schooling, which frames learning as a formal, academic pursuit. A broader view of learning subscribes to the idea that people learn across the range of contexts they frequent. From this view learners learn with others throughout their lives and within the multitude of settings that they traverse (see Life-long, life-wide, and life-deep learning). Learning is influenced by historically shaped cultural and linguistic practices, social and material circumstances of the moment, underlying values for interpreting behavior, affective dimensions, and social expectations. Learning is not solely located within one’s head but rather is part of robust interaction and occurs within and is distributed throughout and across interactions, relationships, and forms of participation with respect to both people and non-human actors such as tools.
Those who study human learning through this lens examine specific practices and happenings that demonstrate and highlight the situated characteristics of learning, how learning is distributed across activity, settings, people, tools, and timescales, and the complicated relationship between learning and language. With respect to language, scholars study how various sociocultural historical linguistic practices such as argumentation afford or hinder learning and they also study evidence of learning through linguistic constructs such as discourse markers. Additionally, scholars study the interdiscursive characteristics of learning, with the associated learning events themselves being separated at times across large spans of space and time.

**Positioning and Identity**

Two constructs that influence learning are positioning and identity. Positioning theory has its historical roots in Vygotsky’s conception of public and private cognition as mediated by tools, such as language. The act of positioning describes how people assign, reject, accept, and create the rights and duties associated with action and interaction. Positions are typically more dynamic than roles and are shaped and influenced by sociocultural historical story lines, which are usually taken for granted frames on activity and settings. Learning environments can be viewed as having a range of storylines and associated positions—which are sometimes durable social categories—available for individuals to become associated with during activity. Depending upon the power and social hierarchies that are operating, individuals may be able to resist undesirable positionings or they have to or can choose to accept them.
Positioning is closely tied to identification processes. From a sociocultural historical framework, identity can be understood as self-understandings that are socially meaningful for individuals as they participate in contexts. People have a multitude of identities that co-exist and are foregrounded at different times depending on setting, activity, people present, and positions that are operating. Identities are interactionally emergent and are typically taken to be socially and linguistically constructed. Identities are situated in and shaped by the sociocultural historical milieu of which any given person is part.

Identities would not exist without interpretive frameworks that allow the self and others to recognize the identities that are salient and ascribe meaning to and determine the implications of those identities for social actions. People perform their identities within activity and these discursive practices are what enable others to interpret and act on identity, which can be one impetus for the positioning work in which people engage. Identities also provide resources for learning in social situations. To further complicate the landscape, individuals are members of multiple cultural groups and groups promote a set of identities and/or have identities attributed to them by others. Individuals in these groups might identify with some of the groups’ identities but might reject others.

Positioning Supports and Hinders Learning and Identification

Significant learning and hence identification with a practice—or the failure to learn and productively identify with a desired practice—can be viewed as a product of extended positioning processes. To illustrate this complex relationship between positioning, learning, and identity consider the following example. An elementary school-aged boy
was positioned by family and friends as a developing expert with respect to material practice and design. This positioning occurred in a multitude of settings, such as his home and museums. The people in his life helped him identify experiences and opportunities that would enhance his practices, thereby supporting his learning. He accepted this positioning and began to perform and develop an identity as an expert builder and craftsman. In school during this historical period in his life however, he was positioned by his teacher as disruptive and was physically isolated from his classmates. As a result of his in-school positioning and disconnect between his in and out of school identities, his academic learning was severely and negatively impacted, while his learning in other settings continued to flourish.

Positioning theory provides an explanatory framework for understanding social interactions, extended learning pathways, and social identification in relation to prevailing storylines and ideologies. Storylines—and hence positioning dynamics and resulting identities—are sometimes institutionalized and can strongly shape learning processes and outcomes in acts of marginalization and privilege.

Leah A. Bricker and Philip Bell
University of Washington

See also Life-long, life-wide, and life-deep learning; Learning Disabilities, Social Categories, and Educational Practices [other encyclopedia entries]

**FURTHER READINGS**

