

## MEANING-CONSTRUCTION AND HABITUS

**John H. Scahill**  
*Ball State University*

“Habitus is a socialized subjectivity” — Pierre Bourdieu

### INTRODUCTION

Longstanding arguments on behalf of a liberal arts component for teacher preparation programs have pointed to cultural impediments to greater professionalism. Acquired habits of meaning-construction on the part of teachers often conflict with high standards of professionalism. Multiculturalism and heightened concerns for effectively teaching children from diverse backgrounds bring renewed emphasis to the notion that prevalent strategic barriers to improved teacher performance are cultural in nature. Contemporary demographic trends and relatedly prominent educational concerns reinforce the view that teacher education should provide preparation for reflective practice, a goal requiring modification of some native meaning-making propensities. That is, untutored meaning-construction is apt to reflect one’s social background and, consequently, may be tainted by bias, prejudice, and stereotypical thinking inimical to the school’s professed human development goals.

Too often, though, such claims about cultural barriers and preferable approaches to practice rest on appeals to intuitively grasped distinctions between “good” and “bad” teachers. The concept of human habitus as developed by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu<sup>1</sup> may be useful for bringing greater specificity to notions of teacher meaning-construction. Bourdieu claims that meaning-construction is a process of far greater complexity than many social scientists (constructivists/interactionists) concede. He has tried to show the relationship between habitus and practical or common sense cognition; and he has elaborated in recent publications on the philosophical underpinnings of habitus. Utilizing habitus might also serve to better ground philosophically claims as to the relevance of social foundations of education for teacher preparation.

The multi-disciplinary field of Social Foundations of Education (SFE) is re-addressing its instructional relevance for teacher preparation programs.<sup>2</sup> A case has been advanced that SFE is indeed central for teacher preparation in part because all teachers, even the most atheoretical and institutionally conformist, confront multiple decision-making situations regularly. SFE faculty argue, rightly, that they are uniquely equipped “to assist teachers in learning the right and responsibility continually to ask questions about their own practice, and to choose among the tools that can best help them ask and answer those questions.”<sup>3</sup> Bound up with these claims as to the inevitability of individual decision-making and the practical relevance of SFE for assisting neophyte teachers is an underlying premise that students bring to teacher training acquired habits of meaning-construction that often conflict with high standards of professionalism. That is, students “enter their professional programs well practiced in understanding educational phenomena in non-scholarly ways, well practiced in seeing teaching and learning with eyes that have learned to see in ways the dominant culture has trained them to see.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, a central task of teacher preparation should be to assist inexperienced teachers to be capable of transcending their culture-bound, common sense perceptions and thought patterns as they gain experience in professional practice. A caveat to that premise is that “all people are meaning makers; teachers are not unique in that respect.”<sup>4</sup>

This paper focuses on the aforementioned premise suggesting that teachers guided solely by native sensibilities and common sense and/or seat-of-the-pants analysis methods will often make poor and unkind pedagogical decisions.<sup>5</sup> While that is undoubtedly so, it may also be the case that SFE discourse on professional meaning-construction and related cultural factors adversely affecting teacher performance is itself wanting in theoretical scope and development. If so, a remedy may be at hand in the concept of human habitus, or socially conditioned systems of dispositions, that, according to Bourdieu, make commonsensical thinking possible in the first place. Supporting my claims requires: an overview of the argument for the practical relevance of SFE for teacher training, explication of Bourdieu's concepts of human "habitus" and "practice," and, finally, specification as to how these concepts can be employed to better ground philosophically SFE relevance claims.

### SFE RELEVANCE CLAIMS

SFE discourse on teacher meaning-construction has been overly reliant on esoteric tacit knowledge of the characteristics of good and bad teachers, and Piagetian learning theory. Consequently, instructional relevance claims tend to be philosophically weak. The SFE instructional relevance argument has seven parts. First, it asserts the inevitability of individual decision making. Secondly, it says teachers have a right and a responsibility to question continually their own practice. Third, it claims that undertrained teachers are prone to unprofessional meaning-construction and decision-making because they have not acquired the necessary skills and sensibilities to attain appropriate levels of performance in these areas. Fourth, it is claimed that SFE faculty are best equipped to achieve the desired teacher preparation for such skills. Fifth, a reason SFE should take on this task is because the principal strategic barriers to greater professionalism are cultural in nature. Undertrained practitioners will make unfortunate pedagogical decisions because their meaning-construction habits of mind are shaped by pervasive cultural forces at odds with high standards of professionalism. Sixth, it is said that strategic interventions have to center on skills rather than theoretical formulae. Teachers need exposure to SFE in order to be in a better position to transcend acquired habits of meaning-construction and thereby make preferable pedagogical decisions. Such decisions are facilitated not so much as a matter of derivation of practice from selected educational theory transmitted in schools of education, but from superior and self-reliant capabilities for observing, listening, associating, and reflecting. Lastly, those who acquire such enhanced skills in teacher education programs will employ them in everyday life as well as in routine and exceptionally challenging pedagogical practice. Altered meaning-construction capabilities are especially needed for teaching children from different and diverse backgrounds; and improved meaning-construction in out-of-school settings will carry over to in-school performance, and vice versa.

All seven parts of the argument are plausible and defensible. However, it appears that SFE faculty generally couch their claims for practical relevance so as to appeal to commonplace tacit understandings concerning the differences between categories of good and bad teachers. Good teachers, or effective teachers, are known to possess cognitive qualities of open-mindedness, critical thinking, and independence of mind. They also possess dispositional qualities of patience, friendliness, and fairness, as well as capacities for communicating, understanding, and relating well. On the other hand, bad teachers are those who lack some or all of these traits or lack them in sufficient quantity and/or quality. Commonplace recognition of the differences between good and bad teachers generally accord with research findings on teacher effectiveness.<sup>6</sup> SFE faculty rightly appeal to such commonplace and generally accurate perceptions. Communicative effectiveness in discourse with external audiences requires such appeals.

Non-foundations colleagues and theoretically-minded teachers can, for the most part, readily grasp and agree with central SFE claims concerning cultural impediments to greater professionalism. Given Piagetian influences on educators such that human subjects are seen as active learners who construct meaning for themselves, and the equally accessible idea that meaning-construction is affected by social contexts, it's but a small logical step to the notion of real world constraints on thought processes. While it may be strategically necessary and communicatively expedient to link

claims for relevance to tacit knowledge of the qualities of good and bad teachers, and accepted doctrines in learning theory, such claims ought to be satisfactorily grounded philosophically and scientifically. The concept of human habitus can serve to refine self-understanding of SFE relevance claims, thereby augmenting the intellectual integrity of such claims and their elaborations.

## HABITUS

Pierre Bourdieu, a professor of sociology at the College de France, is widely regarded as one of the greatest living sociologists.<sup>7</sup> Bourdieu and his colleagues at the Center of European Sociology in Paris have produced a sustained and critical analysis of the role of schooling in reproducing class structures in modern France.<sup>8</sup> Drawing on the works of Marx, Durkheim, and Weber, Bourdieu has developed a distinctive theory of social and cultural reproduction. According to Harvard's Dennis Shirley, Bourdieu's central contribution to sociological theory is his attempt to find a middle ground between individual agency and structural determinacy.<sup>9</sup> He says,

Bourdieu's central contribution has been the extension of the reproduction motif beyond the boundaries of epiphenomenal economic base — educational superstructure models to analyze the internal logic of an educational system which — while concealing its role — simultaneously reproduces and legitimates the capitalist social formation.

Central to that middle ground is his concept of human habitus. The Latin, *habitus*, means condition (of the body); character, quality: style of dress, attire, disposition, state of feeling; habit.<sup>10</sup> Bourdieu's concept of human habitus matches somewhat the original Latin meaning, except perhaps for "character." For Bourdieu, habitus refers to socially acquired, embodied systems of dispositions and/or predispositions. (Richard Nice, a principal translator, points out that the semantic cluster of "dispositions" is wider in French than in English, equivalent to predisposition, tendency, propensity, or inclination.)<sup>11</sup> Hence it refers not to character, morality, or socialization per se, but to "deep structural" classificatory and assessment propensities, socially acquired, and manifested in outlooks, opinions, and embodied phenomena such as deportment, posture, ways of walking, sitting, spitting, blowing the nose, and so forth. Habitus underlies such second nature human characteristics and their infinite possible variations in different historical and cultural settings. While habitus derives from cultural conditioning, Bourdieu does not equate habitus with its manifestations; nor does he think of habitus as a fixed essence operating like a computer program determining mental or behavioral outcomes. Bourdieu rejects crude determinist notions of human action as passive reflexive responses to conditioning stimuli. He also rejects structuralist notions of behavior as execution of imperceptible yet determinate rules of action.

The ancient Greeks used the term habitus to refer to permanent dispositions and their mediating effects on behavior and persona. Asked why he picked up on the notion of habitus, Bourdieu replied,<sup>12</sup>

The notion of habitus has been used innumerable times in the past, by authors as different as Hegel, Husserl, Weber, Durkheim, and (Marcel) Mauss, all of whom used it in a more or less methodical way. However, it seems to me that, in all cases, those who used the notion did so with the same theoretical intention in mind.... I wanted to insist on the *generative capacities* of dispositions, it being understood that these are acquired, socially constituted dispositions.... I wanted to emphasize that this "creative," active, inventive capacity was not that of a transcendental subject in the idealist tradition, but that of an active agent.... I wanted to insist on the "primacy of practical reason" that Fichte spoke of, and to clarify the specific categories of this reason.... (Bourdieu, 1990, 12-13)

Bourdieu has developed a middle ground on theoretical issues of structure and agency, i.e., material or structural influences shaping human action, as opposed to voluntarist, self-directed individual action having the potential to alter social structures. His middle ground rejects both existentialist subjectivism (Sartre) and structuralist objectivism (Levi-Strauss). He says, "Subjectivism inclines people to reduce structures to interactions, objectivism tends to deduce actions and interactions from the structure."<sup>13</sup> Bourdieu claims that he has restored "the social agent in his true role as the

practical operator of the construction of objects.”<sup>14</sup> Habitus, a durable but transposable system of socially acquired dispositions, functions practically as the generative source of a universal capacity such that agents act inventively when they encounter conditions identical or analogous to those producing the habitus in the first place. Capacities to “size up” a social situation and produce an appropriate innovation such as a salutation, joke, bluff, insult, which appears the product of unfettered self-direction and individual purpose, derive from a particular habitus. So, for example, if a patrician U.S. President makes a campaign stop at a working class pub, his banter with the locals may come off as awkward and contrived since there is a mismatch of habitus. (On the other hand, the patrician habitus might well involve the ability to “read” the situation adroitly and produce with ease appropriate verbal and body language.) Bourdieu says that “Agents to some extent *fall into* the practice that is theirs rather than freely choosing it or being impelled into it by mechanical constraints.”<sup>15</sup>

Bourdieu maintains that the social construction of reality is not carried out in a vacuum; cognitive structures are themselves structured because they have social origins. Habitus entails these social origins. From his standpoint each agent is equipped with a habitus (shaped in formative years by home culture) that bears affinity to a larger referential group/class habitus. Class habitus is, of course, a collective phenomena reflecting group adaptations and adjustments to historical necessity and struggles won and lost. Perceiving subjects, via the organizing and classificatory principles of the habitus (individual/class) have a world of common sense, a social world that seems self-evident.<sup>16</sup> Thus the world does not appear as pure chaos capable of being constructed in any old way, according to individual prerogative and whim. Nor is the social world experienced on a common sense level as totally structured, imposing on the perceiving subject inescapable perceptions, outlooks, opinions, and rules of conduct.

Habitus, a system of dispositions acquired through a relationship to a certain “field,” serves to economize psychic energy; “agents merely need to let themselves follow their own social ‘nature,’ that is, what history has made of them, to be as it were, ‘naturally’ adjusted to the historical world they are up against...”<sup>17</sup> The habitus enables an agent’s collusion within the society of which he/she is a member. He calls this fit, or the sense of being “at home” in a familiar milieu, an “ontological complicity” between embodied history in the habitus and objectified history in institutional roles.<sup>18</sup>

According to Bourdieu a proper sociological grasp of “practice” or action requires transcendence of such dualisms as: structure/agency; transcendental subject (consciousness, intentionality)/agent (structuralist conceptions of unconscious rule-following or concealed imperatives governing perception and action); objectivist physicalism/ subjectivist psychologism. In this view practice or action, in keeping with subjectivist perspectives, retains a degree of indeterminacy and spontaneity, as against objectivist over-determination. But Bourdieu insists that habitus is a socialized subjectivity. Rejecting ethnological perspectives on the social construction of reality he says, “No doubt agents do construct their vision of the world. But this construction is carried out under structural constraints.”<sup>19</sup>

This middle ground on structure/agency, then, entails social constraints on what is “thinkable/unthinkable” for a subject/agent endowed with a particular habitus. Habitus is at one and the same time a “deep structural” open-ended capacity for generating actions (analogous to Chomsky’s generative grammar) and a durable system of dispositions acquired through experience. Those systems of dispositions, perceptions, and appreciations or tastes congeal, so to speak, in a social milieu. Attendant limitations and determinations involve individual histories, class histories, “fields” in which subjects/agents endeavor, and “strategies” of the habitus, i.e., predispositions and a “feel for the game” in the world one has “fallen into.” While the social constraints of one’s formative environment are inscribed in the habitus, transformation of habitus can result from radical environmental change and/or “pedagogic action” of such a nature as to effect an altering of consciousness.

## CONCLUSION

Thus far it has been said that pressing educational concerns are compatible with longstanding SFE outlooks on cultural impediments to greater professionalism on the part of classroom teachers and other educators. SFE faculty rightly pursue current opportunities for advancing claims as to the field's instructional relevance for teacher preparation. However, while it may be strategically opportune to link relevance claims with imagery of good and bad teachers and/or widely accepted doctrines of learning theory, a more substantial case can be made utilizing Bourdieu's concept of habitus. It remains to be shown how SFE discourse on teacher meaning-construction can profit from integration with Bourdieu's sociological theory. How can Bourdieu's ideas as to a middle ground on structure and agency serve to enhance understanding of teacher meaning-construction and strategic interventions for steering the same towards preferable pedagogical ends?

When we speak of teacher meaning-construction as opposed to human meaning-construction, we implicitly allude to sociological variables that set teachers as a group apart from a larger population. Keeping in mind that American teachers number in the millions and are by no means homogeneous, as an occupational group there are some noteworthy commonalities (some of which, arguably, are quite conducive to teacher effectiveness). While it would be a grave error to conceive of a teacher habitus, or even a typology of teacher habituses, nonetheless, the habitus concept, properly understood,<sup>20</sup> lends itself to greater specificity regarding teacher meaning-construction. Once again, habitus refers to deep seated generative principles of thought, perception, appreciation, and action; it should not be equated with behavioral manifestations of habitus or terms such as "mentalities," "character," "states of mind," or "world-view". Habitus, the product of conditioning factors, especially early conditioning, is the "condition" of the production of thoughts, perceptions, and actions which are not themselves the direct product of conditioning factors, though once manifested, such thoughts, perceptions and actions are made intelligible by the same cognitive and motivating structures that make up the habitus. An illustration is a quick witticism which comes as a surprise to the producing agent and listener alike; subsequent to its production the joke is evaluated according to the schemes of humor inscribed in the subjects' habitus.

This conception of social conditioning emphasizing generative capacities and durable dispositions, of the past at work in the present, is highlighted in one of Bourdieu's multiple and varied definitions of habitus: "The habitus...the generative principle of responses more or less well adapted to the demands of a certain field, is the product of individual history, but also, through the formative experiences of earliest infancy, of the whole collective history of family and class..." (Bourdieu, 1990, 91) Four contentions regarding teacher meaning-construction can be extrapolated logically from this theoretical outlook. First, the pedagogic encounter of teacher and student is not simply an encounter of two individual histories but an encounter of two habituses involving *four* histories, two individual and two collective. Secondly, the pedagogic encounter entails habituses having different positions in a "field," two embodied histories meeting in a specialized environment, the school, which itself is objectified history. Third, the school as an institution or objectified history has a mission, viz., transformation or reproduction of habitus. Fourthly, teacher habitus and student habitus may be matched or mismatched.

These contentions cannot be adequately explicated in the space of this paper but they lead up to certain conclusions. Operationally, habitus connotes more relevant teacher/student qualities than does ethnicity, race, class, or even gender and age. It makes more sense to speak of interactions of habitus than, say, middle class teachers and at-risk youth, or white teachers and minority youth. Central to the pedagogic encounter and meaning-construction as to what constitutes such things as student effort, misconduct, curiosity, disrespect, responsible attitudes, and so on, is the coming together of embodied histories or habituses. Multiculturalists have, of course, seen this issue of cross-cultural communication, empathy, and fairness as central to educational reform. Yet, as Christine Sleeter has shown, exposure to multiculturalist curricula in teacher education is often without intended effect. Teachers tend to understand the social world from their racial, gender, and

social locations. But this finding requires further explication. Race, gender, and social location are not in and of themselves the determinant variables. It would be more accurate to say that the acquired dispositions associated with those characteristics affect receptivity to the messages of multiculturalist pedagogy. That is, to elaborate on a common observation, telling is not teaching unless the student possesses a suitably receptive habitus.

A mismatch of teacher/student habitus is a prevalent and unavoidable feature of mass public schooling, hence multiculturalist concerns for cross-cultural communication. To a lesser extent the same is true of teacher education. Therefore, in terms of the theoretical ideas at work here, pedagogical aims of enhancing reflective teaching abilities and modifying native meaning-making propensities require pedagogic action that takes into account both the durable and transposable aspects of the systems of dispositions that is the habitus. A starting point for such strategic pedagogic action entails attention to dynamics of receptivity/nonreceptivity predispositions inscribed in the learners' habituses. Again, we are not speaking here of conscious motivations but of constraints on what is thinkable and unthinkable for a subject endowed with a particular habitus, the past at work in the present.

Adoption of Bourdieu's theory-laden terminology and his outlook that habitus and meaning-construction are coterminous can counter distortive tendencies in commonplace analyses of educational topics and issues. For example, rejection of structure/agency dualism implicitly calls into question culturally pervasive outlooks as to dualistic notions of ascription/achievement. An illustration is Bourdieu's contention that "...children who are labelled 'unstable' by academic specialists...bear inscribed in the habitus the instability of the living conditions of their family, that of the subproletariat doomed to insecurity in their conditions of employment, housing, and thereby of existence."<sup>21</sup> This perspective emphasizing the past at work in the present highlights problems of reification in objective assessment procedures by pointing to monadic and atemporal biases. Bourdieu's analytic terminology helps to make thinkable a more dialectical viewpoint on ascription/achievement. One is encouraged to understand pedagogic interactions in terms of multiple histories, what teachers and learners bring to school as a consequence of individual and reference group experiences.

Consider also Bourdieu's assertion that "...affinities of habitus experienced as sympathy or antipathy, are the basis of all forms of cooperation."<sup>22</sup> If a goal of teacher education is to promote reflective attitudes regarding "otherness," and enhanced capacities for sympathy, empathy, and cooperation, then this analytic approach appears to lend itself to those ends. Bourdieu's theoretical framework frees us from linguistic practices serving to reinforce the very perceptual habits we wish to modify. It accentuates SFE's distinctive role in teacher preparation. And it facilitates SFE discussion as to what's entailed in attaining our pedagogical objectives.

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education Society and Culture*, trans. Richard Nice (Beverly Hills, California: Sage, 1977).

<sup>2</sup> My textual referent is a draft position paper prepared for the American Educational Studies Association (AESA) by its Committee on Academic Standards and Accreditation, entitled "Toward a New Consensus Among Social Foundations Educators." Some other examples of group self-definition are: Erwin V. Johannimgmeir, "Through the Disarray of Social Foundations: Some Notes Towards a New Social Foundations," *Educational Foundations* 5, no. 4 (Fall, 1991): 5-39; and the *Teachers College Record* 91, no. 3 (Spring, 1990), special edition on "Foundational Studies in Teacher Education."

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., AESA draft position paper, 8.

<sup>4</sup> AESA draft position paper, 7-8.

<sup>5</sup> AESA draft position paper, 8n.

<sup>6</sup> For evidence as to teacher resistance to SFE intervention efforts aimed at modification of meaning-construction predispositions see Christine E. Sleeter, "Resisting Racial Awareness: How Teachers Understand the Social Order from Their Racial, Gender, and Social Class Locations," *Educational Foundations* 6, no. 2 (Spring, 1992): 7-32.

<sup>7</sup> Richard D. Van Scotter, et. al., *Social Foundations of Education*, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1991), 5-12.

<sup>8</sup> For a journalistic assessment of his growing recognition in North America see, "A Little Bourdieu Industry," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 38, no. 49 (August 12, 1992): A6-8. A scholarly assessment is Dennis Shirley, "A Critical Review and Appropriation of Pierre Bourdieu's Analysis of Social and Cultural Reproduction," *Journal of Education* 168, no. 2 (Summer, 1986): 96-112.

<sup>9</sup> Bourdieu, *Reproduction*.

<sup>10</sup> Shirley, 96.

<sup>11</sup> *The New College Latin and English Dictionary* (New York: Bantam Books, 1966).

<sup>12</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 214.

<sup>12</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology*, trans. Matthew Adamson (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 12-13.

<sup>13</sup> Bourdieu, *In Other Words*, 129.

<sup>14</sup> Bourdieu, *In Other Words*, 90.

<sup>15</sup> Bourdieu, *In Other Words*.

<sup>16</sup> Bourdieu, *In Other Words*, 132.

<sup>17</sup> Bourdieu, *In Other Words*., 90.

<sup>18</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, "Men and Machines" in *Advances in Social theory and Methodology: Toward an Integration of Micro and Macro Sociologies*, ed. K. Knorr-Cetina and A.V. Cicourel (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 304-17.

<sup>19</sup> Bourdieu, *In Other Words*, 130.

<sup>20</sup> Pierre Bourdieu with Loic J.D. Waguant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 261-64, Appendix 1.

<sup>21</sup> Bourdieu, *In Other Words*, 116.

<sup>22</sup> Bourdieu, *In Other Words*, 128-29.