Engaging the Student Role: A Pragmatist Research Agenda for Examining Ventures in Learning

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Abstract
Working within the symbolic interactionist tradition, this article presents an ethnographic research agenda for studying the ways that “people engage roles as students.” Using an ethnographic study of two Protestant Christian seminaries as an illustrative case, I consider the ways the student role may be conceptualized and studied as ethnographic instances of “education in the making.” This includes the matters of people (a) entering into the student role, (b) attending to instruction, (c) being assessed, (d) sustaining efforts, (e) attending to one’s peers, (f) encountering difficulties, (g) experiencing failure and termination, and (h) pursuing subsequent studies. I concentrate on establishing the fundamental elements of theory and methods that can focus research and comparative analyses on the activities that constitute the student role.

Keywords
education, students, ethnography, symbolic interaction

When considering the student role, it is tempting to ask what circumstances or qualities lead some students to be more successful than others. While not denying certain advantages or disadvantages people may have as a consequence of their circumstances or the relevance of the more personal qualities that people may integrate into the learning process, this article focuses on the activities that learning entails and the ways that people engage roles as students.

In developing this statement, I have relied on Chicago-style symbolic interactionist theory, methods, and empirical research (see Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934; Prus, 1996, 1997, 1999; Strauss, 1993), wherein the emphasis is on approaching human group life as a linguistically informed realm of activity, examining human group life in sustained ethno- graphic terms, and developing sets of process-related concepts (i.e., generic social processes) that not only address the full range of human associations but that also have a trans- situational relevance.

Focusing on the activities that people do as students, this article brings the analytic resources that symbolic interactionism offers into the formulation of a research agenda. This agenda has the objectives of not only (a) enabling researchers to examine the activities of students in whatever specific contexts or settings they may be located and (b) using these particular studies to inform our more general knowledge of student-related activities but also (c) contributing to a more generic understanding of human knowing and acting.

Concentrating on “what is,” rather than “what should be,” this article encourages a social process approach to the study of learning. While attending to the ways that people make sense of the situations in which they find themselves, the focus is on examining the ways that people develop their activities in process terms (see Blumer, 1969; Prus, 1987, 1996, 1997, 2010). Furthermore, although there are many solitary aspects to the student role, I focus on the ways in which people develop and adjust all of their activities mindful of others in the setting. Indeed, without these humanly focused reference points, without the related demands and objectives, the interests and intrigues, and the activities and relationships, as well as the irrelevancies and disaffections that people associate with these matters, there would be no arena of learning. The objective was to examine these realms of activity, indicating ways that the analysis may be used both as departure points for ethnographic inquiry and as conceptual coordinates for synthesizing research that addresses people’s involvements in student roles.

A major challenge facing ethnographers and qualitative researchers is developing analytic frameworks for comparing, integrating, and focusing studies of social processes and conditions across multiple research sites, the objective being the generation, assessment, and refinement of more general theories of social life (Best, 2006; Emerson, 1987; Glaser &

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Education as a Social Process

Although the emphasis on education as a social process is often thought to be a more recent approach associated with the American pragmatists, especially John Dewey (1859-1952), a pragmatist approach to education is more appropriately rooted in classical Greek scholarship (see Chambliss, 1987; Prus, 2003, 2004, 2008, 2011a, 2012, 2013; Spangler, 1998), especially in the works of Aristotle (ca. 384-322 B.C.E.). However, given the twists of fate and the shifting interests of the people involved in preserving and destroying scholarship over the centuries, as well as the highly diversified nature of classical Greek thought, the transitions have been far from consistent, comprehensive, or cumulative (Prus, 2003, 2004). Furthermore, as Durkheim (1977) observes, educational theory of a more conventional sort (things have not changed appreciably since Durkheim’s time) has been dominated by a structuralist, quantitative emphasis championed by René Descartes (1596-1650) and an idealist (child indulgent) emphasis promoted by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778).

Adopting a more distinctively Aristotelian approach to education (see Chambliss, 1987; Prus, 2013; Spangler, 1998) and building on others who have addressed education in pragmatist terms (including John Dewey, Emile Durkheim, and George Herbert Mead), this article approaches learning as a collectively engaged, developmentally achieved process.

From this viewpoint, learning not only entails a physiological process whereby people engage the environment in which they exist and act, but learning (as with knowing more generally) is a linguistically enabled process that requires symbolic (concept-related) interchange between a teacher and a student. Relatedly, from this standpoint, things do not have inherent meanings (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). Instead, people first learn aspects of some things from others through physiologically enabled linguistic interchange. Only then, with this as a base, are they able to learn about other things and eventually enter into applications and extensions of the meaning-making process (as reflective agents) by invoking these earlier group-based meanings (Mead, 1934; Prus, 2007b, 2007c).

In other words, there is no knowing and no meaningful activity except that which is rooted in the collective consciousness of the group (also see Durkheim, 1977; Prus, 2011b). All human notions of reality, including all concepts “whatness” (i.e., “what is” and “what is not”), purpose, morality, and individuality, do not exist as pure or inherent biological or psychological essences but instead are given reality or achieve objectification (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Schutz, 1962, 1964) within the human community. For this reason, human thought and behavior cannot be understood as meaningful apart from the community in which the people involved participate. As a humanly engaged social process, learning cannot be reduced to sets or combinations of external or internal factors. Likewise, it is absurd to reduce learning to the things that people do as individuals. Although
all groups are made up of particular people and it is individuals who “act,” it should be stressed that there are no “individuals” or other meaningful demarcations of things apart from the language and lifeworld of the group. Although learning often assumes solitary dimensions, none of these activities could be meaningfully accomplished or would have any relevance, apart from people’s associations with the other (see Durkheim, 1961, 1977, 1983; Dewey, 1922/2002, 1934; Mead, 1932, 1934).

Whereas all learning is based on human capacities for biological sensation, what is learned in identifiable terms is the product of linguistic interchange (Mead, 1934). And, in turn, the related “notions of things” that one acquires are products that countless others preceding oneself have derived through their associations with one another in the particular arenas in which they lived, acted, and interacted (see Prus, 2007b).

It is only within the context of human interchange that people develop realities or notions of “what is” and “what is not.” It is only within the context of the group that things are differentiated, indicated, named, and given meaning as something to be acted toward in some manner. Although people have a physiological, sensory, capacity for learning, things become meaningful in more focused, discernable, and enabling fashions only when people linguistically (and conceptually) participate in the world of the other (see Mead, 1934).

The group not only precedes the consciousness of the individual but the consciousness of individuals can be developed only as those people adopt the realities (as in language, viewpoints, activities, relationships, emotionalities, and identities) of the specific groups in which they act (Mead, 1934; Prus, 1997). Moreover, while the participants in each group may develop some new ways of doing things as well as forgo some of the viewpoints and practices of their predecessors, each group is a social derivative of the groups that preceded it in the broader history of the community in which that group is embedded. Even though it is particular people who assemble at a point in time to create “new groups,” they are only able to do so because of the “group-based” cultures they have acquired in their earlier associations with others in the community. Consequently, even when people attempt to “break away” from their heritage or claim to “start everything anew,” their thoughts, activities, and interchanges are both enabled by and restricted by the elements of “groupness” that they have learned from the predecessors and now use to define their current notions of “reality” (Prus, 2007b).

In this sense, a consideration of the ways that people assume roles as instructors precedes an examination of the activities that people engage as students (see Prus & McLuhan, 2015). As the language of the group precedes individual consciousness, so also does instruction (assessing content, focus, and practices) precede learning. Whereas the targets of instruction may achieve some exposure to the things to be learned by virtue of their participation in the setting, instruction (as intended activity) implies some degree of anticipation, preparation, contact, initiation, observation, assessment, and adjustment. Moreover, instruction presupposes knowledge or content and a sense of purpose or objective.

Still, for instruction to occur, the targets of instruction must be “teachable.” In addition to attentiveness to the instructor, targets must have a capacity for absorption and retention of the matters presented. Beyond the physiological human capacity to learn, it is the acquisition of some baseline language that enables the teacher and the student to achieve some minimal working level of intersubjectivity (Ermarth, 1978; Mead, 1934). Consequently, it is language that allows instructors to not only establish some elementary shared reference points but also to move students from more rudimentary instances of “the known” into more extended realms of the previously unknown (Prus & McLuhan, 2015).

Clearly, learning involves more than language. And language, like the learning it enables, would have no existence apart from objects, activities, the group, or people’s capacities for sensation and memory (see Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934; Prus, 1996, 2007b, 2007c; Strauss, 1993). Indeed, learning presupposes both an earlier (linguistic) conceptual connectedness of these matters and an emerging resynthesis. Still, for this to occur, instruction is required. It is for these reasons, mindful of developmental complexities of human group life, that it is so inauthentic to reduce learning to outcomes and factors (see Prus & McLuhan, 2015).

**Methodological Approach**

The following analysis offers a research agenda for the study of engaging the student role as a social product and process. Symbolic interactionists have long emphasized the need for the study of human group life in sustained and precise process terms (Blumer, 1969; Lofland, 1970, 1976; Prus, 1987, 1996, 1997, 2010; Strauss, 1993). Prus’s (1987, 1996, 1997, 2010) call for the study of generic social processes has been particularly instructive in this regard:

> . . . the term generic social processes refers to the trans situational elements of interaction—to the abstracted, transcontextual formulations of social behavior. Denoting parallel sequences of activity across diverse contexts, generic social processes highlight the emergent, interpretive features of association. They focus our attention on the activities involved in the “doing” or accomplishing of human group life. (Prus, 1996, p. 142)

Prus (1996) identifies seven generic social processes—each with its own set of subprocesses—that are central to people’s experiences in social worlds: (a) acquiring perspectives, (b) achieving identity, (c) being involved, (d) doing activity, (e) experiencing relationships, (f) forming and coordinating associations, and (g) experiencing emotionality. These processes represent a set of sensitizing concepts (Blumer, 1969) for researchers to pursue, test, refine, and
extend in ethnographic studies of particular activities and social worlds. As a research agenda, these concepts offer researchers a common conceptual language with which to communicate and make comparisons across situations, cultures, and history. In short, the study of generic social processes represents a powerful way to develop more precise, relevant, and enduring social theory through comparative analyses across not only substantive contexts but also disciplinary boundaries.

Below, I develop an analysis of the generic social processes involved in engaging the student role. Rather than being the definitive statement on student roles, the objective of the analysis was to provide a research agenda for examining the social processes that student roles entail. In developing the research agenda, I have relied on pragmatist and interactionist theories of education (discussed above), a variety of interactionist ethnographies on student roles and related processes, and an interactionist ethnography of seminary life.

Given the overall length of this statement, it will be possible to provide only the briefest of references to the interactionist and related literatures that address “student” roles. For some ethnographic studies that address student roles in more formalized educational programs, see Becker, Hughes, Geer, and Strauss (1961); Becker, Geer, Reisman, and Weiss (1965); Hargreaves, Hestor, and Melor (1975); Albis and Albis (1984, 1988, 1994); Evans (1987, 1988, 1994); Evans and Falk (1986); and Haas and Shaffir (1987). Also instructive in this regard are the works of Bernstein (1972), Martin (1975), Fine (1985), Dingwall (1987), Adler and Adler (1991, 1994), Dietz (1994), Emerson (1994), Campbell (2003), and Karp, Holmstrom, and Gray (2004).

Although student roles need not be referenced in direct terms, much can be gleaned about the learning process by considering the ways that newcomers engage and are initiated into particular lifeworlds. For instance, see studies of the ways that people learn how to deal with illness (Charmaz, 1991; Davis, 1963; Schneider & Conrad, 1983), be religious (Lofland, 1966; Shaffir, 1995; Van Zandt, 1991), entertain others (Cressey, 1932; MacLeod, 1993; Prus & Irini, 1980), sell things (Prus 1989a, 1989b; Sanders, 1989), engage in a wide range of “deviant activities” as well as deal with disrespectability and control agents (see Prus & Grills, 2003, for an extended review of this literature), cope with disasters (Smith & Belgrave, 1995), become mountain climbers (Mitchell, 1983), and conduct field research (Grills, 1998; Shaffir & Stebbins, 1991).

In addition to benefitting from the interactionist studies above, the analysis draws from an interactionist ethnography of two PCSs as an illustrative case. On the surface, the seminary case may seem far removed from other educational contexts. However, when approached in generic social process (Prus, 1987, 1996, 1997, 2010) terms, the particulars of the research site or social world, while important, are not the emphasis in developing the analysis. The premise is all sites of education and learning will have some generic features that can be identified and studied. The focus in analyzing a particular case is on identifying the transsituational, cross-cultural, and transcultural features of engaging the student role.

McLuhan (2014) conducted a 14-month ethnographic study of two PCSs: Mainline Seminary and Evangelical Seminary. Mainline Seminary was one of a few denominationally sponsored seminaries in Canada to prepare people for ordained congregational ministry in the Mainline denomination church. Evangelical Seminary, though founded by and affiliated with one denomination, welcomed students from a variety of denominational and non-denominational contexts, preparing them for evangelical ministry in any of those settings. Although some PCSs offer academic graduate degrees in theology and religious education, the primary mandate of most PCSs is to prepare people for professional Christian ministry in a variety of church and non-church contexts. They accomplish this task through a combination of ministry-related coursework and a supervised ministry placement, which culminate in a Master of Divinity (M.Div.) degree for students who successfully complete the program.

The data included 80 open-ended, in-depth interviews with 64 ministry students, seminary instructors, and staff members; participant observation in 23 full-term ministry courses, formal and informal student gatherings and seminary events, and weekly worship and community meals; and organizational documents related to the M.Div. program, including course outlines and handouts, program websites, and program manuals and promotional materials. In what follows, rather than consider any single conceptual process in sustained, comparative detail, the emphasis is on providing a broad research agenda for future studies of engaging the student role.

Attending to Student Viewpoints and Practices

A great many of the activities teachers perform require that instructors “take the role” (Mead, 1934) of their students. Teaching requires one to think and act toward the instructional process “as a student” (Prus & McLuhan, 2015). Nevertheless, insofar as instructors are concerned about conveying information, wisdoms, and procedures to others, as well as ensuring that students engage their roles in more focused, sustained, and productive manners, instructors are also required to assume a second set of viewpoints that significantly differentiate them from those whom they instruct (Prus & McLuhan, 2015).

Upon assuming the teaching role in more direct and central terms, instructors are faced with the tasks of (a) considering the ways that students might comprehend and engage the subject matter and (b) making adjustments to offset counterproductive tendencies of students. Instructors need not be particularly effective in meeting these objectives, but their
earlier involvements in student roles normally provide instructors with more viable sets of student perspectives than “the sets of instructor perspectives” with which their students typically work (Prus & McLuhan, 2015).

However, if instruction is to be effective, students also must take the role of the teacher. This means being attentive to concerns that they, “as students,” not only learn things but also do so in more competent manners. In actual practice, this often seems implicit, and even when students adopt standpoints of these sorts they may find that these are difficult to sustain, particularly if their fellow students do not share these emphases.

Still, students should not be seen as completely unfamiliar with the instructional role as they have been subjected to all manners of instruction from parents and peers as well as other “educators” (Prus & McLuhan, 2015). Even from the earliest days of their own speech, people tend to instruct others on what they do and do not want, what to do, what is important, and so forth. Still, given their broader, long-standing interchanges with parents, siblings, and others, it appears that inadvertent disregard and more intentioned resistances are no less familiar to those adopting student roles. Notions of instruction, learning, cooperation as well as disregard and resistance typically become embedded in people’s habits as well as their characters and consciousness even at young ages (see Aristotle, 1984; Prus, 2007a, 2007b).

However, whereas all students are likely to have had some experience attending to and resisting as well as directing others, a very small proportion of these people are likely to have had the experience of developing and sustaining more extended programs of instruction. Also, because they lack a fuller set of perspectives and experiences pertaining to particular studies, many of the subjects to which students are exposed are unlikely to be fully comprehended. Indeed, the longer-term relevance of many programs of instruction may not be appreciated until well after instruction has been completed. It is this more limited set of perspectives that prevents students from more fully engaging the instructor role even when they might endeavor to do so (Prus & McLuhan, 2015).

Thus, while the educational process is contingent on the participants achieving a unity of the student-instructor roles, it is necessary to consider that the unity is problematic. Because student-instructor roles assume both an interactional interdependence and a content-based mutuality of focus, instructional unity depends on the willingness and abilities of both parties to enter into and sustain the points of contact that constitute educational ventures (Prus & McLuhan, 2015).

Before addressing the student role directly, another common aspect of the educational process should be made explicit. This involves the nature of student grouping or subculture and people’s activities within those settings (see Prus, 1997). Whereas all students are likely to have associates who enter into their educational ventures in various ways, the more immediate and sustained presence of other students “in the classroom” constitutes a variety of more enduring and shifting interactional contexts. Although the relevance of any particular set of reference others is contingent on the participants attending to their activities and viewpoints, these associations represent sets of reference points that individual instructors and students may consider consequential for the ways that they define their respective theaters of operation.

Furthermore, because students commonly associate with one another “outside of class,” some things that emerge within instructional settings may reflect earlier or ongoing external student alignments and activities. In addition to the challenges of managing their own involvements in the instructor-student role, instructors and students both face the task of coming to terms with the broader and more particular instances of student subcultures in their general milieu (Prus & McLuhan, 2015).4

When one approaches the student role mindful of people’s activities, the following processes assume prominence: (a) entering into the student role, (b) attending to instruction, (c) learning things, (d) being assessed, (e) sustaining efforts, (f) attending to associates and associated subcultures, (g) encountering difficulties, (h) experiencing failure and termination, and (i) pursuing subsequent studies. By focusing on social processes, researchers not only would be better able to examine instances of these activities in greater detail but could also develop more precise conceptual comparisons (Best, 2006; Emerson, 1987; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lofland, 1970, 1995; Prus, 1987, 1996, 1997, 1999, 2010; Prus & Grills, 2003; Snow et al., 2003; Zerubavel, 1980). Below, we define these processes in more detail and provide empirical examples from (McLuhan, 2014) ethnographic research in two PCSs that are conceptually illustrative.

**Entering Into the Student Role**

Recognizing that people may become involved in educational endeavors in a variety of manners, amid an assortment of encouragements, requirements, instrumental advantages, existing intrigues, and reluctances, it is important to consider the ways in which those entering programs start out their careers as students in these settings.

Researchers should not assume that these routings are exclusive or assume any necessary sequence with respect to given instances of involvement, but it is important to attend to the matters of students (a) being recruited (encouragements from administrators, instructors, parents, and others), (b) seeking instruction (reflecting personal student intrigues), (c) experiencing closure (limited options, urgency), (d) attending to instrumentalism (advantages), and (e) dealing with reservations (limitations, disaffections, discouragements; see Prus, 1996, 1997; Prus & Grills, 2003).

For instance, each of these processes was evident in the seminary context. Prior to applying to the ministry formation program, students at both schools had (a) experienced a variety of recruitment efforts by family, ministers, fellow congregants, instructors, and friends; (b) engaged in seekership,
pursuing personal fascinations with Christianity, seminary, and ministerial life; (c) experienced closure with respect to their personal call to a life in ministry, with both self and particular associates defining seminary and ministry as the only viable options; (d) acknowledged instrumentalism, as some students viewed seminary as a requirement for becoming a professional minister; and (e) experienced a variety of reservations, mostly related to possessing adequate biblical knowledge and Christian character to succeed in seminary.

While it is instructive for scholars to be mindful of the major routings by which people may enter into student roles, it is also important to recognize that people may be differentially prepared to engage particular aspects of these roles. Although people are sometimes thrust into instructional arenas with little or no opportunity to contemplate those circumstances, it is worth attending to (a) the full range of images and emotionalities that people may develop prior to engaging particular instructional programs, as well as any (b) support, guidance, or preliminary instruction they may receive from others before entering particular student roles; and (c) any related skills that they may have or not have developed prior to engaging instances of the student role.

For example, before arriving at seminary, many ministry students were involved in activities that would later prove useful for successfully completing the M.Div. program. The two most common preparatory involvements were Christian education—through Sunday school, congregational participation, and Christian camping—and preaching experience—through pulpit supply and guest preaching opportunities. Through these involvements, students gained a familiarity with the concepts and skills required of the Christian minister.

Also, it is important to recognize that people develop diverse sets of habits pertaining to self-discipline (self-monitoring and regulating practices), concerns for others (vs. self-centeredness), perseverance (vs. distractedness), sincerity (vs. deception), curiosity (vs. uninterestedness), and responsibility (vs. disregard; Aristotle, 1984; Prus, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c). These dispositions, as Aristotle (Nicomachean Ethics) emphasizes at some length, are important not only for understanding the ways that certain people might engage the activities that student roles entail but also for comprehending the resistances to instruction, learning, and performance that particular people “bring into” the student role.

Faculty at Mainline Seminary noted a particularly troubling form of student resistance—the intentionally disengaged student who attempted to pass through the program without being influenced or formed by the program. An administrator at Mainline suggested that the undesirable perspectives and habits of these students are generally formed prior to their arrival at seminary in relationships with Mainline Seminary’s critics, usually ministers or former students. One student explained his concerns about coming to Mainline and strategy upon arrival:

Understandably, instructors found this sort of orientation frustrating and attempted to reform these students as much as possible.

Attending to Instruction

Because educational programs are developed as fields of activity unto themselves, it is important to ask how people entering into these specific lifeworlds as students interpret or define their situations (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934; Prus, 1996, 1997; Strauss, 1993). The emphasis is on the images that students develop of their instructors and programs of study as well as the ways in which people engage the “work” element of the student role. First, however, it might be noted that the instruction that people engage as students may assume a number of forms.

In addition to more direct verbal interchange and listening, instruction may involve visual illustration or display and observation, the use of models and physical representations, behavioral enactments, and projects to be developed, materials to be examined, and text to be interpreted or read. Instruction may also involve reinforcements, associational learning, and repetition.

Furthermore, because those giving instruction seldom wish to keep repeating the same materials or procedures, some importance tends to be placed on the matters of people learning more quickly and thoroughly as well as retaining more of the things they have been taught. While individuals may display differing capacities for quickness and attentiveness, another concern revolves around people remembering things (Prus, 2007b). Still, even remembering is not one thing and although students who are able to recall more things quickly and accurately tend to be more successful in mastering particular programs of instruction, few students (especially at younger ages) are likely to be attentive to the ways in which their capacities for remembering can be enhanced.

Whereas the most advanced forms of remembering involve the ability to recollect matters from the past at will, this is likely to be enabled by things such as (a) sustained rote memorization activity; (b) developing activity-based familiarities and fluencies with things—as in doing, repeating, practicing; (c) attending to the future relevancies of things
encountered; (d) making associations between particular items—through repetition, reinforcements; (e) engaging related matters in differing contexts; (f) attending to comparisons between things—similarities and differences; (g) locating particular or instances of information within universals or generic categories; (h) articulating principles of linkage or association; (i) having terms, words, symbols to attach to things; (j) experiencing things (similarities and distinctions) in more comprehensive and intense sensory emotional terms; and (k) being asked to explain things to others, especially in explicitly detailed instructional manners (see Prus, 2007b).

Given the typically limited frames of reference that students bring to the setting, most are likely to have only a limited appreciation of the intentions, efforts, and objectives of their instructors (Prus & McLuhan, 2015). Most are also likely to have a limited sense of the scope and longer-term potential of the materials being studied. Nevertheless, it is the definitions that students invoke, along with the encouragements and distractions that they encounter from their peers and other associates that constitute the realities at hand for those encountering instruction. There were, for example, some ministry students at Evangelical and Mainline who questioned the relevance and utility of the academic focus that they encountered in many of their courses. Students would often complain in the lunchroom between classes about the lack of practical instruction that they received in courses such as biblical languages (Hebrew and Greek), systematic theology, and biblical exegesis. Even in the more pragmatically oriented “ministry formation” courses, such as pastoral care, an intellectual hostility could be evident:

[Evangelical Seminary] is very academic, which is good . . . A couple times, though, I’m like, “What the heck are we doing this crap for?” Like today, I was reading that pastoral care book. Again, appropriate practice, but you can’t learn how to do that without experience and having conversations with people. To write a book and talk about all this psychology, it’s important for psychologists. But as a pastor, you’re having a conversation with somebody and trying to move them towards seeing God at work in their life. A theory maybe, maybe, minimally might be helpful. (Ministry student, Evangelical Seminary, Male, 25 years old)

Even though the situation may be new to those obtaining instruction, it is also important to recognize that students differentially (a) bring aspects of their past experiences (as in knowledge, preferences, disaffections, skills, and habits) into the setting and (b) thereby locate and experience “the new” within the context of their present states of awareness (Prus, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c). Student definitions of both instructors and course content are not only likely (c) to vary over instructional periods and possibly beyond but also (d) to be considerably more diverse and uneven than that suggested by averaged images of the student-instructor role. Mindful of the relevance of these notions for students accepting, disregarding, and more overtly resisting particular instructors and instructional contents, it is important for scholars to examine matters of the preceding sort in terms that are attentive to the fluxes and flows of particular instructional episodes (Prus & McLuhan, 2015).

Furthermore, whereas students may encounter instruction in group contexts, in one-to-one tutelage, and within apprenticeship programs, we may still ask about people attending to classroom interchanges, doing assignments, and studying. What these matters entail may vary considerably from one instructional setting to the next, but each of these realms of student activity suggests a number of processes that have a more generic relevance.

While students attending classes may or may not have access to particular technologies such as a written language for taking notes or other means of physically recording materials for future reference, the matters of focusing, interpreting, puzzling over, disregarding, and resisting class materials tend to transcend all instructional forums. One may ask when and how people engage or otherwise become involved in, and deal with, these features of class-related experiences.

A common distraction in ministry classes, for example, was the use of computers and mobile phones. During class, some students were prone to text message their friends, use social-networking websites such as Facebook, and check their online fantasy sports pools. One student was even watching sport fishing videos on his laptop computer during a lecture on the Book of Genesis in an Old Testament class at Mainline Seminary.

It also seems instructive to ask about students’ tendencies to monitor others in the setting and to make comparisons between self and others while attending classes. It is also important to acknowledge people’s tendencies to become distracted by their peers as well as the roles they assume in entertaining or otherwise disrupting their classmates. As ongoing instances of collective enterprise, classes are not only likely to vary from session to session, but each session also represents an event to be achieved on its own by the various parties in the setting (Prus & McLuhan, 2015).

The assignments that students engage may range extensively in scope, duration, and complexity. Still, the matters of students working with new materials, testing out their earlier conceptions, dealing with ambiguity, monitoring and assessing, and adjusting tasks along the way are comparatively generic features of doing assignments. So also are the matters of experiencing frustration and limitations, seeking shortcuts, postponing tasks, developing justifications for failures and setbacks, and restarting and reworking projects.

Instructor guidance or tutelage may introduce other elements into the process, as most certainly also will the matter of developing “group projects” (as in defining direction, coordination, influence and resistance, divisions of labor, and attending to “weak links”). One student at Mainline
Seminary explained how group projects introduced new, often undesirable, elements into her educational experience.

I’m not a big fan of group work. That’s because I’m a very high achiever. I find that you get lumped into a group with people that are not, and because it’s a high stakes thing for you, you end up doing all the work . . . So I’ve never been a fan of having marks associated with group work. (Ministry student, Mainline Seminary, Female, 58 years old)

Researchers should attend to the ways in which students engage assignments of all sorts (as in classroom projects, homework, tests, presentations, and so forth).

*Studying* is often embedded within doing assignments. However, typically denoting more focused and sustained considerations and reviews of one’s subject matter, studying draws attention to activities that are intended to develop greater familiarity and fluency with the materials. Studying commonly involves the practices of (a) reviewing things covered in the past, (b) trying to develop more sustained memories of specific things, (c) examining specific materials in greater detail, (d) seeking fuller understanding of the phenomenon under consideration, and (e) practicing or rehearsing things for future performances. Even so, as more sustained ethnographic research on “studying as activity” will indicate, studying is not only a much more multifaceted activity than commonly assumed but we may also arrive at a fuller appreciation of the disjunctures between people’s notions of studying and the practical objective of “learning things.”

**Being Assessed**

Students sometimes define learning *as if* it were synonymous with the acknowledgments (e.g., praise, grades, certifications) they receive. However, when one examines student roles in more detailed, process terms, it becomes apparent that the matter of “learning things” may differ substantially from instructor assessments of pupil performances or the completion of programs of study (Prus & McLuhan, 2015).

Whereas students may adopt a variety of viewpoints on learning, including rejection of, disregard of, and comparative obliviousness to learning, we may still ask about the ways in which people may more explicitly envision themselves as learning things in instructional settings—as in students attending to changes in one or more capacities that they associate with instructional programs.

Four major modes of comparison may be delineated: (a) assessments received from others, (b) comparisons with others, (c) changes in self, and (d) completion of particular instructional programs.

As most instances of instruction are organized, initiated, and monitored by others, students commonly define themselves as having learned things after they encounter feedback on their progress from instructors or receive related comments from peers or outsiders. For example, most ministry students were interested in achieving the highest marks possible, taking them to be indications of potential for professional ministry. Faculty at Mainline Seminary attempted to deemphasize the focus on marks, but discussions with and among students outside the classroom revealed that these efforts were only marginally successful.

A second base of comparison involves assessments of one’s performances or abilities with respect to others (see Prus, 1996, 1997; Strauss, 1993). While some of these comparisons might be initiated by others, students may also evaluate their competencies by comparing and contrasting themselves with other people. Their peers in the setting may represent the most common, accessible, and viable reference points overall, but students may also compare themselves with those who were less advanced than themselves as well as those who are thought more proficient or advantaged in certain respects.

For example, many Mainline students revealed that they would compare themselves with professors and other students. The effect of these comparisons was to affirm or question one’s suitability for the ministerial role, demonstrating the importance of the educational community as a source of evaluative reference points for the self:

There’s also this measuring yourself against the other students. So I’ve got this whole question-filled faith past. Also, I have this intellectual way of going about things. It’s not that I don’t have a sense of faith, but I don’t trust it . . . So I’m looking at these other people and thinking, “Am I like them, or am I not?” . . . I’m looking at other people’s way of being Christian as something to learn from because some of them have been in the church a lot longer than I have. Some people are really wonderful in the way they can express a sincere faith. So I’m thinking, “I’m not like these people. I must not be right for this.” Then I’m looking at [a professor], and I felt that’s more my style. Some of the other students thought that her faith wasn’t as strong as it could be. Well, I think it is, and I can see where she’s coming from. (Ministry student, Mainline Seminary, Female, 60 years old)

Those who attend to personal changes seem likely to draw on one or more of the following matters: (a) recognize the learning that takes place in preparation, (b) notice enhanced linguistic fluency in instructional programs, (c) observe that their own stocks of knowledge have increased, (d) find that they have developed new enhanced technological competencies, and (e) envision themselves as having become more proficient at program-related activities. Many of these reflections are likely to occur as people are preparing for or engaging in tests, completing projects, or producing specific products. For example, ministry students who self-identified as introverted often indicated that their successful completion of the preaching course was a sign that they were making the personal changes needed to have a life in ministry.
Whereas instructors often provide students with interim assessments of their progress, it is also fairly commonplace for educators to provide students with more explicit acknowledgments at the conclusion of particular programs of study. These acknowledgments need not be intended as substitutes for the learning that particular educational programs entail. However, once practices of these sorts are instituted, they often become focal points of those programs. Indeed, it is not uncommon to encounter cases in which certifications and ceremonies appear much more consequential to many participants than the things actually learned in programs of instruction (Best, 2008, 2011).

A professor at Mainline Seminary explained that student qualification for convocation and academic honors were unreliable indicators of who had learned the most at Seminary and who would become effective ministers after graduation:

When you go to convocation there’s a gold medal [for the best grades] . . . We have community awards, but I wish we had more awards for people who are going to be good ministers but aren’t the brightest students. Many of the rewards are restricted to top mark in the class, and I don’t think that’s always the wisest thing . . . We’ve had a couple of gold medalists who I would not put in a congregation. (Professor, Mainline Seminary)

These recognition procedures tend to obscure assessments that students receive in other manners (instructions, criticisms, remedies, and routine feedback in apprenticeship contexts) as well as the materials, “homework,” and practice sessions to which students may be exposed as a means of promoting (and assessing) learning throughout the program. For instance, a professor at Evangelical Seminary recounted the graduation of a student of whom the faculty had serious doubts and reservations. Although the student technically qualified for graduation, that fact masked his experiences and encounters while working his way through the program:

I can remember one student in particular that we had an internal discussion about whether we could actually grant the person a degree. His life was such a mess, and we were afraid of him being in a church, like a fear of what he would do to people. This guy was mentally abusive. We weren’t necessarily afraid that he would physically hurt someone. But he was totally dysfunctional. But it was like, “Well, he’s fulfilled the requirements. He’s passed his classes. He’s done all the things. How can we say now we aren’t going to give you the degree?” So that’s kind of what it came down to. But no one wanted to give our imprimatur to this person . . . But we did . . . (Professor, Evangelical Seminary)

It is important that those studying educational programs not become caught up in matters of success as measured in final assessments or other interim indicators (Prus & McLuhan, 2015). The more appropriate scholarly emphasis is on the ways in which those involved in educational programs attend to, make sense of, and adjust to both more formal and more casual assessments. Whereas these distinctions are important in conceptual terms, researchers can expect to find that most people’s considerations of “what students have learned” are much more interconnected and interfused than the preceding divisions suggest.

Sustaining Efforts

While people may engage student roles with wide ranges of autonomy and supervision, it is important to ask when and how people more intensely pursue particular realms of study, both over the shorter and longer terms (see Prus, 1996, 1997). Rather than assume that people’s applications of effort are random matters or are shaped exclusively by the structural features of the setting or the psychological characteristics of the participants, the emphasis here is the ways that people engage their roles as students in more deliberative, tactical, and adjusting manners. While not denying the particular limitations that people may experience when they attempt to do certain things or people’s more individualized tendencies, central attention is given to the ways that people might engage roles as students in more direct, here and now instances.

Regardless of the setting, researchers are likely to find it valuable to attend to the ways that students experience task-related matters: (a) encountering instructional tasks, (b) receiving instructions, (c) interpreting instructions or objectives, (d) embarking on tasks, (e) pursuing activities, (f) prioritizing activities/tasks, (g) encountering and dealing with distractions, and (h) intensifying and minimizing efforts.

It is also important to recognize that some instructional programs require longer and/or more comprehensive lifestyle commitments than others. For example, many seminary students were pursuing ministry later in life as a second career. Having already achieved some success in the secular work world, these students often engaged in an extensive rearranging of their lives to pursue their studies. One student in particular left a tenured professorship and a promising research program to pursue a life in ministry. This student had to negotiate the meaning and implications of this transition with his colleagues, students, family, and church.

When particular programs of instruction have longer-term dimensions, the following processes are likely to become more consequential for comprehending the student role: (a) arranging for longer-term involvements, (b) centering one’s life around instructional activities, (c) managing interim tasks, (d) juggling outside responsibilities, and (e) dealing with setbacks, criticism, and failure.

Engaging Student Associates

While people often discuss “peers” and “peer pressure” in more singular terms and frequently use these notions to justify the difficulties that students encounter in educational programs, it is essential that researchers and analysts adopt more precise, discerning, and process-oriented approaches to
the matter of pupils engaging aspects and sectors of the broader student subculture.

It is essential to consider the ways in which students (a) define their associates, (b) develop affinities and disaffections with the overall student group more generally and certain people within, (c) participate in activities with these other people, (d) feel more and less obliged to go along with the broader group or specific people within, (e) attempt to influence the group more generally or certain people within and deal with subsequent resistances from these people (see Prus, 1996, 1997).

For example, one student division at Mainline Seminary was between younger and older ministry students. The younger students felt that the faculty and administration privileged the older students. In particular, the younger students felt challenged regarding the seriousness of their call; the ability to articulate their faith; their experiences in ministry; their relative lack of suffering experiences; and their personal sacrifice to be in seminary. This tension permeated many classroom activities, assignments, and informal interactions at Mainline.

It was really hard at first. I would look around the classroom and there is basically no one like me. I’m the youngest, and I’m a girl . . . And I feel as though I wasjudged a lot because of my appearance. I would get these questions from people, like “Why are you here?” I just felt that people didn’t want to interact with me . . . It’s weird to have to have relationships with men at school who are old enough to be your father. It’s awkward . . . I just didn’t feel like I fit in. There are so many second career people at [Mainline] that sometimes it feels like that they only way you can become a minister is if you’ve had these intense life experience, like divorce, that you’re really known pain and suffering. I felt that there was an attitude that because I was so young and relatively happy, like “Why are you here?” . . . With so many second career people at school, people think that you need to go through so much trauma to be here . . . that you need to have that same experience to be a minister. They think that the church is full of broken people, so we need broken ministers. Why can’t we have somebody who really has their shit together? People always say that “You’re so young. You really need more life experience.” It makes me so mad. What’s wrong with me being happy and together and not having major life changing events? (Ministry student, Mainline Seminary, Female, 22 years old)

When discussing student associates and the subcultures that people develop within these associations, it is vital to recognize “the presenting cultures” (Goffman, 1959) that students bring into particular instructional settings. To overlook people’s existing notions of knowledge, preferences (and disaffections), skills, and habits would be to neglect essential aspects of what they bring into the associational process. Although people may disregard, conceal, or minimize the relevance of various features of their backgrounds, other aspects of their presenting culture denote prospective resources and limitations. Indeed, these associations build on the perspectives, identities, relationships, activities, emotionalities, and linguistic fluencies that participants bring into those settings (Prus, 1999; Prus & Grills, 2003).

Each encounter or instance of contact between two or more people, including those emerging at the very outset of a group’s formation, has the potential to introduce focal points and experiences that extend as well as question people’s existing notions of reality. Because they provide participants with additional sets of experiences in the setting at hand, even the most preliminary interchanges may suggest both realms of predictability and uncertainty with respect to subsequent encounters involving other participants within.

Whereas the instructor-student role typically revolves around a particular subject matter, peer associations tend to be much more diverse. Although one could pursue the matter of peer relations in much more extended terms (i.e., as subcultural lifeworlds; see Prus, 1997), our more immediate emphasis is on the ways in which people’s involvements in these groupings overlap with and become interconnected with the particular instructional programs in which they are involved. This is not to deny other aspects of the learning process or the ways in which certain things learned from peers might be integrated into other aspects of people’s lives but rather to sustain focus on our more immediate analytic agenda.

With this more delimited objective in mind, we may ask about the ways that students attend to their associates as well as their instructors. In addition to asking how students make sense of the ways that their peers engage their studies, we may ask how students manage their involvements in the various (and shifting) subcultural arenas they encounter within the classroom setting and how they manage these fields of activity relative to their involvements in the emphases and materials being presented by the instructor. Likewise, it is important to consider how students synthesize their own studies-related activities with the activities of their associates. Noteworthy in this regard are the instances in which students envision themselves assisted as well as diverted from instructional matters.

Encountering Difficulties

Student notions of difficulties in attending to assignments, tasks, or projects may correspond with as well as differ from any problems anticipated by their instructors. Indeed, even when instructors attempt to minimize particular sources of difficulties based on past experiences with earlier or even their present students, instructors seldom seem able to fully anticipate the range of things that their students may find problematic in the next set of instances. At the same time, however, students’ definitions of difficulties are apt to vary from student to student as well as over time for particular people.
The problem for researchers and analysts is one of considering the fuller range of matters that students consider problematic and indicating variations in the ways in which these concerns are identified, experienced, and managed. Although they may be seen as having substantial difficulties by their instructors, students who disregard or dismiss the value or relevance of learning particular things need not define things such as skipping classes, avoiding work, seeking shortcuts, rushing through assignments, and presenting other people’s work as their own as problems for themselves. Indeed, they may envision these “quick-fixes” as highly instrumental if not “smart” or desirable ways of avoiding or minimizing their own involvements in the setting.

For example, instructors at both Mainline and Evangelical explained that plagiarism is just as common in religious education as it is in secular education:

Sometimes I call a student in and show them what they’ve done and say, “You can’t do this. This is just too . . . You’ve got to footnote this.” . . . Just last year I had a student and she handed this paper into me that was almost all plagiarized. The writing was beautiful academic writing, and I knew that it could not be hers, so sure enough I figured out where it came from. (Professor, Evangelical Seminary)

While those adopting stances of the preceding sort may be concentrating on things that they consider more desirable, other students may become distracted from assignments in more situated terms. Even here, however, it is not apparent that those experiencing distractions of more temporary or fleeting sorts will define these as difficulties. And, like those just discussed, those people may also be pleased to find short-term fixes.

In some cases, students may presume levels of ability that exceed the course-related challenges that await them. Whether these people will define the ensuing shortcomings as difficulties attributed to their own assumptions or become disenchanted with other aspects of the situation (assignments, instructors) when they encounter setbacks is another matter. Some of these people are likely to be receptive to “quick fixes” as opposed to more careful applications to the fields of study.

For example, in a course on Christian Education at Mainline Seminary, many of the students expressed outside of class that they felt the instructor and course had little to offer to their seminary education. As the term progressed, students became increasingly critical of and academically withdrawn from the course material, performing the minimum level of work required, even after several classroom admonishments by the instructor.

I noticed in class today several students rolling their eyes and demonstrating other modes of distancing (e.g., logging onto websites that had no relation to the course; joking with friends; and discreetly mocking the professor while doing assigned group work) from what the professor’s lesson and instructions.

After class, I was talking with two of these students in the lunchroom. I asked them what they thought of the class. One student responded, “That class is useless. _______ is a poor professor. She’s boring and confusing.” The other student at our table nodded in agreement. (Field Notes, Mainline Seminary)

In other instances, students may lack understandings about various aspects of the educational program and/or assignments. Students may be unaware of, or unable to grasp, the discipline, art, or technique that is being imparted to them. Thus, students may be vague and imprecise in the ways that they approach things and/or may develop assignments in rough or incomplete forms without realizing the limitations with which they are working. Although people need not define these as difficulties, similar shortcomings may be evident when people lack the necessary background preparations, concepts, understandings, or other abilities to engage tasks. While students may become aware of some of these difficulties in the process of embarking on particular tasks, other matters may not be envisioned as problematic until much later.

A similar set of circumstances may arise when people misunderstand or misinterpret assignments. However, difficulties are more likely to be defined at those points at which people experience uncertainty about projects, particularly when they encounter dilemmas about how to precede in more immediate, “here and now” situations.

Furthermore, while people may find that they lack the physical stamina necessary to complete tasks on certain occasions, people sometimes find themselves losing focus on their primary objectives. Also, whereas people sometimes may “try to do too much” on occasion, those who spend time questioning their abilities and wondering about the receptivity of their work by others often do not develop projects as fully as they could.

For researchers, the task becomes one of attending to the ways that people approach the instructional matters they encounter and how they define and deal with difficulties in both more situated and more enduring terms. Still, it is only by examining student practices along these lines in extended detail and then subjecting collections of instances to more sustained comparative analysis that we may be able to develop concepts that address the ways that students engage their roles in terms that are more authentic and processually attentive to the lived complexities of the educational process.

Experiencing Failure and Termination

Particular instances of instruction may be concluded when people complete programs, but it is important that researchers and analysts not disregard a variety of other aspects of “the disinvolve process” (Prus, 1996, 1997; Prus & Grills, 2003). Although only some instructional programs introduce the possibility of failure as a more explicit mechanism and/or a basis for terminating instruction, this option
seems likely to foster a number of concerns, including a more explicit attentiveness to competition, standards, and instructional feedback.

When people wish to avert failure and/or the termination of particular programs of study, they may also seek concessions and other “second chances” on their own and/or with third-party supporters. For instance, Mainline faculty collectively reviewed students biannually in an effort to identify problems in need of remediation. Once faculty identified troublesome students, one or two would meet with the student with the concerns. In an effort to remain in the program, students would make remedial pledges and suggest potential self-initiated remedial strategies they could employ to correct the problem. If nothing else, the implementation of these remedial regimes usually delayed any potential termination from the ministry program.

Even when people are not terminated from programs in more direct, exclusionary terms, they may still disinvolve themselves from these settings on more tentative and/or more complete manners. A common occurrence, for example, was voluntary student withdrawal after students were confronted with faculty concerns with which they were in disagreement.

As in many other cases of disinvolvment (for reviews of this literature, see Prus, 1996; Prus & Grills, 2003), one not only encounters many instances of reinvolvment in particular studies but also encounters cycles of disinvolvments and reinvolvments. Regardless of the ways that people experience the disengagement process, this also represents an essential topic of ethnographic inquiry if one is to understand the educational process in more comprehensive terms. These involvement cycles, for instance, marked the careers of most part-time ministry students, some of whom took up to 10 years to complete their degrees by taking one or two courses each semester, dropping in and out of seminary life.

**Pursuing Subsequent Studies**

Whether people complete programs and pursue studies at more advanced levels in particular fields or embark on different areas of study, these occasions allow researchers to reengage the entire set of processes considered to this point. Still, it may be appropriate to comment briefly on two important modes of pursuing studies that might otherwise be overlooked.

One of the means of reengaging the educational process involves people invoking roles as instructors (Prus & McLuhan, 2015). Although often viewed more singularly as a teaching role, the role of instructor also takes people into the role of a student, wherein people not only may learn about teaching as activity but also often extend their own stocks of knowledge in particular areas through the teaching of others.

The student role takes on another set of dimensions still when people more explicitly assume roles as “scholars.” Here, instead of attempting to master existing curriculums as students or develop more effective curriculum as instructors, the emphasis is on people extending existing realms of knowledge by exploring and examining in more systematic terms things that are less well known. While far from even in effect, objectives, intensities, dedication, and the like, the general objective of the scholar is to more directly engage, explore, test, and analyze things, thereby better comprehending matters, that in some respect seem undeveloped, uncertain, or otherwise unknown.

Although some attention is given to the better known roles that people may assume as instructors in another article (Prus & McLuhan, 2015), these two realms of pursuing subsequent study also merit extended ethnographic attention and sustained comparative analysis.

**Conclusion**

While mindful of the roles that people assume as administrators and instructors in educational programs, this article has focused attention on the ways in which students meaningfully and actively enter into the learning process—and the ways in which researchers might study what people actually do as students. In contrast to those who emphasize the outcomes of educational programs and quest for sociological and/or psychological factors as mechanisms for explaining differentials in program outcomes, the interactionist perspective approaches education as a multidimensional, collectively engaged, and developmentally achieved process.

Despite the more immediate, ongoing, and solitary nature of much thought and activity in the educational process, human knowing and acting are not individually situated processes. Instead, the thinking and acting that take place in the “here and now” always reflect notions developed earlier within the human group. Human reality is a historically enabled group process and is achieved, built up, and shared through language and other (linguistically enabled) aspects of culture.

Whereas reality is continually being created, people’s current notions of reality always utilize earlier community-based conceptions of “what is” and “what is not.” It is these earlier notions that are invoked, applied, tested, confirmed, and adjusted as people engage (i.e., define, act toward, assess, acknowledge, adjust, and redefine) things in meaningful ways. Therefore, from an interactionist perspective, reality exists not as an objective “thereness” but as a socially constituted “whatness.” That “whatness,” as Dewey, Mead, and Blumer emphasize, is thoroughly enmeshed in the human lived experience of community life. It connotes an ongoing, linguistically achieved, activity-based, “coming to terms” with the human lived environment.

Although we used an ethnography of two PCSs as an illustrative case, the resulting conceptual analysis was also informed by a larger body of interactionist research on education and has not been directed toward any particular program, subject matter, application, or level of study. Therefore, the materials developed herein represent a set of conceptual...
departure points that may be used for examining the ways that people engage roles as students in any context. Also, because of their generic emphases, the processes outlined in this article provide conceptual coordinate points around which materials from subsequent studies may be assembled and subjected to more sustained comparative analysis.

Thus, rather than building up isolated islands of ethnographic inquiry, the social processes outlined herein serve as points of reference for developing theory that not only is grounded in human lived experience but that also lends itself to testing, assessment, and more extended conceptual developments (see Best, 2006; Blumer, 1969; Emerson, 1987; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lofland, 1970, 1995; Prus, 1987, 1996, 1997, 2010; Prus & Grills, 2003; Snow et al., 2003; Zerubavel, 1980).

Whereas the more immediate emphasis in this article has been on people engaging the educational process as students, ethnographic inquiry that focuses on student activities also would be invaluable for comprehending the broader educational process. Indeed, administrative and instructor roles cannot be adequately understood without more comprehensive considerations of the ways that students enter into this process as living, thinking, acting, and interacting agents.

Furthermore, because the matters of education and learning are so pervasive in all human lifeworlds and are so central to people’s participation in all realms of human endeavor, careful sustained ethnographic examinations of student activities could have great consequence for the broader study of human knowing and acting on the part of social scientists.

There are clear limitations in developing an article of this type. As a research agenda, the analytic emphasis was on delineating as many of the social processes implicated in becoming and being a student as possible. The ultimate objective of the article was to foster future research on the student role, providing a set of conceptual coordinates and reference points for developing analyses and synthesizing findings across a diverse range of educational contexts. Therefore, the discussion of each process was restricted in terms of space. Furthermore, although the seminary case provided illustrations of the process-oriented concepts, single-case illustrations are no substitute for a detailed comparative analysis of multiple sites of “education in the making.”

The aforementioned limitations are best dealt with through future research. Thus, future research should assess, refine, and extend the agenda presented herein. Individual case studies can provide important insights on particular processes in specific contexts. However, comparative analyses are essential in developing more formal, generic, and encompassing social theory (Best, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Prus, 1987, 1996, 1997; Strauss, 1993). Indeed, while I have benefitted from the existing process-based ethnographic research on education, much more is needed to achieve the generic sociology for which Prus (1987, 1996, 1997, 2010) argues. A more concerted focus on the generic social processes of education would move us closer to addressing this need.

Furthermore, as I have stressed throughout the article, in pursuing future studies of education as an interactively achieved phenomenon, it is essential for researchers to (a) concentrate on “what is” rather than “what should be”; (b) examine human lifeworlds from the viewpoints, practices, and interchanges of all of the people involved in the educational process; (c) maintain a concerted focus on activity; and (d) develop research and analysis in ways that have a more generic, more enduring relevance. Approached in this manner, the study of student lifeworlds could represent the most productive realm of scholarship.

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Notes
1. These structuralist and idealist emphases can be traced back to Socrates (469-399 B.C.E.) and Plato (420-348 B.C.E.).
2. See John Dewey (1899 Lectures [1966]; 1910-1911 Lectures [1967]; also see Biesta & Burbules, 2003); Emile Durkheim (1956, 1961, 1977; Prus, 2011b); and George Herbert Mead (1932, 1934; also Biesta, 1999a, 1999b).
3. All names are pseudonyms.
4. Somewhat parallel notions are evident in the administration and experiencing of treatment in control agency contexts (Prus & Grills, 2003). Not only is treatment (like education) far from being one thing but people’s involvements in group interchanges can affect the ways in which participants define treatments, programs, and objectives as well as themselves and others in the setting.
5. Those interested in the study of group projects may find it useful to approach these as “collective events” (see Prus, 1997).

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