

Learning Alone and Academic Capital: An Old Sociological Idea in a New Educational Application

Jack Trammell

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jack Trammell is chair of the Sociology, Criminal Justice, and Human Services Department at Mount St. Mary's University in Maryland. He specializes in social history, disability, education, and human services.

The concept of social capital has been discussed for more than 75 years, pioneered by social scientists such as Bourdieu's (1996) theory of capital, Coleman's (1990) rational choice theory, and Putnam's (2000) democratic theory. Despite a great deal of debate about specific definitions, social capital can generally be defined as the transactional value of relationships, networks, associations, and social knowledge—in essence, a commodity that people can earn, store, spend, and invest toward specific purposes and goals.

Academic capital, a relatively new concept, can be seen as a subset within the larger world of social capital and/or cultural capital (Trammell, 2018a; Trammell, 2018b). In this framework, academic capital is defined in similar general terms: the transactional value of relationships, networks, associations and social knowledge, only geared specifically toward situations and environments particular to education (and in this conversation, higher education). The development of new instruments, such as the Combined Measures of Academic Capital Survey (CMACS), is part of the developing concept (Trammell, 2019).

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Utilizing the concept of academic capital allows for a number of useful innovations, particularly in areas like developmental education, universal design in instruction, and learning assistance, where researchers have struggled to combine or reconcile awkward combinations of theoretical paradigms (e.g. the overlap between critical race theory and ESL). Students in this new theoretical framework can be gifted cognitively and successful in secondary experiences yet still come to college with academic capital assets that vary widely. Academic capital provides a new way to assess how “at-risk” a student is based on measures more separable from race, socio-economic status, disability, or other traditional minority identity statuses that involve complicated historical stigmas.

As a theory, academic capital has the promise of transforming learning assistance and higher education in several ways, but one perhaps more important than the others is the possibility of moving beyond deficit models that frame developing students as *needing something*. Instead, academic capital recognizes that everyone is their own agent with control over where they want to spend, invest, or develop their own academic capital. Just as Wall Street is incredibly diverse, with a sometimes-overwhelming collection of tools and possibilities, so academic capital opens a rich window on educational success that does not rely on simply reading better or getting accommodations.

This theory may seem to be too good to be true, although considering some basic initiatives that could be part of this shift is not overwhelming. Some of these ideas include the following: a dramatic reframing of new-student orientation away from simply how to get help and more toward developing relationships that will matter—when you develop your academic capital you *know* where to get help; encouraging living and learning communities (LLCs) where faculty, staff, and students interact together, creating and banking academic capital; and continuing to reframe the college/university experience as having fuzzy edges (i.e. doesn't really begin or end in the strictly dichotomous sense). There are many other ideas and possibilities, including some with direct implications for tutoring, ESL, and disability programs.

Putnam's original sociological concept of social capital lamented the trend that modern society

seemed to indicate that people were becoming more distant from each other (his example was bowling leagues) (Putnam, 1995). He pointed out that more people bowl now than in decades past, and yet bowling leagues (i.e., social networks related to bowling) have nearly disappeared. In the same way, areas of the academy have often become encased in silos and students can be overwhelmed, particularly at larger institutions. Academic capital is a framework that takes educators back to the primary importance of relationships, which is what the original theory of social capital was all about.

References

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