In the early 1990s, the German critical psychologist Klaus Holzkamp—who, having developed and further elaborated Alexei N. Leont’ev’s cultural-historical activity theory, considerably influenced Jean Lave with respect to her thinking about learning—gave two subsequently published presentations in which he interrogates the relationship between teaching and learning (Holzkamp, 1991, 1992). He points out that official school curricula, teachers’ (often required) lesson plans, and prescribed learning outcomes all point to an underlying deterministic model according to which teaching brings about learning irrespective of any intentions students might have. Holzkamp (a) questions the possibility of school learning as something that could be planned and (b) suggests that teaching possibly interferes with learning. We short-circuit our analyses of classroom events when we assume that the teaching of a curriculum (concepts) and learning (curriculum contents, concepts) are equal according to the formula “students learn what teachers teach.” As I know from years of teaching science and being department head of a science department, everyday teacher talk exhibits this equivalence. Thus, teachers (and professors, too) assume that because they “have covered” some topic, students also know it. But I consider Holzkamp to have raised legitimate concerns especially with respect to the nature the match between the objects/motives of schooling and curriculum, on the one hand, and students’ goals, one the other. Thus, we need to know whether students have appropriated in their goals the collective motives or whether the collective motives are inverted and undercut in the students’ goals—as this was the case of the working class lads Paul Willis (1977) observed. The disparity between the two occurs even under the assumption that schooling in fact is interested in learning (e.g., science concepts) rather than, as Foucault (1975) suggested, a way of hierarchically structuring student population and access to job- and income-related opportunities. In this chapter, I do not intend to reproduce Holzkamp’s argument but rather, after sketching his argument, I make the provisional assumption that student indeed want to learn what the curriculum prescribes. I show that even under this condition, there are irremediable contradictions whereby students cannot see, for example, precisely those phenomena that support the concepts they are to learn; and I show that the inner contradiction of organized learning that arises from the fact that the learning object intended by the system inherently is unknown to the students, who therefore cannot reproduce the motive of activity in their own goals (intentions).

Drawing on an activity-theoretic formulation of the object-oriented nature of human activity forms and a phenomenological formulation of perception, I highlight (by drawing on empirical case materials) the inner contradictions in present-day cognitive theories that presuppose learning as intentional (e.g., present in all forms of constructivism) but fail to theorize the essential passivity involved in learning. Fundamentally, any activity
requires an intended object, but in teaching-learning situations, the intended object is precisely what lies outside the purview of the learner; how can students learn something (i.e., engage with the object of learning) that inherently cannot be intended? After articulating the various aporia concerning intention, objects of activity, and learning, I provide an empirical case of guided inquiry, which highlights both the inner contradictions in any teaching-learning situation and the (fundamentally restricted) possibilities for reaching planned learning goals at all.

**LEARNING: A CULTURAL-HISTORICAL ACTIVITY THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE**

The notion of activity theory does not refer to what educators frequently denote by this term, a confusion that arises from the problematic translation of activity theory from German and Russian into English, which uses the same word “activity” for two very different German/Russian concepts, Aktivität (aktivnost’) and Tätigkeit (deyatelnost’). Cultural-historical activity theorists use the former to denote “being busy,” whereas the latter denotes culturally and historically evolved processes that contribute to the survival of human societies. Farming, hunting, building tools, and constructing shelters (houses) all constitute activities that maintain the collective, which in turn supports the survival of the individual through exchange relations that distribute basic necessities to its members. From this perspective, then, schooling is the relevant activity, which has a motive of reproducing and therefore maintaining and developing society. Because schooling is the activity, it is also the unit of analysis from the perspective of activity theory, which does not allow units of analysis smaller than the activity.

The advantage of using activity as unit of analysis allows researchers to locate the motives for reproducing existing forms of knowledgeable practices to be built into collective motives, of which individuals may but do not have to be aware. That is, teachers and students may not be aware of the overarching motives that mediate what is going on in their classroom—for example, the events that occur in inner-city schools in the poorest districts of the US. We cannot understand learning generally and guided instruction particularly in this case by limiting our analysis to the traditionally used level of the individual. Activity theory allows us to theorize intention and determination at three different levels, motive-driven activity, goal-realizing actions, and contextually determined operations.

What cultural historical activity theory does not yet have is an appropriate framework for capturing the passive element in all human activity, which makes, e.g., for the fact that we do not intent our intentions or that we may intend (e.g., touching something) but that we thereby open ourselves up for being affected in unforeseeable ways. A phenomenological perspective that also is consistent with the materialist dialectic of CHAT allows us to get a handle on passivity—which, in my treatment, is more passive than even the most (intended) passivity (e.g., not doing something)—and thereby on the relation between learning and intention.

**LEARNING AND INTENTION: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

There is a second major theoretical framework that allows us to make thematic several important contradictions in the construct of learning generally and the construct of guided
learning in particular: phenomenology (e.g., Merleau-Ponty, 1945). This theoretical framework is concerned with the role of intention in perception and learning, highlighting that intention does not exist as such but always has an object—intention is transitive, binding subject and object into an irreducible unit. Thus, “[e]very thought is interested (not uninteressiert), i.e., an elucidation of a Vorhabe <“prepossession”> which motivates—that must equal in evidence (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. 17). Similarly, the verb to construct is transitive; in learning theories, the object is knowledge. Students are said to be engaged in the construction of knowledge. In the previous section, I point out that activity and actions are oriented toward (collective) motives and (individual) goals, respectively. In other words, they are intentional, though at different organizational levels (individual, society). Intentions, too, are central to a phenomenological perspective on perception generally and on learning, specifically. The interesting aspect about institutionalized learning setting is the inner contradiction that students are supposed to learn what they inherently cannot intent, because they do not know what they are to construct (the particular knowledge) and therefore cannot have it as a goal that orients their actions; and they do not know the means they can draw on and what the raw materials are that they can use. More so, the very perception that is needed to isolate the raw materials (part of the object of activity [Saari & Miettinen, 2001]) required in knowledge construction precisely requires the knowledge that is to be learned.

Based on my phenomenological considerations and example, I am led to a more encompassing incompossible pair of statements concerning learning:

1. To intend to learn something, I already need to know the something; and
2. To know a something, I (first) need to learn the something.

In other words, to intentionally construct knowledge, this knowledge is a prerequisite to guide my intention to learn; but if I already know this knowledge, I no longer need to intend learning it. That is, it is impossible to intend learning what one does not already know in the same way that it was impossible for Christopher Columbus to intend the discovery of the Americas. In a strong sense, therefore, this means that we are passive with respect to the learning that occurs to us—we can only acknowledge (etymologically derived from cnâwan, to recognize [know again]) that we have learned something once we already know it.

GUIDED LEARNING: AN EMPIRICAL EXAMPLE

In the previous two sections, I articulate the inner contradictions in planning instruction and in learning from experience. When instructional goals are set—whether in behaviorist, cognitivist, or constructivist fashion—students are little more than cogs in and of a machinery designed to change them. Whether students actually become knowledgeable is irrelevant as long as they achieve. Furthermore, even when students are in situations where they are asked to observe or engage in some task in other ways, it is inherently impossible for them to intend learning a specific form (content) of knowledge, because if they knew, the did not have to intend learning. But precisely because of the inner contradictions in learning, there is the possibility for grounding and supporting arguments for guided learning. As a result of a teacher–student transaction, analyzed in this section with close attention to the details of the setting, the students come to see what
they had not seen before while running a computer simulation of simple Newtonian motion of an object on which a force acts.

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In this contribution, I articulate a cautionary approach to the idea of learning as a phenomena possible without intention; this allows me to ground the idea of guided instruction as long as I can assume that students reproduce in their goals the motive of the schooling activity system. This caution is meant to mediate any idea about the possibility of instruction to reach specific instructional goals that can be planned beforehand. On both cultural-historical activity theoretic and phenomenological grounds I suggest that students cannot intend the specific knowledge to be learned and therefore find themselves in a quandary. Teachers, though they may provide resources for certain discursive and perceptual features to stand out and be salient, cannot guarantee either sense or meaning, because the traces previous experiences left in students’ bodies mediate what they can perceive and learn at any one moment.