Three Forms of Learning in Social Context

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This paper is an analysis of different forms of learning in their social context. The forms of learning emerged from a research project into the ways that adults learn and the subsequent analysis endeavours to locate the types of learning within the wider social context. It is a tentative movement in the direction of a sociology of learning. There is not really sufficient space during this presentation to argue for a definition of learning and so one is suggested here: that learning is the transformation of experience into knowledge, skills and attitudes. The first part of the paper briefly describes the research project itself and its findings; thereafter there are three parts which discuss the three main forms of learning; finally, there is a brief concluding discussion.

The Research Project: Over the period of about fifteen months in 1985 and 1986 groups of adults were the subject of a project to discover something more about the way in which adults learn. All the participants were first invited to write down a learning incident in their lives. They were asked to state what started the incident, how it progressed and, finally, when and why they concluded that it was completed. Having undertaken this exercise they were then paired in order to discuss their different learning experiences and it was suggested to them that they might like to examine the similarities and the differences in their experiences. Thereafter, two pairs were put together and they then discussed their four different learning experiences. At this time, they were asked if they would draw a simple model of their joint learning experiences, and some of them actually constructed some quite sophisticated models of learning.

The first time this exercise was conducted the groups were asked to feedback their ideas at this point for a general discussion. Thereafter, they were given a copy of Kolb's learning cycle and it was suggested to them that they might like to adapt it to relate to their own experiences. Kolb's (1984) learning cycle is given in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1   Kolb's Learning Cycle
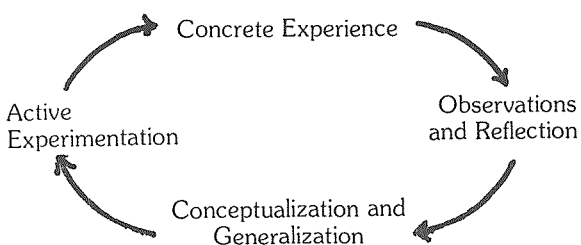
Participants were informed that the cycle was not necessarily correct and that they were free to adapt it in any way that they wished, so that it would relate to their experiences. From the feedback from the first set of groups a more complex model of learning was constructed by modifying the above learning cycle but also which related to the findings of each of the groups of four people. Whenever this exercise was repeated thereafter, the last stage each time was to introduce the adaptation of Kolb's cycle that had emerged from the previous time that this had been undertaken.

This exercise was conducted on nine separate occasions both in the UK and in the USA, with teachers of adults and teachers of children, with university lecturers and adult university students who were teachers of adults in their full-time occupation, with younger people and with some not so young participants, with men and women. In all about two hundred people participated in the exercise, although the sample was middle class and not tightly controlled. A complex model of learning was constructed as a result of the research. This model was subsequently tested in seminars, etc., over another nine months period, again both in the UK and the USA, with some two or three hundred people participating in these. An early draft of the model was published (Jarvis 1986) and a further draft is to appear in *Adult Education Quarterly*. The final model will appear, with a full description of this methodology in a book (Jarvis, 1987) *Adult Learning in the Social Context* to be published later this year. However, the purpose of this paper is not actually to examine the model, as such, but to analyse the various types of learning responses that were discovered.

It will be noted from the definition of learning suggested at the outset of this paper that it is claimed that all learning commences with experience, so that there is a sense in which learning might be regarded as a response to experience. Basically, it is suggested that there are nine types of response to an experience and that they may be classified into three fundamentally different types of learning: non-learning, non-reflective learning and reflective learning. Each of these three types contains three sub-types and in the reflective learning stratum there are two forms of each of the three types. Now the purpose of this analysis is to relate each of these types to a wider social context, and this is undertaken in the next three sections.

Non-Learning in the Social Context: It is very clear that people do not always learn from their experiences and so the first group of responses are non-learning ones: presumption, non-

consideration and rejection. Each of these three sub-types are now described briefly.

Presumption is the rather typical response to everyday experience. Schutz and Luckmann (1974, p.7) describe it thus:

> I trust the world as it is known by me up until now will continue further and that consequently the stock of knowledge obtained from my fellow-men and formed from my own experiences will continue to preserve its fundamental validity... From this assumption follows the further and fundamental one; that I can repeat my past successful acts. So long as the structure of the world can be taken as constant; so long as my previous experience is valid, my ability to operate upon the world in this and that manner remains in principle preserved.

While this appears almost thoughtless and mechanical, it is suggested here that this is the basis of all social living. It would be quite intolerable for people to have to consider every word and every act in every social situation before they undertook it. Hence, a great deal of life is lived on the basis of previous learned experiences and presumption is a typical response.

Non-Consideration: For a variety of reasons people do not respond to a potential learning experience; maybe because they are too busy to think about it or maybe because they are fearful of the outcome, etc. Thus it may be that non-consideration is another response that occurs quite commonly in everyday life to potential learning experience; maybe because they are too busy to think about it or maybe because they are fearful of the outcome, etc. Thus it may be that non-consideration is another response that occurs quite commonly in everyday life to potential learning experiences.

Rejection: Some people have an experience, think about it but reject the possibility of learning that could have accompanied the experience. For instance, think of an elderly person experiencing the complexity of modernity and exclaiming, 'I don't know what this world is coming to these days!' Here is a possible learning experience, an experience of the complex modern world, but instead of probing it and seeking to understand it, the person rejects the possibility. While the illustration here is with the elderly, it could have been with the not so elderly; with the bigot, who looks at the world and says that (s)he will not have any opinion/attitude changed by it, etc.

Sociologically, the significant thing about any response to experience is that no person is a total individual, *every* person lives in a society. What, then, are the effects of non-learning? That the society and its structures are unaffected by the people's experiences. That no change is likely to occur because there have been no alterations in knowledge, skill or attitude of the people in society when they do not learn, whoever they are. People have accepted, or rejected, what they have been presented, but they have not learned anything and so nothing can happen to change society. At least two conclusions can be drawn from this; the one about the person and the other about society.

A person who goes through life often experiencing the world presumptively, or even from a position of non-consideration, feels totally free within the structures of the society because they occur in just the manner that they are expected. Hence, a sense of personal freedom is experienced, simply because the society does not seem to pressurize the individual to do anything that the person does not wish to do. By contrast, when the individual rejects the possible learning, then those social pressures often appear oppressive. Yet there is still a sense of individual freedom, freedom not to respond to those social pressures that appear to be operating. This is a negative freedom here that enables the person to stand back and to reject the social forces that are excised upon him/her. Hence, the person might still feel free to act as (s)he so desires, even though the pressures might seem oppressive.

In contrast to this, it is possible to see that society remains unaffected: those who exercise power continue to do so; those who present interpretations of the world in the media continue to do this; those who prescribe for the 'ills' of society continue to make their pronouncements upon the world. They frequently remain unchallenged. Perhaps the failure to challenge those who exercise power or who structure interpretations of the world in the media, etc. is merely non-learning, or perhaps it is apathy? It is also the result of non-learning in the social situation. But what of those who do exercise power? Their power can be exercised covertly and they never have to appear to demonstrate their ability to make people accept them or their understanding of the world. This is what Gramsci called hegemony, and which Williams (1976, p. 205) described as:

> ...a whole body of practices and expectations, our assignments of energy, our ordinary understanding of the nature of man and his world. It is a set of meanings and values which as they are experienced as practices appear reciprocally confirming. It thus constitutes a sense of reality for most people in society, a sense of absolute because experienced reality beyond which it is very difficult for most members of society to move, in most areas of their lives.

Thus non-learning confirms those in power in their position, confirms those who structure and interpret reality for people in their position and basically affects nothing. Yet, the significant thing is that without non-learning no society or organization could have stability and, therefore, it is vitally important for the continuity of society - whatever the society in question may be.

Non-Reflective Learning in the Social Context: These forms of learning are those which are most frequently socially defined as learning. For the sake of convenience the three that have been isolated in this research project are: pre-conscious, skills learning and memorization. The factor above all else that enables them to be placed within one stratum together is that they do not involve reflectivity.

Pre-conscious learning is one on which there is little research. It occurs to everybody as a result of their having experiences in the course of their daily life about which they do not really think nor about which they are even particularly conscious. They occur at the periphery of the vision, at the edge of consciousness, etc. Ruth Beard (1976, pp 93-95) calls this incidental learning and she suggests that people develop such phenomena as schemas of perception as a result of these experiences. Other scholars who have been interested in this approach include Mannings (1986), who researched incidental learning in an adult education institution, and Reischmann (1986), who presented a paper at AACE in which he talked about learning *en passant*. Now this research project was not itself aimed at analysing this type of learning, although a number of the respondents mentioned this possibility during the research itself. It is similar in approach to the next two forms of learning.

Skills learning is traditionally restricted to such forms of learning as training for a manual occupation or the acquisition of a high level of physical fitness through training. However, some learning in preparation for a manual occupation is certainly not non-reflective, so that this has to be restricted to the learning of simple, short procedures that somebody on an assembly line might be taught. These skills are often acquired through imitation and role modelling.

Memorization is perhaps the most commonly known form of learning. Children learn their mathematical tables, their language vocabularies, etc. Adults, when they return to higher education, sometimes feel that this is the type of learning that is expected of them and so they try to memorize what such and such a scholar has written, etc. so that they can reproduce it in an examination. Hence, the authority speaks and every word of wisdom has to be learned, memorized.

The significance of these approaches to learning in the wider social context become very clear. As long as these approaches to learning are practised, then learning is nothing more than a process of reproduction. Society and its structures remain unquestioned and, consequently, unaltered. People learn and as a result they fit easily into the larger organization or the wider society, they learn their place - as it were. Once again, this may be examined from the position of the individual and the wider society.

Individuals who learn this way do learn to fit into the organization or society, as such. They experience a degree of freedom in as much as society does not appear unduly oppressive and for so long as they accept what they are expected to learn then no problems seem to occur. Perhaps more significantly, the structures of society appear fairly acceptable and present no major problem to the learners.

Society needs to reproduce itself, or at least those who exercise power within society need to reproduce the same types of social relations as they experience, so that they have to insure that people learn them and reproduce them. If learning is understood as reproduction, then this certainly aids the process! The more that education and the examination system is regarded as supporting this process, then power can still be covertly exercised. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) claim that teaching that perpetuates this process is actually symbolic violence, since it is imposing upon the learners, maybe in their ignorance, interpretations that may be false to their situations. This, of course, may also be true to media interpretations, although there is always the possibility of not accepting these. However, rejecting information that is presented to learners is a more problematic situation within an education institution, especially if it is part of an examination syllabus! Bowles and Gintis (1976, p.103) write:

> We shall argue that beneath the facade of meritocracy lies the reality of an educational system geared towards the reproduction of economic relations only partially explicable in terms of technical requirements and efficiency standards. Thus we shall first suggest educational tracking based upon competitive grading and objective test scores is only tangentially related to social efficiency. Thus we shall confront the technological meritocratic ideology head on by showing that the association between the length of education and economic success cannot be accounted for in terms of the cognitive achievements of the students. Thus the yardstick of the educational meritocracy - test scores - contribute surprisingly little to individual economic success. The educational meritocracy is largely symbolic.

But the symbolism is necessary, so that the reproduction of the social and economic relations can occur without the necessity for the exercise of overt power. Educational opportunity is a part of the myth of the open society. Learning is a part of this same process: non-reflective learning might be encouraged and the authority structures of an organization or society can remain unquestioned and unchallenged.

Reflective Learning in the Social Context: Thus far it has been shown that learning tends to be reproductive, simply because that is the way that it is frequently defined socially. It was suggested that non-reflective learning could not do other than to reproduce the social structures of society, but this is not true of reflective learning. These forms of learning involve the process of reflection, and thinkers such as Freire *(1972a, 1972b inter alia)*, Mezirow (1977, 1981), Argyris (1982 *inter alia*), Kolb (1984) and Boud *et al* (1985) have all examined the process of reflection. Because of Freire's work it might be assumed that all reflective learning has to be revolutionary, but this must not be assumed to be the case, Reflective learning is not automatically innovative. But before this is discussed it is necessary to examine the three types of reflective learning that were discovered in this research: contemplation, reflective skills learning and experimental learning.

Contemplation is a form of learning that behaviourist definitions of the phenomenon make no allowance for and yet, in many ways this might be viewed as a very intellectual approach to learning because it involves pure thought. This is the process of thinking about an experience and reaching a conclusion about it without reference to the wider social reality. The religious type of terminology was carefully chosen since it allows for meditation, as well as the thought processes of the philosopher and the activities of the pure mathematician.

Reflective skills learning, is called *reflective practice* in the book *Adult Learning in the Social Context.* This is one of the forms of learning that Schon (1983) concentrates upon, when he points out that professionals in practice think on their feet. In the process they often produce new skills as they respond to the uniqueness of their situation. Indeed, it was pointed out earlier that there are not many forms of skill that are learned in a totally unthinking manner, and so this may be regarded as a more sophisticated approach to learning practical subjects. It is not only learning a skill but learning about the knowledge undergirding the practice and, therefore, why the skill should be performed in a specific manner.

Experimental learning is that form of learning in which theory is tried out in practice and the end-product of the experimentation is a form of knowledge that relates fully to social reality. This approach to learning relates very closely to Kelly's (1963) understanding of human beings as scientists, seeking always to experiment on their environment.

It was pointed out above that these three forms of learning do not always have to be innovative, or change orientated. It may be recalled that Argyris has two types of learning and in discussing these, he (1982, pp. 159-160) made this point:

> First is the misunderstanding that the goal of Model II implies that Model I is somehow bad or ineffective and should be suppressed. On the contrary, Model I is the most appropriate theory in use for routine, programmed activities or emergency situations (such as rescuing survivors) that require prompt, unilateral action. We must not forget that the strategy of all organizations is to decompose double loop problems into single loop ones. The major part of everyday life learning in an organization is related to single loop learning. Double loop learning is crucial, because it allows us to examine and correct the way we are dealing with any issue and our underlying assumptions about it.

For Argyris, then, the more innovative forms of learning are crucial but the other approaches are just as significant. While he employs the terms single and double loop, it is proposed to utilise the terms conformist and innovative reflective learning here. Both of these terms now need to be discussed. Botkin *et al* (1979) employ the terms maintenance and innovative learning and these reflect the ideas contained here. It will be recalled that Freire (1972a, 1972b *inter alia*) recognised that there were two types of response in his forms of education: the one he called the 'banking concept of education' in which the learning was non-reflective and the other he called 'problem posing education' in which he thought the learning would be innovative. However, Freire has not really constructed a full typology of learning and he has omitted some of the intermediate forms and, consequently, his problem posing education relates only in part to innovative reflective learning. In contrast, Habermas (1971, 1972) has three forms of learning: the technical, the practical and the emancipatory. His emancipatory form is similar to Freire's problem posing form of education, and not precisely the same as the innovatory reflective learning that is discussed here. The word innovatory is preferred to emancipatory because the connotations of this word are revolutionary, it does not have to be. Hence, the world seeks to convey change, rather than only revolutionary change.

It is now necessary to examine these forms of learning within their wider social context. Clearly, those forms of reflective learning that result in conformist outcomes are not going to affect the social situation a great deal, whereas those which are innovative may do just that. However, it has to be recognised that because learning has occurred, the behavioural outcome may not always be congruent with the learning. Hence, a person might have reached innovative conclusions as a result of the learning process but might have also decided that it was inappropriate to practise them within the social context; this partially relates to Argyris's analysis of espoused theory and theory in use, but perhaps the decision not to practise may be congruent with the espoused theory also! The inappropriateness mentioned above becomes significant within the analysis. Why should it be inappropriate? Why should ideas that have occurred through reflective learning processes not be expressed or practised? It could be because the person does not wish to offend a friend or a colleague. But it might be because the power/status relationships within the social context do not encourage such free expression.

Three questions need to be posed at this stage: firstly, why is it that there appears to be a propensity to produce conformist outcomes to reflective learning process; secondly, why should innovative outcomes be possible; thirdly, what are the effects of innovative learning in the social context?

People are the result of their previous learning, they are to a great extent reflections of their past. Mannheim (1936, p. 2) wrote:

> Only in a quite limited sense does the single individual create out of himself the mode of speech and of thought we attribute to him. He speaks the language of his group; he thinks in the manner in which his group thinks. He finds at his disposal only certain words and their meanings.

People are therefore social products, using the language and even the thought patterns of their socio-cultural-temporal milieu. Consequently, there is a tendency to think in the same way and reach the same conclusions. Hence, there is a tendency to reach conformist solutions.

Why, therefore, should innovative thought occur at all? Mannheim again provides an answer. Writing about the intelligentsia, he (1936, p. 10) suggested that because they are drawn from a variety of different backgrounds they brought a variety of different interpretations of the world together and, hence, innovative ideas were possible. Pluralism makes innovative ideas more possible because there is both the recognition that there are alternative perspectives and because

there is usually a need to make some form of choice, etc. It is one of the features of modernity that there are a variety of interpretations of many phenomena available, provided access to them is not hindered, and therefore it is possible to analyse and synthesise and reach new ideas. This is not only a function of the intelligentsia in modern society, it is a possibility for all people - provided that the information is available to them. Hence the control of the production and dissemination of knowledge becomes very important in contemporary society.

What, then, are the social effects of operationalising innovative reflective learning? This must relate to the social position that the learner occupies within society. For the sake of this analysis society is divided into an upper and a lower eschalon - a crude but useful heuristic device. If the learners are within the upper eschalons of society they might also find that they are accepted much more easily, provided that they do not contravene the position of the elite. In contrast, those people in the lower reaches of society might find it much more difficult to find a platform in order to propound their ideas and might find it harder to gain acceptance for them. If the ideas further the position of the powerful, then the learners might find that they are accepted and that their ideas are also accepted. By contrast, if the ideas are not acceptable to the establishment, be it management or political elite, then they will find the social structures oppressive. The power of the elite can no longer be exercised covertly, but overt power has to be utilised in order to maintain the established positions. Hence, thinkers like Freire are forced into a revolutionary position because their ideas about innovatory reflective learning encourage the people to perceive the world in a different light and to act back and change the world and this threatens the entrenched positions of the elite.

Conclusions

This paper has suggested that all learning begins with experience and that there are at least nine possible learning responses to experience which may be classified within three strata: non-learning, non-reflective learning and reflective learning. Additionally, it recognises that there are two types of each of the reflective learning responses and these are conformist and innovatory. This paper has sought to demonstrate that in the non-learning, non-reflective learning and conformist reflective learning, the outcomes of the learning do not create a change situation and, therefore, do not threaten in any manner the

position of the elite in an organization or society. Hence, people can feel free and the power of the elite can be exercised covertly -this is the hegemonic position isolated and discussed first by Gramsci - so that people are not always aware that they are in a situation that is bounded by power structures. However, the power situation may itself be one reason for learning in a non-reflective manner and also a reason why it should not happen! By contrast, when innovatory reflective learning occurs, it creates the possibility for change. Recognition of the appropriateness of expressing the learning outcome might itself be an indication of the power exercised by the elite in the organization or society. Finally, there is recognition that people higher in the social strata may find it easier to express the outcomes of innovative reflective learning.

That learning tends to be socially defined in non-reflective learning terms is an indication of the structures of society. That learning is predominantly conformist is an indication of the strength of the social structures. That reflective learning can be innovatory is beyond doubt but no organization nor society could sustain the potentiality for change all the time and no elite could tolerate it, so that learning tends to be socially defined in conformist terms. In contrast, innovative reflective learning, the outcomes of which could prove beneficial to the organization or society as a whole, tends to be regarded by some as nuisance, in the least, but also by others as threatening or even subversive, and the more that it is seen as subversive the more it is defined as revolutionary thinking.

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