An Analysis of Experience in the Processes of Human Learning

Analyse de l'expérience dans les processus de l'apprentissage humain

Analyse der Erfahrung im menschlichen Lernprozess

Análisis de la experiencia en el proceso del aprendizaje humano

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An Analysis of Experience in the Processes of Human Learning

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ABSTRACT • This paper illustrates the processes whereby personal experience is constructed from an interaction of the natural, personal and social elements of the life-world network. It shows how experience is both pro-active and re-active and that the sense of self emerges as a result of the on-going interaction of the individual with the elements of the life-world, and it relates human learning to this process.

KEYWORDS • consciousness, experience, interaction, learning, life-world, person

‘Experience’, claims Oakeshott (1933, p.9) ‘of all words in the philosophic vocabulary is the most difficult to manage’. This claim is not without foundation, but in the field of education we have been influenced by Dewey’s (1938) analysis of the phenomenon in which he argued that there are two main criteria by which to assess an educational experience – continuity and interaction: that is that the effects of one experience are felt by subsequent ones and that the experience of a person occurs through interaction with the immediate environment. For him, experiences occur when these two conditions obtain and this happens in what he calls ‘situations’ which continue throughout life: life is a continuous series of situations: a situation is like a single slide in the video of life when time seems to stand still because the video has been stopped. As Dewey’s discussion is about education rather than learning he had to introduce the teacher into the argument who directs and controls the flow of the continuity and the quality of education. Learning, however, is much more fundamental to life than education and there is no need of a teacher, although there is often a mediator between the external world and the learner, but his two criteria still obtain: an experience is a part of a continuous process which lasts, in most people, for the duration of life itself and it entails series of interactions with the immediate environment. The duration¹

¹ Duration is ‘on-goingness’ in Bergson’s work – it is ‘flow’ which makes no reference to specific time: It is consciousness and memory (Lacey, 1989, p.29). But in everyday speech we use the term to refer to a specific ‘length’ of time.

of life itself, either our personal life or life *per se*, cannot be specified since it is on-going during our lifetime and we live within it – this is both our being and our becoming since we never arrive until the day that we die. However our life comprises a multitude of sequenced situations in which we interact with our environment – the learning that ensues is our becoming – and these are points in time which we may remember. Each situation is an experience in which we learn through both our interaction with our environment and through developing our past experience in the continuity of experienced life. Perhaps Bergson captured this idea most succinctly in his idea that duration is like a musical melody with individual situations of life being its notes (Lacey, 1989, pp.26-27).

It is, however, the whole person who experiences the situation and, therefore, in order to understand the nature of experience it is necessary both to understand the notions of the person and the environment and this will comprise the first part of this paper. In the following two parts the nature of the interaction between persons and their environments is explored, initially by looking at the way the persons react to changes in the environment and then by looking at ways in which individuals seek to change that environment through pro-action. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how learning is related to human development through experience.

1. Persons in their Environments²

In this section we shall examine briefly both the nature of the person who has the experiences and the environment in which they occur which is both natural and social.

1.1 The Person

The constitution of the person is not something that gains universal agreement. Indeed, there are a number of different theories but, perhaps there are three main ones which are dualist, monist and non-reductionist monist theories of the person: the dualist theory suggests that the body/brain and the mind are separate entities; the monist suggests that there is no separate mind and that all thought goes on through the mechanisms of the brain; the non-reductionist monist one suggests that the body/brain and the mind have the same substance but different functions. Each of these theories has some unanswerable problems so that none can demand universal acceptance although in my work I have argued (Jarvis, 2012) that the non-reductionist monist theory is the strongest one. This means that the body/brain and the mind have the same substance but separate functions which suggests that the body/brain and the mind can interact either separately or together with the environment: the body has primary experiences and the mind has secondary (or mediated) ones, or the body/brain can have sense experiences and the mind cognitive ones. Primary experiences can occur through any of the senses, so that

2 Some of the discussion in this section is developed from my book, *Learning to be a Person in Society* (Jarvis, 2009).

I can experience colour, sound, taste, smell, and so on. Additionally, I can react to these sense experiences with both primary or secondary emotions (see, for instance Turner and Stets, 2005), so that I can like a colour or a taste and this, it could be argued is something I have learned (a secondary emotion) whereas I can be frightened by a situation and this could be because of the fact that I have been hard-wired to respond to such situations in this manner which may have been a learned protective mechanism from deep in my evolutionary past which has now become instinctive (primary emotion). At this juncture we are faced with the fact that learning experiences are not just direct responses to a situation because the individual learner is more than just a body. Learners have their own history and so both our evolutionary past and our life experiences contribute to the manner in which we have experiences from which we learn.

However, for sense data to be meaningful they must have a cognitive interpretation and so, ultimately, it might be claimed with Oakeshott (1933, p.19) that all sensations imply 'consciousness, consciousness implies judgement, and judgement is thought', so that there is a cognitive dimension to every conscious experience. Experiences constitute situations but it is possible for the body to function unconsciously and have what I have called elsewhere, pre-conscious experiences (Jarvis, 1987, 1992). However, it could be argued that it is only when I become conscious of how the body has functioned and responded to whatever stimulus it receives that I have learned from the experience. In other words it is rather like a delayed reaction - the action, perhaps a reflexive action, takes place at t1 but the realisation or meaning of what has occurred happens at t2, which could be a considerable time later. In many normal situations this later realisation could be attributed to reflection but in these reflexive or unconscious situations the brain appears to be functioning without immediate connection to the seat of consciousness: it is only when the connection is re-established that the realisation occurs.

In sleep the body functions unconsciously even though we can learn from the occurrences in the mind during that time, but once again it could be argued that we only learn from the brain's functions during our sleep when we are awake and call them to mind and think about the outcomes of the brain's functioning. (See van den Veen and Archer, 2012). At the heart of a learning experience is consciousness although it would be difficult to maintain, in the light of the previous discussion, that all learning is a function of consciousness.

The person is in some way a combination of body/brain and mind. The complexity of the nature of the person has to be recognised when we consider that nature of the experiential processes through which we learn.

1.2 The Environment

No individual exists in splendid isolation but from the time of our birth we live in a life-world which is a network in which the natural and social worlds generate powerful forces with which individuals interact.

Figure 1: The Life-World Network

The fact that there are arrows between the three constituent elements in the life-world network illustrates that it is always changing since the natural world changes by night and day, by natural disasters, and so on, while the social world comprises people in interaction who are always learning and changing. Changes in the natural or social world can be experienced both by the senses in bodily experience (primary experience) and also cognitively (secondary experience) when socially constructed meanings can be attributed to the event and mediated to the learner by an intermediary – such as a teacher. Such meanings constitute the basis of culture, where culture is regarded as everything that is learned and shared by individuals – all that lies beyond the natural and physical world.³

That the arrows are two-way also illustrates the fact that change can be initiated by any of the constituent elements so that, say, we act in a specific manner and the outcomes of the action have their effects both on the natural and social worlds, but if there are changes in the natural or social world then we react to the stimuli that they produce and have an experience through which we change and adapt to the new situation. However, we can also desire to change the environment, either natural or social, in which we live and so the arrows also illustrate that individual pro-action can also generate change in the other elements in the life-world network. Interaction with the other constituent elements in the network, therefore, can be both reactive and pro-active: the melody of life, to use Bergson's illustration, has both re-active and pro-active notes but each note disturbs the 'fictitious' steady state in one or more domains of living - cognitive, active and emotive - and generates an experience from which we learn. Interaction, then, comprises two processes

³ The single arrow in the diagram can be misleading because the connections between each of the constituent elements of the life-world network are multitudinous: 'everything that is learned and shared' perhaps indicates something of the complexity of the inter-relationship. It is probably impossible to enumerate the number of connections that exist within such a life-world network but the body alone can receive stimuli of varying intensities through all the senses simultaneously.

– re-active and pro-active – and we will discuss each separately. The type, or direction, of experience is significant both for the process of learning but also for the development of the individual learners ourselves throughout our lives, as we will demonstrate in the following two sections.

2. Reactive Experiences

None of the three constituent elements in the life-world network are fixed or static and it is their continuous movement that underlies this discussion on the construction of experience.

Without entering very deeply into the discussion of evolution it would be true to claim that our early predecessors in the evolutionary chain reacted to changes in the natural world and as the process developed hominoid species developed through adaptation, but adaptation was probably not the only mechanism of change in the evolutionary process but it is a process of adjusting to different conditions which provide the organism with a better chance of survival. In natural selection the organism adapts in one or numerous ways in the struggle for existence but the conditions of the natural world also exercise constraint over the process of adaptation and this prevents an infinite number of adaptations occurring: natural selection operates within these more confined parameters. These are organic reactions to changed conditions but without consciousness there is probably no experience and no subjective choice by the organism in the way that it will develop in order to survive. In this sense the process of change is apparently natural with external forces acting upon the organism to generate genetic change over extremely long periods of time. It is only over such a long period of time when the conditions are relatively stable that species can evolve and establish themselves – this is phylogeny. Initially it was a biological process but, as Oubre (1997, pp.5-6) wrote:

‘Human adaptation involves not only genetic processes (and their consequent morphological and physiological transformations), but also behavioral and cultural innovations. It cannot be overstated that the course of hominoid evolution at least over the past few hundred thousand years has been primarily biocultural rather than only biological. The evolution of the human species is linked to changes both in biologically inherited characteristics – the human genome – and in learned knowledge – the repository of human culture.

Consequently, we can see that hominoid evolution has meant that individuals emerged as a result of the two other constituent elements in the life-world network acting upon them and the hominoids in turn, reacting to these pressures. It is with the birth of consciousness, however, that responses to the environment began to change from natural to being aware and deliberate. New forms of reaction and adaptation developed and animals learned to learn but this does not necessarily mean that the earlier ones were discarded, only that the earlier adaptations became

less conscious than others⁴. Now we can see that individuals consciously react to the external pressures; that is that they have a reactive experience. Conscious experiences can be remembered although there is no single location in the brain where these memories are stored (Rose, 2005)⁵, but these memories constitute the internalisation of the surrounding culture in the brain and also in the mind which, from very early in our lives begins to construct the 'Me', or the self (Tomasello, 1999)⁶. 'Me', or self, is learned through reactive experience to the forces that are generated by changes that occur within the life-world network and as we acquire a repertoire of memories so the 'Me' recognises the patterns of experience that it has as a result of being in similar situations and this enables us to repeat our past successful acts (Schutz and Luckmann, 1974). At the same time as we receive similar stimuli we are also able to receive dissimilar ones through other senses, so that because of the complexity of every situation we can be both aware of the need to change in one part of our life while other parts remain in a steady state. The more liquid (Bauman, 2011, inter alia) our society then there is a greater tendency to receive dissimilar stimuli. Every dissimilar stimulus generates a disjuncture (gap) between our expectations of similarity and what we actually perceive and in these instances we react and change in some way learn or learn that we cannot learn, so that we attempt to restore the steady state in this part of the network. We also store both the memory and its effect on us – we have had a learning experience which constitutes an element in the process of becoming. However, the notion of disjuncture is important to our consideration of the construction of these experiences, and the following diagram illustrates its nature.

Figure 2: Disjuncture - the Distance between Perception of the Reality and Individual Biography

4 Space does not really permit a longer discussion on the evolutionary process and the way that the brain has been structured with reptilian, mammalian and social functions and how it continues to develop – even after birth: children's brains continue to grow and develop in size and function as they are affected by socio-cultural experiences in which they both learn and adapt.

5 That there appears to be no place in the brain for memories raises fundamental questions about Freudian psychology, but it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore them here.

6 There is a long history in the debate about the relationship of conscious experience to the 'me', or the self, as famously discussed by Mauss (1938), although in this presentation we are more strongly influenced by Mead's (see Strauss, 1958) analysis of mind, self and society.

Co-incidence is the steady state when there is harmony between expectation and perception but the next two stages – divergence and separation – are stages where the gap between the perception and the reality is not too great and individuals react to it and seek to re-establish the steady state, either consciously or unconsciously, through learning in any of the three domains of thought, deed and emotion. There is a greater propensity to respond unconsciously when the gap is small (divergence) whereas a wider gap (separation) demands a conscious act of learning. In the final state ‘distinction’, individuals recognise that they cannot understand their situation nor will they do so in the future unless they embark on an extensive course of learning or training and so they have to live in a state of ignorance about it. This situation occurs for many people who are not skilled in science and technology although we live in a knowledge society that is technologically based – rather than trying to learn the necessary knowledge and skills, they opt to ‘leave it to the experts’ and live in acknowledged ignorance themselves. The experiences of disjuncture from which people learn, as we have seen, can occur in the cognitive, emotive or action domains and the state of disjuncture is typified by such questions as - Why? How? and so on. It is the experience of being in ignorance that sparks the reaction to learn and to restore the steady state in that specific dimension of the life-world network.

However, as small children we also learn through play that we can act upon our environment and change it, as Vygotsky (1978) showed.

3. Pro-Active Experience

As human beings we have never accepted a steady state in the life-world network, we have always wanted to explain it or change it. Learning theory has traditionally, and rightly, been dominated by the cognitive domain but cognition is not entirely dominant in the network: many scholars would argue for the primacy of action. Doing is at the foundation of our humanity. Husserl (cited in Schutz 1967, p.51) famously wrote, ‘I live in my Acts’. In precisely the same way Ricoeur wanted ‘his thought to be rooted in the concreteness of human experience, everything must relate back, in some way or another, to human action’ (Lowe introduction to Ricoeur, 1986, p. x). Margaret Archer talked of the primacy of practice and Hannah Arendt emphasised *viva activa* in preference to *viva contemplativa* as the dominant domain. However, in reality, we cannot isolate the three domains of human existence: for instance, I might want to change the situation because I do not like it and so I have to learn how to do it, and so on – this is the beginning of experiences that individuals generate because they desire to change the situation. These are what I have called pro-active experiences and these were learned in childhood play. From the outset, children’s play is an exploration but underlying it a very complex form of learning as Vygotsky (1978) shows. He (1978, pp.103-4) demonstrates that:

...play gives a child a new form of desires. It teaches her to desire by relating her desires to a fictitious “I,” to her role in the game and to its rules

(Vygotsky, 1978, p.100)

Like the proximal zone of development, there is a gap between what is and what is desired and the zone is rather like the image of disjuncture.

Figure 3 Desire - the Distance between Aims of Change and the Individual Experience of the Situation

Each of the four segments of the diagram is similar to the previous diagram but in order to achieve the aims the individual has either to learn new knowledge and act or to act either exploratively or experimentally and reflect upon the process and the outcomes of the event thereafter. However, when there is a clear division between the experience of the situation and the aims of change – distinction, the desires are recognised to be unobtainable at that instance in time. The change in behaviour of the individual will naturally exert pressures on the natural and social world which, in turn, have to change to endeavour to re-establish the steady state.

The significant feature of this form of experience is, as Vygotsky noted, the place of the 'I' and so in early learning experiences we find the beginnings of the formation of both the 'I' and the 'Me'. The 'I' desires and seeks to achieve its desires – in this sense 'I' is an expression of 'being' and in every endeavour to change the situation, the process of 'becoming' is occurring. Tomasello (1999, p.89) points out how children learn how others perceive them and act towards them and the wider world in general and herein lies the basis of the 'Me' but Vygotsky suggested that children relate their desires to a 'fictitious' 'I' during play. The 'Me' develops through our reaction to the wider world while our 'I' develops through our action upon that world in play and the interrelationship of these is crucial to the formation of the person. Mead (Strauss, 1956, p.229) writes:

- The 'I' reacts to the self which arises through the taking of the attitudes of others. Through taking those attitudes, we have introduced the 'me' and we react to it as an 'I'.
- But the re-active learning is fully related to the proactive learning: 'Me' precedes 'I' for Mead and the 'I', in this sense, is 'the spokesman of the self of a second, or minute, or day ago' (Strauss, 1956, p.229). The 'I' changes slightly in response to the changes in the 'Me' as it internalises the outcomes of experiences with the external world. The self, then, is a social process – it is an 'I-Me' interaction: it is also a single entity;

- The ‘I’ both calls out the ‘me’ and responds to it. Taken together they constitute a personality as it appears in social experience. The self is essentially a social process going on with these two distinguishable phases. If it did not have these two phases, there could be no conscious responsibility and there could be nothing novel in experience (Mead in Straus, 1956, p.233).

Personal learning is our interacting with the social and the natural world: it is an interaction between the ‘I’ and the ‘Me’, which is a cognitive phenomenon, as Oakeshott argued.

While the objective of this paper is primarily about the experiences from which we learn, it must be recognised that in the educational system teachers create the conditions in which the learning experiences occur: they can do this by arranging the environment or by creating either or both disjuncture and/or desire to learn in the content of their lessons. In so doing, teachers direct the process of formation of the self (I and ‘Me’) and in this sense, the expertise of teaching lies in the situated skill and understanding of the professionals.

Conclusion

Learning, therefore, is always the outcome of conscious experience and may be defined as:

The combination of processes throughout a lifetime whereby the whole person – body (genetic, physical, biological and skills) and mind (meaning, knowledge, attitudes, values, emotions, beliefs and senses) – experiences natural and social situations, the content of which is then transformed cognitively, emotively or practically (or through any combination) and integrated into the individual person’s biography resulting in a continually changing (or more experienced) person.⁷

Learning, then, is not a single process but a family of different processes that occur in the sequence of experiences we have in the course of our daily living – it is about our being and becoming in a lifetime of learning.

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⁷ This definition is a very slight but significant change from that upon which *Learning to be a Person in Society* (Jarvis, 2009, p.35) was based – the change is the insertion of the words ‘natural and’ since the book was about learning in society.

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Résumés • Zusammenfassungen • Resúmenes

Analyse de l'expérience dans les processus de l'apprentissage humain

RÉSUMÉ • Cet article illustre les processus de développement de l'expérience personnelle fondés sur l'interaction entre les éléments naturels, personnels et sociaux du monde vécu. Il montre la façon dont l'expérience est à la fois proactive et réactive et comment l'affirmation de l'identité personnelle résulte de l'interaction permanente des individus avec les éléments du monde vécu. Il établit un rapport entre l'apprentissage humain et ces processus.

MOTS-CLÉS • conscience, expérience, interaction, apprentissage, monde vécu, individus

Analyse der Erfahrung im menschlichen Lernprozess

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG • In diesem Artikel beschreiben wir die Entwicklungsprozesse der persönlichen Erfahrung, die auf der Interaktion zwischen den natürlichen, persönlichen und sozialen Elementen der erlebten Welt basieren. Wir zeigen die Art und Weise, wie die Erfahrung zugleich proaktiv und reaktiv funktioniert und wie sich die Behauptung der persönlichen Identität aus der ständigen Interaktion der Individuen mit den Elementen der erlebten Welt ergibt. Wir stellen somit eine Verbindung zwischen diesem Prozess und Lernen beim Menschen.

SCHLAGWÖRTER • Bewusstsein, Erfahrung, Interaktion, Lernen, erlebte Welt, Individuum

Análisis de la experiencia en el proceso del aprendizaje humano

RESUMEN • Este artículo ilustra los procesos de desarrollo de la experiencia personal basados en la interacción entre los elementos naturales, personales y sociales del mundo vivido. Muestra cómo la experiencia es a la vez proactiva y reactiva y cómo la afirmación de la identidad persona es el resultado de la interacción permanente de los individuos con los elementos del mundo vivido. Establece una relación entre el aprendizaje humano y estos procesos.

PALABRAS CLAVES • conciencia, experiencia, interacción, aprendizaje, mundo vivido, individuos