Personal Journeys of Discovery: 
what do I mean by ‘learning’?

Paper 1: A story of evolving meaning making in relation to concepts of learning as experienced by the researcher:

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Workshop Paper presented with Ivor Goodson at the Conference of the Network on Life History and Biography, Roskilde University, Denmark, 1-4 March 2007

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Introduction

In this paper I provide a narrative of my own journey of discovery in trying to gain a deeper understanding of the slippery concept of ‘learning’. It is a paper that draws on notes, jottings and draft papers I have written, memories of the past as recalled in the present, reflection and published theories. While an understanding of how I might have arrived at the pathway I am about to describe would provide scope for many insights about learning, a version of my personal life history or biography lies beyond the scope of this paper. The purpose of the paper is to provide the workshop audience with some background ‘knowledge’ of the constructs that I tell myself I bring to the research process of the Learning Lives project. The story is, of course, only a snapshot in time, because the concepts and constructs that I work with are forever shifting as new thoughts and ideas are introduced to me. Nevertheless, there are threads, anchors, ideas that I cling to – and may ultimately relinquish – that form some structure in my thinking, helping me make sense, and, I believe, undoubtedly constraining me in moving on.

Having said that I will not be drawing on my full life story, I will begin by sketching a chronology of my past in order to provide a backdrop for the story that will unfold of my evolving personal concept of learning. This story will draw on my work, first as a research student, then as a research fellow, that has been connected to the academic study of the concepts of learning. The paper is not written to provide conclusive arguments (or a conclusion – to break with tradition), but rather opens up questions that remain a source of curiosity to me and hence a driving force for my continued interest in finding new ways of thinking about what is meant by ‘learning’.

The learner’s life: a brief overview

Having gained a first degree in Business Studies – a route way very different from that I had dreamed of from the age of 5 to be a primary school teacher – I began my adult ‘working’ life as an ‘unemployed housewife’, looking for work in the economically depressed north of England in 1980. Taking a British politician’s advice at the time, to the unemployed to ‘get on their bikes’ to find work, we made the decision to move to the more affluent south of England where it was much easier
to gain employment, which I did, in the field of administration. My early working life involved a number of jobs in the public sector, usually working in the area of ‘personnel/human resources’. Here I began to observe and informally question how people came to be who they were; who seemed to ‘succeed’, who ‘struggled’; what brought out the ‘best’ and ‘worst’ in employees, and in myself. In all this work I felt I was stagnating.

Ultimately the yen to teach proved too strong and I returned to formal education to train as a teacher. Strangely, I recall little of what I ‘learned’ during this year, other than experiences gained in the classroom whilst on teaching practice. Ask me about the learning theories covered on the course and I would have to admit, I recall none – were they ‘taught’ at all? It was a time when ‘experiential learning’ was fashionable in England. Perhaps I’d just missed the point!

As I began to have some ‘successes’ in the classroom – teenagers sometimes appearing interested, occasionally being engaged, increasingly gaining better exam results – I also began to wonder what should be done to better help those pupils who were ‘problems’ to the teaching profession. They didn’t do what we wanted them to do! I also began to feel that we were missing the point. Why should they want to do our bidding, especially given some of their life stories? Were there ways we could adapt to them and their needs rather than always imposing ‘our needs’ on them?

Being a teacher of Business and Information Technology, I put a great deal of effort into education/industry links. I was intrigued at some aspects of work that was going on in ‘industry’ with regard to learning. I was delighted when I secured a position to set up and run an education centre for a major car manufacturer. The aim of the centre was to ‘unlock potential’ among the workforce of the factory, teachers and young people from local schools and colleges through creating learning opportunities designed to bridge the gap it was assumed existed between what was taught in schools and what was needed for a strong economy in the age of globalization.

From wondering about ‘learning’ in the classroom I became increasingly fascinated by how people came to be who they came to be as adults. With ‘lifelong learning’ the mantra of the factory, working in a company gaining awards as a learning
organisation and failing to succeed in a capitalist world proved to be, personally, a highly rewarding experience. BUT, and it is a big but, I became increasingly aware of my own limited underpinning ‘knowledge’ of learning. I wanted to increase my understanding of what theories were available to draw on to help ‘convert’ all those ‘non-learners’ into ‘lifelong learners’. I will not dwell here on what I might have meant by this. I have long since moved on.

In 1998 I began research into fostering dispositions to learning in 11 – 14 year olds. As a research student I spent my time reading, thinking and writing about ‘learning’. It is to this, and my subsequent reading, thinking, and writing as a Research Fellow with the Learning Lives Project that I now turn.

**Evolving personal concepts of learning**

In February 1999, three months after I returned to formal education, I noted my personal concepts of learning as being:

- Gaining a deeper understanding of a subject/topic or gaining greater ability in a skill in such a way that the knowledge, understanding or skill can be used in future applications.

- The ability to think through an experience, a problem or an issue by drawing on past knowledge and experience and by predicting consequences of actions on the self, others and the environment, thereby becoming a ‘rational’ decision-maker.

- To reflect on, question and challenge existing ‘knowledge’ in self and others so as to gain greater understanding and meaning from experiences and be better able to use the new knowledge to improve decision-making and understanding in the future. To be able to use knowledge to make choices and to understand that choices come with consequences.

- A continuous process of questioning, challenging, amassing knowledge and eliciting new meaning.
A continuous improvement process that allows the individual to achieve personal goals in harmony with society. (Adair, 1999)

Reading them now I am amazed at how influenced I was by the scripts of industry, especially with regards to ‘continuous improvement processes’.

I went on to discuss some of the literature I had been reading during those three months. This opened up my thinking to three philosophical positions in relation to the principle of learning and personal psychology: behavioural (ie doing; learning by rote); cognitive (ie knowing; learning with understanding); and social/phenomenological, or affective (ie feeling; knowledge gained by living where feelings, emotions and experience play important roles in learning). (Hartley, 1998; Riding and Rayner, 1998)

There were the views of Ausubel and Robinson (1966, cited in Riding and Rayner, 1998) where they polarised learning as passive versus active learning; rote versus meaningful learning. Rogers and Freiberg (1994) write of passive students or “tourists” compared to active “shareholders” in the classroom. Like West (1988), they believe there is really only one true type of learning:

. . . insatiable curiosity that drives the adolescent mind to absorb everything he can see or hear or read about a topic that has inner meaning. I am talking about the student who says, ‘I am discovering, drawing in from the outside, and making what I discover a real part of me.’ I am talking about any learning in which the experience of the learner progresses this way:

‘No, no, that’s not what I want.’
‘Wait! This is closer to what I’m interested in, what I need.’
‘Ah, here it is! Now I’m grasping and comprehending what I need and what I want to know!’ (Rogers and Freiberg, 1994)
Learning without meaning they describe as learning “from the neck up” whereas significant, meaningful learning involves the ‘whole’ person and the sense of comprehension comes from within, is pervasive and may affect behaviour, attitude and possibly personality.

Others do not go quite so far, but adopt a constructivist view of learning. In the constructivist theory of learning it is assumed that there is a continuous process of construction of meaning. The learner makes sense of new inputs by creating links with their prior knowledge (Bennett and Dunne, 1994).

I read the work of Barrow and Woods (1988). They did not discard rote learning entirely, but saw it as ‘learning of a kind’. They went on to identify different types of understanding: ‘mechanical’ (understanding the what but not the why); ‘reasoned’ (understanding the ‘what’ and the ‘why’); and ‘personal’ (having the ability to step outside one’s own personal view and see things from another’s perspective). They also pointed out that some philosophers link reasoned understanding and personal understanding, believing that thinking and feeling are intertwined.

Into my thinking came the notion of the role of emotion in learning, and I began to explore this area of literature, including the work of Greenhalgh (1994) who draws on Rogers earlier work that identifies a belief that significant learning only takes place if a person sees it will maintain or enhance the structure of the self. Such learning is resisted as the personality protects itself, individual’s only accepting new behaviours when it is perceived as safe to do so and when the new behaviour’s are in the person’s own interest. Thus the most effective learning occurs when any threat to the self is minimised. This Greenhalgh compares to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs: physiological, safety, social belongingness, self-esteem and self-actualisation.

Added into my thinking, the work of Rebok (1987) who describes the organismic development approach as human beings developing through stages with development directed to a final ideal end state, namely the notion of contemplation-reflective thought as in Plato’s assertion that the ultimate goal of human existence is contemplation. Chickering, cited in Burstyn (1986) contends that people at different levels of ego-development have different motives for learning, perspectives towards
knowledge and will prefer different educational practices, relationships and assessment of their work. The concept of learning may therefore vary according to the stage of ego-development of the individual, believing that age and stage of ego-development are not highly correlated.

Other models of learning were ‘discovered’, such as some of those cited in Jonassen and Grabowski (1993). For instance there was Bloom et al’s (1956) taxonomy of cognitive Objectives moving from knowledge, through comprehension, application, analysis, and synthesis to evaluation; Gagne (1970) and Leith’s (1970, 1971) taxonomies of learning, the first to provide a sequencing for instruction, the second a description of cognitive behaviours. There was the work of Piaget (1972, cited in Chickering, 1986 and Rebok, 1987) moving from empirico-inductive thinking to deductive hypothesis testing; the work of Perry (1970, cited in Chickering, 1986; 1988 cited in Ramsden, 1988) whose taxonomy went from the memorisation of known knowledge (absolutist) to relativist, where there is different knowledge needed in different contexts, no absolute truth and learning is about synthesis.

I also, at this time came across the work of Saljo (1979, cited in Hartley, 1998). He described five conceptions of learning:

- as quantitative increase in knowledge;
- as memorising and later reproducing;
- as acquiring facts, skills and methods that are going to be useful later on;
- as making sense or abstracting meaning;
- as a process that helps us to interpret and understand reality

By this stage I was beginning to reel as well as to realise learning about learning was going to be a major challenge. Life outside academia suddenly seemed alluringly simple and straightforward – three bullet points in a meeting or it wasn’t worth the time to get to know. I began to rethink my personal concept of learning. The result is given below.
Revised Personal Concept of Learning

Figure 1 diagrammatically depicts my concept of learning. The categories chosen attempt to reflect the range of types of learning outlined in the Literature review whilst synthesising these with my own prior knowledge and understanding of learning. The major change in concept is in viewing learning as many and various types. I have chosen to represent them as ‘equal but different’ as I find it difficult to argue that one type is better than another. Taking a relativistic viewpoint, I find myself caught in the tension of there being no absolute truth in what learning is. It appears to be all the items listed below, in no particular order and I can identify that I make use of the different types of learning to varying degrees dependent upon the context and environment at the time. I am also aware that my strengths and/or interests lie more in some domains than others.

Figure 1: Personal Concept of Learning (Adair, 1999)

At this stage I identified a number of questions:
In a study of Key Stage 3 students, what patterns of concepts of learning might we find?

Might the patterns correlate with ego-development, ‘intelligence’ or perceived learning activities encountered?

Do all human beings aspire to self-actualisation and Plato’s notion of contemplation as the ultimate life goal?

How might differing end goals affect one’s concept of learning?

Do different concepts of learning affect the degree of ‘love of learning’?

Might the ‘ideal’ be to have a versatile approach to learning, using the type of learning appropriate to the given situation?

Is everyone, willing and/or able, with suitable guidance, to achieve all the types of learning?

How does the above ‘fit’ with the concept of the ‘life-long’ learner? (Adair, 1999)

And there the work on concepts of learning was put on hold while I went off to explore other avenues of literature around learning, factors that may affect learning, the critique of education policy and the planning design, collection and early analysis of empirical data for my doctoral research. Later, as I honed in on what I was going to include in my thesis I returned to some of this work and especially to the work of Saljo.

Later still, as I struggled to make sense of my work on dispositions to lifelong learning I briefly came across the work on communities of practice by Lave and Wenger (1991). It caught my attention but it wasn’t timely to incorporate their work, yet I knew I wanted to include something of the social contexts into my thinking and didn’t know how. In my head I kept returning to the story of Adam (McDermott, 1993).

McDermott was concerned with attempting to discover examples of mental activity in ‘natural’ environments. What ultimately captured his and his co-researchers attention were the actions and reactions of Adam, a ‘Learning Disabled’ child. Although labelled ‘LD’ Adam, we are told, “seemed always eager to try.” At first reading we
might assume Adam to be motivated toward learning. Yet as the story unfolds we find that his actions and reactions to the social situations he finds himself in, form and reform as an amoebic process. In everyday life he presents less as a child with a problem, only as he moves along a continuum to ever increasing formal learning situations does he become conspicuous in his weaknesses. Only then is he required to take action to protect himself, and only when the actions of others have reacted with his own actions to create the need for reaction of a type in him. In other words, learning, ‘intelligence’ and motivation might be social and it might be complex. (Adair, 2003)

I needed some way of describing how I believed that learning was not only about psychological processes, whether rational and/or emotive but also needed to include social interactions and contexts. I had come across Pollard and Filer’s work (1996, 1999) and had made use of aspects of it in my writing, but it was not until I was asked, very late in the doctoral process, to reflect on why I had not made more use of their – and other authors – work on socio-cultural theories of learning that I made connections in my own mind as to the relevance of their thinking to that which I was struggling to say.

My final thesis incorporates a model of learning used by Pollard and Filer developed from an earlier version by Haste (1987). This attempts to amalgamate three domains of learning, the intrapersonal (psychological; individual interpretation), the interpersonal (social interaction), and the positional (socio-cultural-historic). From their socio-cultural contexts learners gain ‘knowledge’ of the “normative frameworks and assumptions for ‘making sense’” (Pollard with Filer, 1996: p.7) of their worlds. These frameworks are mediated by the individual’s interpretations and cognitive ‘capacities’. The socio-cultural-historic positions are themselves mediated by the social practices that the individual experiences and meaning is generated from these social interactions. The meanings generated from social interaction are, in turn, mediated by the intra-individual interpretations that the learner brings with them to the social contexts they experience.

The model not only provided a useful way of creating a more unified thesis, but it also provided me with a framework that I could see other possibilities for. I felt secure
with my new found ‘knowledge’, though somewhat less secure with my new identity of ‘doctor’.

And so to the Learning Lives Project. After accepting the position of researcher on the project, and before commencing employment, I began to read around the subject of life histories and learning. I also began to keep a journal and it is to some of the entries in this that I now want to turn to draw out how resilient I am to a change of view! Hmmm! Maybe not the open minded, creative thinker I’d rather like to think myself as being!

Initially my reading was around life history methodology and I occasionally linked my thoughts to the Pollard/Filer model of learning. I intuited a usefulness about the model. Later my reading took in the work of Dominice (2000) which at the time of reading I think I recall, I did not find especially inspiring, yet as I work through the journal for this paper I begin to realise that I need to revisit this work as it has some resonance with ideas Ivor Goodson, as the Project Director for Learning Lives at Brighton, has shared with me. Of interest here is how this is only sparking interest from me more than two years after I first read it. Earlier I read, made notes, acquired and consciously forgot. Now I sense a need to interact with the text, to think with the text, to challenge my own thinking, to actively engage rather than passively collect. Other entries in the journal make me feel likewise.

As the project swung into action so my reading diminished and I became engrossed in data collection and related tasks. Reading continued but serious thinking about literature linked to concepts of learning were, to a large extent, put on hold. But in summer 2006 I resumed my writing in this area. As I prepared a draft conference paper I returned to familiar territory. Central to my concerns were much that I had thought and written about in my thesis. I returned to the Pollard and Filer model. I returned to my work on lifelong learning and to the political rhetoric of learning being triadic in nature. That is learning being for economic progress, personal development, and social inclusiveness and democratic understanding (Aspin and Chapman, 2001).

Added into this were thoughts arising from participation in the Learning Lives Project and the social interactions that occur within that community of practice – or more
accurately, communities of practice, as what occurs within whole group meetings, research fellow meetings and site team meetings are, of course quite different. Of particular note here are three areas of thinking. One relates to literature on social learning; another has been provided by Hodkinson et al (2006) on metaphors of learning; the third revolves around Goodson’s thinking on narrative and primal learning. The last of these I will leave Ivor to speak about for himself, the others I will briefly describe my interpretation of.

In my thinking in the summer of 2006 I return to Pollard and Filer’s model (again!):

Each domain brings with it a plethora of theories and models about learning providing a range of existing ‘tools’ to help interpret and understand various aspects of learning. So we may draw on ‘expert knowledge’ from perspectives of behavioural, cognitive and social/phenomenological philosophies of learning (Hartley, 1998; Riding and Rayner, 1998), different ways of making sense of learning, but learning that is viewed as happening ‘in the head’. Other theories such as activity theory (Engestrom et al, 1999) situated learning and communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) subscribe to the concept of learning as being social, differing with context and relying on other people as well as ‘tools’ such as computers, notes and textbooks and being constrained by the rules of the system. These are the models of learning we may think of as ‘out there’. Distributed cognitions include these ‘participatory’ models of learning, but Salomon (1993) suggests that while cognitions are distributed, there is also value in retaining a belief in individual cognitions too. (Adair and Goodson, 2006)

Hodkinson et al (2006) name and critique three metaphors for (and ways of understanding) ‘learning’: ‘acquisition’, ‘construction’ and ‘participation’. Whilst recognising that there are weaknesses in these metaphors, the model of learning provided by Pollard with Filer assumes learning to be intrapersonal (‘in the head’ of the individual) and interpersonal (‘out there’ in society). It provides scope to explore learning as a variety of metaphors, each with their strengths and weaknesses. As we have suggested elsewhere (Adair and Goodson, 2006) it allows us to consider learning
as acquisition, and construction and participation. We are able to explore lifelong and life-wide; formal, non-formal and informal; intentional as well as unintentional learning, based on this model. But what the model doesn’t help us with is ways to operationalise the exploration. What we need is a means to gain insight into the ways people make sense of their worlds. Narrative learning and primal learning - which Ivor is going to introduce in his paper - are one way to help here.

For me this is where I have arrived with my thinking. It leaves me asking if and how narrative and primal learning fit/contradict the various metaphors. It creates a drive in me to explore how it may be used to develop (or destroy) the starting model in my head based on the model of learning developed by Pollard and Filer.
References

Merrill, Macmillan Publishing.


Learning Lives: Learning, Identity and Agency in the Life-Course is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, Award Reference RES139250111, and is part of the ESRC’s Teaching and Learning Research Programme. Learning Lives is a collaborative project involving the University of Exeter (Gert Biesta, Flora McLeod, Michael Tedder, Paul Lambe), the University of Brighton (Ivor Goodson, Norma Adair), the University of Leeds (Phil Hodkinson, Heather Hodkinson, Geoff Ford, Ruth Hawthorne), and the University of Stirling (John Field, Heather Lynch, Irene Malcolm). For further information see www.learninglives.org.