

### **Personal Theory of Learning**

Learning is the process of making meaning out of experiences. The pre-existing knowledge that the learner brings into the experience serves as a catalyst for the meaning making. Also, the context of those experiences such as the people places, and things involved in them greatly influence what meaning the learner makes of the experience. These experiences out of which meaning is made can be in or out of the classroom and can be either individual in nature (such reading a book) or cooperative in nature (such as team sports). I believe that learning is illumination that occurs when one considers their own pre-existing knowledge within the context of an experience. Through this experience, the learner makes meaning by deepening the pre-existing knowledge by creating connections to, identifying juxtapositions with, or adding augmentations to it via individual introspection and/or cooperative reflection about the experience. I would describe learning, on the whole, as malleable and nuanced in that it depends heavily the learner's perspective, setting and influencers.

The first way in which learning is nuanced is that it depends on the perspective of the individual learner. Jean Piaget's concept of schema – defined by Dr. Dennis G. Wiseman as “an individual's collection of prior knowledge that provides a context for meaningful interpretation of new information”(2008) – is key in learning. The idea of schema, as a collection of prior knowledge, works like a chest of drawers of the mind in that the brain uses schema makes sense of new information and then categorizes and organizes that information. It is from this schema that learning happens as the individual adjusts schemata through processes known as assimilation

or accommodation. Kendra Cherry, an author of a blog post on the subject, expounds on these concepts: “in assimilation, new information is incorporated into pre-existing schemas...in accommodation, existing schemas might be altered or new schemas might be formed as a person learns new information and has new experiences”(2016). Take an example of a young child who is presented something new to their schema pertaining to clothing, casual shorts made of cotton with belt loops and cargo pockets, would compare and contrast them to information already categorized and organized in that schema in order to figure out what place to put them in a literal chest of drawers. In the mind of the young child, shorts are no longer merely polyester and made for exercise. The categorization of the knowledge formed by one’s schema is a foundation from which a more solid understanding of a concept can be built.

Learning is subtle in that it depends on the learner’s setting. That is, what one learns depends on who and what they are around. As example of the situated perspective of learning, espoused by such researchers as Putnam and Borko (2000), pertains to greetings. I grew up in the South where manners and particularities concerning greetings such as shaking hands firmly and making eye contact were of the utmost importance. My wife grew up in rural Pennsylvania where one (generally speaking) dispenses with such pleasantries and formalities and offers a simple terse phrase and a quip as custom enough for the average greeting. This difference in learning how to greet is a product of where the learning took place and the people who guided the process of learning. In this case, where and with whom my wife and I grew up, respectively, influenced our learning. The situation, both physical and social, influenced us to internalize these different ideas about the same context. The idea, as researchers Putnam and Borko (2000) summarize is that “the situation in which the learner learns, becomes a fundamental part of what is learned”(pg. 4).

Learning depends on the learner's influencers that is that learning an individual undergoes is greatly influenced by the people around them. An article by Saul McLeod (2011) outlines Albert Bandura's principles of social learning such as how children will pay attention to other people who they deem to be models, will encode their behavior and will later model that observed behavior. Putnam and Borko discuss that social learning is "as much of enculturation into a community's ways of thinking and dispositions as it is a result of explicit instruction in specific concepts, skills, and procedures"(pg. 5). Psychologist Lee Vygotsky pointed out a more concerted type of social learning, rather than merely arbitrary observational learning, by which, as discussed in an article by Saul McLeod (2014), a more knowledgeable other, leads the learner's learning. Furthermore, Richard Culatta (2011) explains Vygotsky's concept of how those leader's of learning work within the zone of proximal development to help scaffold the learner to new understanding. Examples of the process by which humans learn kinesthetic activities such as bike-riding or swimming come to mind when thinking about social learning. Someone who is exceptional at performing these tasks teaches the new learner to complete steps/tasks one at a time by demonstrating the task and then aiding them in performing it meanwhile integrating new tasks at pace with the learner until the learner performs the full sequence independently.

Lastly, learning is malleable. B.F. Skinner and behaviorists emphasize that through what is known as operant conditioning, the behaviors of a learner can be altered. Melissa Standridge (2002) writes about the reciprocity of learning in that understanding of information or a process can both be internalized and then rewired depending on how the things external to the learner that I have already mentioned such as the setting and influencers, reward the learner. Thus,

through training, people's learning can change. Also, through more arbitrary psychological processing, habits can form and be tweaked via the explicit process Charles Duhigg describes in *The Power of Habit* (2012). Duhigg describes the habit loop of cue, routine, reward as more of an individual development although external factors can influence it. A generic example of the influence of conditioning in learning would be to get the mind to unlearn a routine of a habit thus changing the overall results of it. The reward stays as it influences the habit and the cue is there but the routine is unlearned via replacement of a new routine and the gist of the habit can change. Choosing to workout for an hour (new routine) at the end of a long workday (cue) so as to achieve some decompression and down time (reward) could provide different overall results than sitting around watching TV (old routine). All in all, the ideas of behaviorism and habit-formation reinforce the orientation of learning around situations.

To conclude, I think the analogy used by Brown, Collins, and Duguid (1989) concerning how learners attain knowledge is very apropos to what I believe learning to be. The idea is that words mean different things depending on the context in which they are written and read, how they are said by someone saying them:

“all knowledge is, we believe, like language. It's constituent parts index the world and so are inextricably a product of the activity and situations in which they are produced. A concept...will continually evolve with each new occasion of use, because new situations...inevitably recast it in a new, more densely textured form. So, a concept, like the meaning of a word, is always under construction”(pg. 33).

This idea, I believe, truly accounts for the situated perspective on learning.

To conclude, I give an all-encompassing example of my thoughts on learning via a description of my two year old daughter's experience learning about the terms of hot/cold/warm.

Through this descriptive sequence of learning, you can see many if not all of the aspects of learning I described above. My daughter first understood the aforementioned terms from her experience with water. Cold water was to be used for drinking and warm water to be used for washing hands and bathing while hot water was explicitly off limits for use on the body. Hot water is used for Mommy's tea. She had also been experiencing hot/cold/warm through the temperature outside. However, she experienced an even more nuanced view of the concepts as we kept busy via indoor 'treasure-hunts' over the winter and I used temperature descriptors on a gradient (hot/cold/warm/warmer) to describe her nearness to the object being located. She accommodated new meaning to the words hot and cold. She is assimilating the ideas of magnitude of outside temperature and situational definitions through this experience as I now use the terms warm/warmer and cool/cooler to describe the temperature along with hot and cold. Thus, both what she knew about hot/cold/warm via experience, instruction, and conditioning allowed her to dig deeper into the meanings of those words in other contexts from which she bolstered her already existing original understanding of what those terms meant. To conclude, this example of my daughter learning about the various uses for words describing degree of temperature further illustrates the nuanced more situated perspective of learning that I now espouse.

## References

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