

Philosophy and the Learning Ecology

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By

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the connections between philosophical inquiry and the learning ecology. The article begins with brief definitions of philosophy and learning, followed by a summary of a philosophical theory of knowledge that may shed light upon the Meaning of Learning (MoL). Next, the concept of confluent education will be discussed as a potential model for describing the ways in which learning can evolve beyond traditional instructional contexts. Then, the implications for influencing the learning ecology toward this vision will be discussed.

Back in the days when Socrates debated issues in the marketplace, philosophy was all about providing practical advice for living. Although the world's great wisdom tradition has since evolved into a multiplicity of discourse communities, the central concern of philosophy from ancient time – how to think critically – remains trenchant and meaningful. Philosophy "... involves questioning one's own point of view as well as the views of others; it involves searching for defined and defensible values, clarifying one's beliefs and attitudes, and formulating a framework for making decisions and acting on these decisions" (Ornstein & Hunkins, 1998, p. 31). When Jim Finn addressed the John Dewey Society in 1962, he turned to educational philosophy for inspiration. For Finn (1962/1996), clarification was one of the jobs of the philosopher (and the inspiration for this paper). My hope is that the ideas that follow may contribute to our knowledge about learning and illustrate the potential role that philosophical inquiry can play in creating a broader meaning of learning.

Three Aspects of Philosophy

Philosophy often means different things to different people. For some people, philosophy is a body of knowledge concerned with "... the general nature of the world (metaphysics or theory of existence), the justification of belief (epistemology or theory of knowledge), and the conduct of life (ethics or theory of value)" (Honderich, 1995, p. 666). For others, philosophy is more of an activity that utilizes unique skills and methods of thinking in order to provide practical advice for living (Morris, 1999). Then, there are personal philosophies, which we all possess, that provide general conceptions of the world in which we live and our place in it.

Philosophy, as an academic discipline, is important to our field because it provides a foundation for theory (Koetting, 1996; Smith & Ragan, 1999; Snelbecker, 1974).

Accordingly, many of the scientific roots in instructional technology can be traced back to philosophical origins (Koetting, 1996; Luiz, 1982). Philosophical inquiry, as an activity, provides value for instructional technologists, by challenging them to put their wisdom to work and to think critically about the best ways to facilitate learning. Finally, we can begin to act in accordance with our insights when our personal philosophies are clear. Philosophy is all about *thinking*.

What Is Learning?

Some people believe that learning occurs in the head while others feel that it's an external behavior that must be observed. Others feel that both perspectives are valid, and some people are promoting a broadened outlook on learning that explores how people learn naturally in addition to instructional practice (Visser, 1999, April). Multiple perspectives of learning should contribute to a better understanding of what it is and how it can best be facilitated. Is learning a relatively stable change in knowledge or skills as a result of experience, or can it be given a wider meaning? Ecological systems theory has illuminated the myriad factors that influence learning, which takes place at different levels of organizational complexity ranging from the individual to society at large (Visser, in press).

The purpose of this paper is to explore the Meaning of Learning (MoL) by drawing connections between philosophical inquiry and the learning ecology. A brief summary of a philosophical theory of knowledge will follow. Next, the concept of confluent education will be discussed as a potential model for describing the ways in which learning can evolve beyond traditional instructional contexts. Then, the implications for influencing the learning ecology toward this vision will be discussed.

What does it mean to be knowing?

Some of the most-heated debates in instructional technology revolve around the notion of objective *vs.* subjective truth. Some people believe in the existence of an objective truth where knowledge is something that can be acquired through instruction. Another view is that truth is subjective and knowledge is something that is actively constructed through experience. Is it possible that both ideas about truth can co-exist; and, other conceptions of truth may have merit, as well? It may be useful to introduce a theory of knowledge to frame this discussion, if we can accept the notion that knowledge acquisition is a dimension of learning.

Phenomenology. One particular school of thought finds a nice balance between the objective and the subjective. Some brands of phenomenology posit that a primordial existence can be discovered (Hackerbarth, 1996c); yet, our knowledge of it is filtered through our perceptual processes (Hackerbarth, 1996a). Accordingly, knowledge emerges as we reflect upon our actions – slowing down our thinking processes – and “listen” to ourselves. Knowledge becomes rooted in perceptual experiences and it becomes meaningful through reflection.

Phenomenology asserts that there are essential features of the world called essences, which can be presented to the mind, in their entirety, through single mental acts of intuition (Honderich, 1995). On the other hand, when perception occurs from a given point of view, only certain aspects can be perceived. Therefore, according to phenomenology, people can acquire direct knowledge of essences (universal properties) and indirect knowledge through aspects (Honderich). Phenomenology posits the existence of a knowable universe; yet, knowledge emerges through reflection on essences and their connections. Herein lies the connection

between the objective and the subjective because there is a knowable reality, as well as mental acts, which may or may not exist in reality.

Phenomenological method. Phenomenology can be interpreted as a theory of knowledge and as a method, based upon reflection of mental activity. Reflection involves an activity known as eidetic reduction whereby attention is shifted from perceptual experiences to abstract properties (essences). This process brings essences to the surface and allows connections to be made; thus, revealing universal truths. Generally, the phenomenological method requires a willingness to jettison prejudice and leave theoretical speculation behind (Honderich, 1995) – to study things “as they are.” This requires “bracketing of the objective world” in order to discover what one’s own perceptions disclose. By suspending judgement, this approach provides insight into one’s own point of view, along with a method for evaluating the consistency and coherence of those beliefs.

Thus far, brief definitions of philosophy and learning have been presented followed by a summary of phenomenology as a theory of knowledge and as a method of inquiry. Based upon the assumption that *knowing* is an aspect of *learning*, these topics were introduced to shed light upon the Meaning of Learning (MoL). In addition, phenomenology provides a foundation for discussing confluent education (Hackbarth, 1996a; 1997, March), which may serve as a model for explaining how learning can transcend traditional settings and become more of a lived reality.

Confluent Education as a Metaphor

Hackbarth (1996a; 1997, March) described the type of learning that occurs through confluent education, which is intended to produce a sense of wholeness in people and society. Confluent education emerged in the 1960s and 1970s as a “flowing together” of the cognitive

and affective domains but it evolved into an integration of various dimensions of learning (Hackbarth, 1996a). Accordingly, the concept of confluent education could become a model for a wider meaning of learning. From a phenomenological perspective, confluent education allows us to experience our own perceptions with the understanding that they are not arbitrary, but grounded in a knowable universe. Thus, learning would occur as we reflect upon our perceptual experiences.

Confluent education, from a phenomenological perspective, focuses on the skills of inquiry and reflection. A key feature of this type of learning is immersion in discipline-based inquiry, which Hackbarth (1996a; 1996b) relates to the notion of situated learning and/or cognitive apprenticeship. The procedures of inquiry in authentic environments, along with reflective practice, are at the core of this approach. Learning occurs through reflection upon experiences that are unique to a given discipline. Learning can be enhanced by presenting multiple perspectives within a discipline (Cognition and Technology Group at Vanderbilt, 1990), integrating knowledge between disciplines or interdisciplinary learning (Hackbarth, 1996b), and, utilizing transdisciplinary modes of inquiry (Nicolescu, 1999, April; Visser, 1999, April). Further, the post-modern concept of “multivocality” (Landow as cited in Hlynka, 1996), or multiple voices, is echoed in ever-evolving approaches to construct knowledge with people of all genders, races and social classes (Anderson & Damarin, 1996). Hackbarth found support in the work of George Kneller (1984; 1994), who explicated the importance of dispositioning young people for a type of learning that is grounded in inquiry and reflection. Kneller (1994) asserted that learning occurs best through the senses – especially in the early grades – and he discussed the application of “prereflective concepts,” which are dispositions to think and act that are established in early childhood. Confluent education, from a phenomenological perspective,

offers several insights that may shed light upon our ideas about human learning. It suggests that there are distinct parts of the learning ecology that can be influenced to produce a wider meaning of learning, extending far beyond traditional classroom settings. For example, Kneller (1994) posited that “schools must foster meditative thinking as an end in itself” (p. 142). This approach has far-reaching implications for the learning ecology including parenting, family interaction, teacher preparation, curriculum design; and, emerging models of leadership in our global economy to name but a few.

Reclaiming the magic of learning. A toddler’s first steps. Discovering the rules of tic tac toe for the first time. Riding a bike. Shakespeare becomes meaningful. Building an Access database. Sending your first email message at the age of 67 years. As we explore the implications for philosophy and the learning ecology, confluent education can also serve to remind us that the affective domain offers so much more than just motivation to learn. People are “programmed” to learn in different ways and learning occurs in so many varieties. Gardner’s (1993) theory of multiple intelligences may only scratch the surface of human learning; yet, throughout the lifespan, the thrill of learning prevails upon us to capture this magic as we search for its meaning. The integration of cognitive and affective dimensions of learning is the hallmark of confluent education, which adds value as a potential model for a broadened view of learning.

Conclusions

The learning ecology is a vast and intricate network of systems. A change in one part of this ecology affects all of the others. So, the question remains, how can learning transcend

traditional instructional contexts and become more of an integrated, lived reality? Perhaps we would receive the greatest point of leverage if we were to focus on schooling.

From a phenomenological perspective, Hackbarth (1996a) discusses various ways in which a spirit of adventure can be fostered in the schools. For our students, the meaning of learning may be understood to be "... reflection upon that immediate experience where their own intentions are actualized in their inquiry, questioning, and pursuit of knowledge..." (p. 38). Hackbarth offers several recommendations to help students explore the world, as it is embodied in the schools, "... in the same spirit as they spontaneously expand the horizons of their daily lives." (p. 38). Guided inquiry in authentic environments (or utilizing discipline-based methods) might serve to realize this vision; however, teachers would be challenged to "raise the bar," as well. The following suggestions are offered for educators (or any adults):

- Meditate upon the nature of knowledge, how it evolves, and of what value it is to learn.
- Study the methods actually used to gain new knowledge and the criteria by which evidence and claims to truth are assessed in each subject area.
- Design, implement, assess, and revise inquiry activities that their students are capable of engaging in fruitfully.
- Encourage students' creative expression in the pursuit of personally significant knowledge that enhances efficacy within their daily lives.
- Model the quest for knowledge in the service of humanity (p. 39).

While this seems like a tall order, it is well within reach. In a follow-up article, thirty years after his initial thoughts about a philosophy of instructional technology, Ely (1999) suggested that "if there is any new dimension to the philosophy held by many professionals in the field it is change

itself – the readiness to consider, test and adopt new procedures and processes in the goal of obtaining more efficient and effective learning.”

My goal for this paper was to build upon our knowledge about learning and illustrate the potential role that philosophical inquiry can play in creating a broader meaning of learning. To accomplish this, phenomenology was introduced at a conceptual level. Then, confluent education was presented as a potential model for guiding students in their exploration of the world, as they live their lives inside and outside of school settings. Then, a few challenges were offered. These challenges were not limited to just educators because they appear to be good strategies for parents and community leaders as well; each playing an important role in the learning ecology. Since posing questions is the major task of philosophy, I'd like to conclude this paper with a question: If it takes an entire village to raise a child, what will it take to raise a parent?

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