

# The Deeper Layers of Learning

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**Abstract:** *The literature on adult education stresses often a shift from traditional reproductive learning towards communicative learning. This paper explores a further shift in late modernity towards ideosyncratic, aesthetic learning. Is there such a shift? If so, why? And what is it exactly? How would facilitation look like?*

At the surface, learning seems to be a clear concept. It seems to assume a body of rather objective, secure knowledge and learning itself is the acquisition of such knowledge. I shall refer to that sort of learning as *reproductive learning*. A more complex and dynamic situation grows where the existing body of knowledge raises questions, controversies. Then it comes to *communicative learning*, the sharing and construction with others of knowledge. But communicative learning itself thrives on and supports in individuals *ideosyncratic learning*, the quest for the most personal expression of the most personal ideas, intuitions, feelings. Ideosyncratic learning is the carrier of the radical individualization and aesthetization of the late modern world. and stresses autonomy, creativity, and self-realization.

## Theoretical Exploration

The hypothesis above is rather general. What I intend to do is to stuff the hypothesis with concepts from different types of learning theories. My paper is essentially just a conceptual exercise, not a proof that the theory is correct. To avoid eclecticism, I start with rather broad learning theories and then detail these theories with concepts of learning theories of a more limited scope. To be more precise, I start with socialization theory, then accentuate my analysis by applying concepts from the epistemology of learning and move from there to the theory on cognitive learning and subsequently to the theory on motivation and affective learning. Finally I shall touch the theory on facilitation of learning. Although sometimes I leave this rigid structure and jump a little bit back and forth.

## Institutionalized Individualization

I am referring in my hypothesis mainly to everyday learning. So you may call this socialization theory. Learning at schools and for instance in corporate training is just a small part of it. In late modernity such everyday learning is embedded in broader processes of globalization, localization and individualization. The process as a whole can be characterized as *institutionalized individualization* (Beck, cited in Giddens, 1998, p. 36). Just to sketch the framework of my argument, I shall demonstrate these developments for three central examples, respectively for the domains of economics, politics and culture.

Globalization in the domain of economics leads to an intensified competition and an increase in the scale of corporations that leads paradoxically to an internal structure that is more decentralized and encourages communicative learning through forms of *collaborative management* at the workplace. At the same time corporations encourage ideosyncratic learning through a greater autonomy and flexibility of their workers.

Globalization in the domain of politics leads to horizontal global political structures, an increasing complicated network of all sorts of new institutions, treaties and regulations. At the same time the traditional hierarchical national political structures decentralize and are partly broken down in public-private partnerships, involving citizens in these forms of communicative learning through all sort of new *participatory systems* (Wildemeersch a.o., 1998). Horizontalization leads also to ideosyncratic learning because it replaces the role of ideologies by personal interests and personal commitments. This development has been described in the literature as a shift towards life politics (Giddens,

1991, pp. 209-231) and “personalized politics” (Lichterman, 1996).

Globalization in the domain of culture refers to the growing impact of mass culture facilitating communicative learning through modeling *life styles* as quasi-communities, that replace traditional communities such as the neighborhood and the family, and leads to ideosyncratic learning in fostering an aesthetically expressive individualism (Bellah, 1985; Maffesoli, 1996)

### **Constructivism and Pragmatism**

Why is this? Why does globalization leads to localized communicative learning and towards individualized ideosyncratic learning? It has often been said, that it is so because globalization makes the knowledge about the world more complex, dynamic, fragmented. But that is a rather general remark. It seems to me that there are at least three slightly different developments:

- Sometimes indeed the world itself becomes more complex. For instance the multinational corporation is an organizational and technical more complex environment that makes learning about it also more complicated.
- Sometimes the world itself is not necessarily more complicated, but there is just more fragmented information. For instance, mass communication gives adults an overload of information about political questions such as pollution, war and poverty, but we lack now authoritative narratives that structures this information for us (Lyotard, 1979).
- Finally, modernization seems to foster *performative learning*. Knowledge is often organized in constructions about how the world is, but we have to deconstruct and reconstruct knowledge in action-oriented constructions that helps us to solve concrete and situated problems. (Dewey, 1938; Usher, Bryant & Johnston, 1997, pp.1-27)

In terms of the epistemology of learning there is shift from objectivism to constructivism towards pragmatism. Constructivism is still an umbrella for quite different types of theory ranging from the Russian learning psychology (Vygotski, 1978) towards situative learning (Wenger, 1998). See for an excellent synthesis Driscoll (1994, pp. 359-373). Pragmatism refers to the classical theory of experiential learning as learning by doing (Dewey, 1938; Lewin, 1935).

### **Divergence and Convergence**

Before I move on, let me warn you not to make the fashionable mistake to see reproductive learning as an obsolete phenomenon just because new forms of learning emerge. There is still a lot of reproductive learning and partly that is still unavoidable as a way to introduce children and adults to complicated knowledge constructions. Communicative learning is often not a replacement but an elaboration of such reproductive learning. Communicative learning, as can be observed in for instance collaborative management, horizontal politics and negotiated family relations, are not just forms of social construction of knowledge, but processes of deconstruction and reconstruction.

This process can be highlighted in more detail by applying to communicative learning the distinction between divergent and convergent thinking. In development and learning theory this has been often described as the dual process of assimilation and accommodation (Piaget, 1952; Kolb, 1984). My reasoning below rests in particular on the description of divergent and convergent thinking in task-oriented groups by Johnson & Johnson (2000, pp. 273-375) who refer to divergent and convergent thinking as differentiation and integration of positions.

Divergent thinking in general is the competence to assimilate a rich variety of facts and arguments. For instance, within the framework of reproductive learning it means the assimilation of such a rich variety of facts and arguments through structuring them in a pre-determined perspective. Communicative learning conversely is based on the juxtaposition and discussion of different perspectives. Communication results, at its best, in more ideas, insights and strategies that no member had previously thought of, and in communication incorrect constructions are more likely to be recognized and rejected (Johnson & Johnson, 2000, pp. 277-279).

Convergent thinking is the counterpart of divergent thinking. It is the competence to accommodate different and paradoxical facts in a new coherent framework. In communicative learning, convergent thinking is crucial in building consensus. The phenomenon of *group polarization* (Meyers & Lamm, 1976) demonstrates that groups can develop a consensus that is a qualitative shift from the earlier individual perspectives, a shift that can be more risky or more cautious than the earlier

individual perspectives. Ideally, each consensus is temporary, because it has to be tested again and again when new insights and critiques come to the fore.

### **Learning Climate**

We have to realize that these are only potential features of communication. It does not always materialize. Because at the same time there is a tendency in communication to oppress critical thinking. This phenomenon has been described in the literature as *groupthink* (Janis, 1982). Such an oppression of critical thinking in groups can be caused by a range of factors. I just mention two important factors. Firstly, a directive leadership that doesn't allow open and critical group discussions. Secondly a quite common fear in group members to damage the cohesion of the group by making critical remarks. Groupthink limits divergent thinking by setting limits on the sort and amount of facts, arguments, perspectives that are allowed in the discussion. In doing so it replaces the great narratives of earlier times by the "small narrative" of the group and produces so its own form of reproductive learning.

A comparable phenomenon can be distracted from motivation theory. Communication and more general the presence of others seems to stimulate our thinking and learning. Deeper down, theoretically the facts are not that simple. In particular, the question is what could be a good mix of competition and cooperation. Competition seems to work better with simple tasks. But when tasks become more complicated, competition raises feelings of anxiety and insecurity, which in turn increases the likelihood that the dominant or most probable response will occur (Johnson & Johnson, 2000, pp. 279-280). So again, communication is a potential feature that does not always materialize; it depends on the extent of openness and cooperation in communication.

Concluding, communicative learning only materializes under the condition of the facilitation of critical thinking and an open learning climate.

### **Community and Identity**

But there is something wrong with communicative learning. It is just as reproductive learning the intrusion of the society in individuals. Or even worse, communicative learning is a more sophisticated intrusion of society in individuals than

reproductive learning was/is (Foucault, 1980). But just because society intrudes deeper in the individual, it therefore triggers of also an opposite tendency. While society introduces forms of communicative learning as a more sophisticated strategy to get grip on individuals, these individuals feel threatened and develop personal learning strategies to hold a grip on their own life.

Equally interesting is the form that these learning activities takes, in order to hold grip on the own life. Whether it is the domain of culture, politics or culture people strive for making a difference, to be special, stressing their personal uniqueness. That's why I started to call it ideosyncratic learning. Of course, ideosyncratic learning leads most of the time only to a relative uniqueness. Most people want both at the same time, to belong to a community and to be special, to have an own identity (Bakan cited in Kegan, 1994, p. 217)

Ideosyncratic learning could be called, equally correct, aesthetical learning, because, as we will see below, ideosyncratic learning is not just cognitive learning, in the sense of learning through rational reasoning, but is based in affective learning, in the sense of learning through expression of highly personal intuitions, feelings, tastes.

### **Creativity**

Above I described communicative learning as a combination of divergent and convergent thinking. In this context ideosyncratic learning can be defined as the development of a competence for convergent thinking and more precisely as *creativity* (i.e., the competence to develop innovative knowledge constructions). Communicative learning itself stimulates such creative, ideosyncratic learning in individual participants.

To illustrate this we have to go back for a moment to communicative learning. Divergent thinking in communication is a characteristic of communication itself, but convergent thinking at the contrary is much more a uniquely individual process. Communication as divergent thinking can become just chaos if there are no participants that offer ways to converge this information. But communication not only thrives on such convergent thinking of individual participants, it also stimulates it. Ultimately communication is just a trigger, a strong incentive for the development of convergent thinking in individuals. But even when you accept

that under ideal conditions communicative learning is superior to the convergent learning of the individuals participating in it, that does not mean that learning stops when a consensus has been reached in communicative learning. Both the arguments generated in communication and the possible consensus reached in any of these communications, enter the individual thinking as new material that must be accommodated by these individuals, in order to hold grip on their own thinking.

### **Self-realization**

But how do you facilitate creativity in individuals? What is it exactly? How can people get a better grip on differentiated, fragmented knowledge? How do people choose and mix different constructions of knowledge, when juxtaposed? Most authors refer to it as something that goes beyond, or better underlies, rational thinking. For instance, philosophers refer to it as a shift from instrumental and normative towards aesthetical judgments (Habermas, 1981, pp. 25-71; Früchtel, 1996). Wenger (1998, pp. 51-71) refers to it as the experience of meaning. Crossan, Lane, & White (1999) in the discussion of learning organizations, refer to it as a unique individual process based on intuition. Bellah a.o. (1985, pp. 333-334), in their definition of expressive individualism, refer to it as a unique core of feeling and intuition. For me, it is also related to courage and endurance. Courage to be critical. Endurance in the wrestling with facts and arguments.

From humanistic learning psychology (Rogers, 1969) we may learn that facilitation of such aesthetical and affective learning processes should be rather non-directive. It also seems to be something that is not easily to do in a group; maybe this explains why we see now, whether embedded in communicative learning or not, in facilitation of adult learning the rise of individual mentoring, counseling, coaching of learning. It also takes probably often rather informal forms, in asides of the formal learning process. Finally the development of creativity is not a quick fix, these learning processes reach their zenith often only in mid-life and probably less than 50 % of the adults will reach that point ever (Kegan, 1994, pp. 185-197).

### **Quasi-idiosyncrasy**

I could easily have stopped here, but there is something weird with the way I used the concepts of communicative learning, ideosyncratic learning, aesthetical learning, creativity, meaning, etc., compared to the rather common way of using this sort of concepts in late modern common language. I used the concepts of communicative and ideosyncratic learning as the deeper layers of learning that apply to all domains of learning, such as economics, politics and culture. In late modern language there is a tendency to limit the use of the concepts of community and in particular idiosyncrasy to the domain of culture and, even more interesting, to understand also just reproductive learning in the domain of culture in terms of communicative and ideosyncratic learning.

The reason of this different use of the concepts of community and idiosyncrasy seems to be the ongoing rationalization of the domains of economics and politics. Although a lot of people see possibilities to develop an creative and satisfying role in the domain of economics, for many other people work is, despite the philosophy of human resources development, largely still an alienating experience, in the sense that it doesn't lead to sustained human relations and durable purposes (Sennett, 1998). Likewise politics, political participation and voluntary work is for some people still a way to express social commitment, but for many people politics became just too rationalized and bureaucratized and that makes it difficult for many of us to experience participation in it as meaningful and as an expression of our deepest feelings and intuitions. Therefore the search for community and identity in the domain of culture becomes for many people an alternative way to react on the intrusion of society in the individual, it becomes a different way to protect and develop an own identity. The alienation of rational forms of thinking leads to a new romanticism.

That makes it understandable that in late modernity the expression of community has been often sought in the domain of mass culture, that offers a broad range of life-styles as *quasi-communities* (Maffesoli (1996, pp. 1-67). Different of the traditional communities, based on spatial closeness, these lifestyles as the new communities are based on closeness in style, taste. An individual person can express his or her personal identity by a

specific pattern of conspicuous consumption, leading to *quasi-idiosyncrasy*.

Although much of this is just reproductive learning, following role models as developed and disseminated in mass culture, there is of course, also in this domain, a stimulus for in-depth learning. Communicative learning starts for instance where people follow art classes, become theater players, form music groups, sport in amateur competition. And in turn this supports the learning of real idiosyncrasy in developing a personal style in individuals, who sometimes become professionals and role models themselves.

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