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Defence and resistance towards Transformative Learning

(Adult learning theory)

This paper deals with non-learning – i.e. all kinds of not learning, insufficient learning, distorted learning, unintended learning and the like – in general and specifically in relation to Transformative Learning. It identifies three main types of non-learning defined as mislearning, learning defence, and learning resistance, relating mainly to the cognitive, the emotional, and the social/societal dimension, respectively. Each of these types of non-learning is considered, and, in particular, two kinds of learning defence, described as ‘everyday consciousness’ and ‘identity defence’ are discussed, as empirical studies have shown that they are prevalent in adult education today. Finally, the terms ‘habits of expectations’ (Mezirow) and ‘sets of assumptions’ (Brookfield) are taken up as the key expressions of non-learning in TL theory, and it is concluded that TL theory could profit from dealing more specifically with the emotional and social dimensions of learning and non-learning.

Key Words: Non-learning, learning defence, learning resistance.

Learning theory is obviously primarily about what happens when somebody learns something. But seen from the point of view of education and teaching this is certainly not always the case, and it should be just as important to deal with what happens when somebody in a learning situation does not learn anything or learns something that is insufficient or quite different from what is intended.

Therefore, in my recent book “The Three Dimensions of Learning” (Illeris 2002) – which is presented in another paper at this conference – I have also taken up the question of what happens “when intended learning does not occur”. And empirically, together with some of my colleagues I have worked intensively with this question in connection with a three-year study of adult education from the perspective of the learners, dealing with various types of education for low-skilled or unemployed adults in Denmark (Illeris 2003).

Lifelong learning and ambivalence

The results of this project were in some ways surprising, not to say shocking. They revealed that the great majority of participants had a most ambivalent attitude to the courses they were attending. They definitely wanted to learn something that could improve their chances on the labour market, but at the same time they strongly wished that such learning was not necessary, i.e. that they could manage without.

After the project was completed, I received clear evidence that this is not uniquely the situation in Denmark. In many economically developed countries the adult education situation has changed dramatically during the last few years. On the one hand, participation in adult education has increased rapidly. On the other hand, people are today not participating in greater numbers because they really want to, but because they directly or indirectly are forced to do so to avoid being financially and socially marginalized.

Our study also showed that this ambivalence strongly marked the learning taking place, the learners using a range of more or less unconscious strategies to avoid involving themselves too much and being confronted with the insufficiency of their qualifications and humiliated in other ways.

I shall not here go into details about all of this, but simply use it as a background for discussing different ways of non-learning in relation to the concept of transformative learning – as the learners in our project typically were in such situations where TL could, and for many teachers also should, have been the way out of their profound personal and social problems.

Three main types of learning obstacles

There may, of course, be an unlimited number of individual and situational reasons for non-learning (which I use as a general and overall term for all kinds of not learning, insufficient learning, distorted learning, unintended learning and the like). In order to establish some kind of structure in the field, I shall take my point of departure in the three learning dimensions that I set up and substantiate in my book: the cognitive, the emotional and the social dimension. However, it must be stressed that this is only a point of departure. It is one of the core understandings in the book that all learning includes each of the three dimensions. When it comes to non-learning, it is not about processes that are fulfilled, but about processes that are blocked or derailed, partially or totally. So, in this case, the dimensions can be used to separate different kinds of non-learning in relation to the types of obstacles and the dimension in which they are mainly rooted. But at the same time it must be acknowledged that they more or less affect all the dimensions of the process, that different kinds of mental obstacles often work together, and that it is only analytically that the main kinds of reasons for non-learning can be kept apart.

In the cognitive dimension obstacles to intended learning will be about what is generally seen as the learning content, which is not acquired, grasped or taken in as intended. In general I use the term *mislearning*, implying that for some reason the content, impulse or message does not come through correctly, resulting in erroneous learning or non-learning. The reasons for this may be, for instance, a lack of involvement or concentration, a lack of necessary prior learning to understand the message, or it may be due to inadequate communication or teaching. Behind such reasons there may again be other and mentally or socially more deeply rooted causes. But when it is a case of more or less pure mislearning, the main consequences are in the cognitive dimension: The learner does not acquire what he or she wants or is supposed to learn.

However, the obstacles to learning may also be rooted mainly in the emotional dimension. If so it will typically be a case of some kind of mental *defence*. Freud has described such defence mechanisms as personal inhibitions, such as for instance repression of impulses that are personally unbearable and therefore must be banished to the unconscious domain from where they can influence the experience and behaviour of the learner in all sorts of uncontrolled ways.

In our late modern society these types of personal defence mechanism have certainly not disappeared; we all have such barriers. But they seem – at least in the educational field – to have been surpassed by two other, more general and societally rooted types.

The one of these we are all subject to, and we must be so to maintain our mental balance. It is a defence against the overwhelming number and complexity of impulses and influences that everybody is exposed to today. Nobody is able to take all this in – to try to do so would lead directly into insanity, and therefore we have all of necessity built up a semi-automatic defence system – described by the German social psychologist Thomas Leithäuser (1976) as our *everyday consciousness* – that either rejects or distorts the majority of impulses, preferably of course those

that we dislike or are less interested in, but often also those that we might profit from but do not immediately categorize as worth dealing with.

The other “new” type of defence mechanism, which we have met very often in our empirical studies referred to above, we have called *identity defence*. This is the very strong mental defence that we are all inclined to mobilize if we get into a situation in which we feel our identity threatened – and this is exactly what today happens to a lot of people who for some reason, in which they may have no part at all, must accept fundamental changes in their lives and change themselves accordingly. For instance, one may have worked fully satisfactorily for twenty years in a bank, but one day the bank is closed and no other job in which one’s qualifications are serviceable is available. In adult education today a lot of people who are to be retrained have more trouble with the change of identity required than with the acquisition of the knowledge and skills in question. The situation involves them feeling degraded and humiliated as respectable adults and members of society, which is hard to bear, and this provokes a defence that while certainly inadequate is personally and mentally necessary.

Finally, the non-learning may be rooted in the social and societal dimension. In this case it is typically a matter of mental *resistance*, which may often be combined with and difficult to separate from defence, but in its essence is a very different function. Because whereas defence is something that is there in advance of an event that might result in learning, resistance is active non-acceptance and objection that can be very inappropriate and annoying in an educational setting, but nevertheless constitutes symptoms of strong personal forces and engagement. Therefore resistance has the potential of leading to very important learning processes, albeit often of other kinds than what the message or intention has been. Both for the individual and for our common culture and society the most important steps forward are often released when someone resists accepting the usual way of doing and understanding something.

Learning problems as reflected in TL theory

When working with the perspectives of TL, whether it be in practice or in theory, questions about learning obstacles, inhibitions and blockings will, of course, sooner or later crop up. TL is a very demanding process for the learner, and there must be strong subjective reasons for involving oneself in this type of learning. Correspondingly, it is psychologically natural to find ways to avoid such demanding learning if there is no strong subjective motivation to drive it.

In TL theory as described by Jack Mezirow (1991), the key concept to characterize such obstacles, inhibitions and blockings is “habits of expectations”. Similarly, Stephen Brookfield (1987) employs the concept of “sets of assumptions”. Both of these concepts immediately refer to the cognitive dimension of learning, as they have to do with the learning content. But the term “expectations” in particular simultaneously suggests that there is an emotional aspect involved.

At the same time, both concepts seem to refer to the personal background of the learner and miss the very strong social and societal indications which, as I have come to see it, are at least as important today.

I am not in doubt that the concepts of Mezirow and Brookfield have their background in the kind of learning obstacles that have typically been at stake in the learning settings in which TL has been practised and developed. But today adult education is no more dominated by people who are eager to learn and educate themselves and have voluntarily enrolled in courses to meet their desires, curiosity and interests.

On the contrary, the majority of participants have been pressed into adult education, and they are very ambivalent. If the emancipating and empowering potentials of adult education are to be maintained it is crucial that the “positive” side of their ambivalence is consciously supported by

teachers and mentors. To do so, the first step is to realize the situation as these participants experience it, even though this to some extent changes the role of the adult educator in the direction of that of a social worker.

With respect to the issue of transformative learning, my attempt to relate it to a more general learning theory in the case of non-learning or distorted learning leads me to the conclusion that the mainly cognitive approach of TL should be supplemented by an interest in the emotional and social dimensions in order to fully capture the background, character, functions and results of what is referred to as habits of expectations and sets of assumptions, thereby also establishing a more adequate basis for working with the obstacles, inhibitions and blockings at stake.

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