Animating Learning: New Conceptions of the Role of the Person Who Works with Learners

David Boud
University of Technology, Sydney, Australia

Nod Miller
University of East London, UK

Recommended Citation

Animating Learning: New Conceptions of the Role of the Person Who Works with Learners

David Boud
University of Technology
Sydney, Australia

Nod Miller
University of East London
UK

Abstract: This paper focuses on the role of the person who works with others to foster their learning and describes our struggle to make sense of this role. We identify a perspective termed animation, consider its features and discuss issues of context, identity and relationships between animators and learners.

Introduction

Our purpose here is to outline ideas concerning the activity and location of the person who works with others to promote their learning from experience. We start by reviewing the analysis which underpinned *Working with Experience: animating learning* (Boud and Miller 1996), in which the concept of animation was developed. We continue with a discussion of the progress of our subsequent ideas about animation. Our main focus is on the importance of viewing animation as a perspective on promoting learning rather than as a role which teachers or facilitators might adopt

Alternative traditions in fostering learning

The starting point for our analysis was the observation that considerably more attention had been paid in adult education to the learner than to the teacher. We noted that a learner-centred standpoint was characteristic of much of the discourse of the field, and reviewed literature which focused on the role of the person who works with learners. Freire's 'teacher' (1972), Tough's 'ideal helper' (1979) and the 'facilitator' described by both Brookfield (1986) and Heron (1989) represented some conceptions of how this person could be viewed. We saw these conceptions as having developed out of contrasting and often competing educational and social scientific traditions which provided theoretical frameworks for understanding relationships and processes in adult education. However, we felt that none of these traditions sufficiently addressed the complexities of the role of a person who promotes the learning of others in current adult education practice.

We identified two principal traditions which have been important in the development of theories of learning from experience and as having often been in conflict with one another. The first of these is the tradition of human relations training, counselling and adult learning which had its foundation in humanistic psychology and which developed particularly strongly in North America. In recent years this has become the dominant paradigm in relation to learning from experience in formal settings. Concepts such as self-directed and lifelong learning and an emphasis on the individual learner have characterised the discourse of this tradition. The second tradition developed in the context of collective social movements and political action. It focused more on groups than on individuals. It drew on continental European thought, such as that found in critical social theory, and on the values and practices of

participatory action research which developed in third world countries as well as on newer currents of feminism and anti-racism. Social structural features of experience and constructs such as power and oppression featured more strongly in this tradition than the psychological or the personal.

Until recently, much educational literature and practice has reflected divisions along these lines. Inappropriate polarities between the individual and the group, the psychological and the sociological and learning and control were emphasised at the expense of a deeper synthesis. Insights from one tradition were often ignored or dismissed by those in the other. This led to fruitless debates between protagonists and the impoverishment of practice. We intended our work to contribute to a coming together of these traditions, to bring insights from each to inform the theory and practice of adult education.

Developing the Notion of Animation

In *Working with Experience* we argued that a new notion of 'animation', which drew on features of each of the competing traditions, was required to capture the range of demands which are placed on those who foster the learning of others. We were concerned to establish ways of thinking about the role of the animator in learning, and to elaborate key elements of this role. We drew on our own experience of organising and promoting learning in a variety of contexts and our roles in national organisations concerned with adult and experiential learning and group relations training. We were also influenced by conversations and collaborations with other educators and writers who contributed essays to the book and by our reading of the literature on adult learning and social action.

In our earlier work we had been concerned to develop models of the process of learning from experience to focus attention on the key factors which could enable learners and those who promoted learning to examine their own practices. We saw the development of a model of animation as a way of connecting this work on learning and experience with consideration of the new roles demanded of teachers, trainers and facilitators in a post-modern world.

We referred to the process of working with the experience of others as 'animation', and to the person who works to promote others' learning as an 'animator'. We chose these terms as having connotations outside the learning context; the verb 'to animate' may be seen as implying actions such as to give life to, to quicken, to vivify, to enliven, to inspire, to encourage, to activate or to put in motion. These connotations fitted well with the concept we were attempting to articulate. We saw animators acting with learners, in situations where learning is an aspect of what is occurring, to assist them to work with their experience. Animators may operate within or on behalf of educational institutions, but, increasingly, fostering learning is not an activity bounded in this way. We agreed that animation entailed acknowledging that the notion of experience was not one which should be taken for granted, that present experience was framed by the past experience and social and cultural contexts of the learner and that it was influenced by other participants in the learning event. While instruction might be an aspect of animation in some situations, we did not see it as a necessary aspect.

We saw the main emphases in animation as being on learners and their needs and interests, and on the socio-cultural contexts which frame learning, create opportunities for learning and impose constraints which can block learning. We suggested that in order to create a useful model of animation it was necessary to move beyond the dualities which characterised much of the discourse of teaching and learning. Animation might be viewed simultaneously as an individual and collective enterprise, involving mind and body, taking account of cognitive and affective elements in learning, and situated within the spheres of the personal, the cultural and the political. Animation was defined as a highly contextualised activity in which account must be taken of the ways in which learners (and animators) interact with, are influenced by, and in turn influence the learning context. While some aspects of animation might appear to have the character of generic skills, it would be prudent to assume that they are always related to a particular context or set of circumstances. The key elements which the theory of animation aimed to address were:

• relationships between animators and learners;

• the significance of feelings and emotions;

• context and discourse;

• creating micro-cultures;

• power and oppression;

• working with difference.

Further Developments in Animation

Following the publication of *Working with Experience*, we tested our ideas in different settings and continued conversations with a number of the contributors to the book (Miller, Boud *et al* 1997). Some of the reactions to the concept of animation were predictable; greater elaboration of many aspects of our approach was sought. But other responses were unexpected. For example, we were surprised by the strength of attachment that some of our colleagues had to the notion of the teacher, and their desire to incorporate features we had identified with animation into their conception of teaching. We also began to realise that many of our students were keen to appropriate animation as part of a new role, or perhaps a new label they wished to adopt. This involved treating animation as a functional set of activities or practices which could be learned in an unproblematic way. We were troubled by such a view which appeared to value certainty and control over understanding, responsiveness and respect for diversity.

In bringing together the various perspectives represented in the book we had envisaged that it might be possible to create a new, more encompassing notion of the animator as a person who worked with the experience of learners in ways sensitive to the cultural, political and power dimensions of the context in which learning was taking place. While it was easy to identify issues to which animators needed to pay attention, it became increasingly clear that animation should not be regarded as a new set of practices which people could be trained to perform. It was not a matter of synthesising traditions and establishing a more lengthy set of topics which animators, as distinct from teachers or facilitators, might need to address. The development of a new hybrid role, for example, can be a way of avoiding critical appraisal of whether fostering learning is usefully seen in terms of social roles rather than other concerns.

As our thinking developed, animation became less of a label for particular commitments and associated practices, more of a perspective or conception (similar, for example, to conceptions of learning as discussed by Marton, Hounsell and Entwistle 1996). In our present thinking animation is more akin to a conception of educational practice than to a new role. It is not a label for a new social role but a way of viewing the role of the other in fostering learning; it would not, for example, replace 'teacher' or 'facilitator'.

One of our intentions was to draw attention to the limitations of the perspectives embedded in particular roles such as those of teacher or facilitator and to focus on key issues and dynamics which underpin the multiple roles involved in helping others to learn. It is not appropriate, nor even possible, to delineate specific features of the role of animator as the practical activities which need to be deployed will vary considerably from context to context and with different intentions of learners. However, we believe that there are key concerns to be identified and elaborated. Actions resulting from their consideration will manifest in a very wide range of animator practices, many of which may appear similar to actions of teachers or facilitators. These key concerns can be summarised under the headings of context, identity and relationships.

Context. Context refers to the social, cultural, political, economic and technological milieu in which any act of learning occurs. It includes much more than the immediate institutional environment, curriculum or learning task: it encompasses all that impacts on learners and animators and frames their actions. Context defines the range of what it is possible to do and what outcomes are permissible. Context establishes boundaries for ways of thinking and it

creates limits in ways which are not necessarily discernible to those on whom the limits are placed. This is not to say that context fully determines what is possible, but that unless they attend to context and its resulting dynamics animators may inadvertently perpetuate existing patterns which can control and limit learning. Context needs to be problematised, confronted, subverted or accepted if learning is to be promoted (Boud and Walker, 1998).

For example, in the context of a university, structures and processes such as assessment regulations, requirements of examiners and quality assurance mechanisms set limits on the freedom of both learners and animators to engage in or promote self-directed learning. Animators need at least to render these limitations visible to learners and to ensure that all involved in the learning process recognise the power relationships operating within the institution.

Identity. The actions of those who foster the learning of others can be influenced more by the identities they construct for themselves than by anything to do with the learner. Learning is often taken to occur at particular sites and to be defined by those sites (for example, it is often equated with what happens in schools). Teachers' identities are likely to be shaped by the institutional contexts in which they operate, by the academic and professional training they have experienced, by their socialisation into the teaching role, by peer group pressure and by the reward structures of the organisations in which they are employed.

If an animation perspective is adopted then issues of identity for both animators and learners need to be given critical consideration. Identity both constrains and permits different kinds of learning. Approaches to learning through autobiography and other self-reflexive devices which highlight the impact of past experience on current practice, which unpack the way in which people construct themselves and which illuminate diverse and shifting identities may form part of this critical process.

An example of the use of self-reflexive personal narratives for the exploration of changing identities and orientations occurs in a project with which one of us is currently involved (described more fully in Miller, Leung and Kennedy, 1997). Students are encouraged to engage in reflective writing about their experience of using the technologies which form the subject matter of their course as well as its means of delivery in order to unpack and analyse their identities in relation to technology and to engage in active (re)construction of their identities as their skills develop; thus they recognise their movement over time from technophobe to expert computer user. At the same time, animators in the project are engaging in their own autobiographical reflection in order to develop an understanding of their relationships with technology and of the development and limitations of their own expertise.

Relationships, negotiation and consent So much is taken for granted in conventional teacher-learner relationships that it is often difficult to notice the ways in which power operates to constrain and control what learning is possible. The perspective of animation requires that assumptions about the relationships between learners and those who work with them are subject to critical scrutiny and that where necessary new assumptions be negotiated.

Negotiation of relationships is not a straightforward matter. Learners and animators will rarely be in a position to identify their non-trivial needs and goals at an early stage and even more rarely will they be able to articulate them. This means that animators have particular responsibilities to monitor the nature of their relationships with learners. The consent of learners is needed if learning relationships are to be productive, and the negotiation of this consent requires delicate handling, particularly when learners may be unable to conceptualise uncomfortable elements of the experiences to come.

In one of the chapters in *Working with Experience* the sensitive nature of the negotiation necessary here is illustrated in an account of an animator's work with prison inmates serving life sentences for violent crimes. In this example one of the most challenging tasks the animator faced was gaining the consent of learners to confront them with their own actions and their consequences. Overcoming his own fear and gaining the trust of the learners were two aspects of animation practice (see Johnson 1996).

While there are many other concerns which the animation perspective needs to face, the identification of these three as central indicates the shift which we believe needs to take place in thinking about fostering learning. As conventional teacher-learner identities break down and as we recognise the profound effects of context on learning, a renewed emphasis on relationships is needed. This emphasis must be a sophisticated one which acknowledges the

all-pervasive operation of power-knowledge (Usher and Edwards 1994). We need to look again at what is going on in teacher-learner and facilitator-learner relationships to see that the learning which is taking place may be quite different from what the two parties believe at the time to be happening, and that many new possibilities are available.

Conclusions

As we face an increasingly diverse and globalised world, learning can no longer be defined and limited by familiar educational institutions and personnel. There is an explosion of learning desires and needs which cannot be met in conventional ways. This creates a demand for new ways of looking at the process of fostering learning. As we increasingly find ourselves required to 'teach' what we don't know and what it is unrealistic for us to know, we need new ways of thinking about our role. The notion of animation which has been briefly outlined here offers one perspective which incorporates considerations of context, power and shifting identities.

References

Boud, D. and Miller, N. (eds.) (1996), *Working with Experience: Animating Learning.* London: Routledge

Boud, D. and Walker, D. (1998) (in press). Promoting reflection in professional courses: the challenge of context. *Studies in Higher Education*.

Brookfield, S. (1986). *Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. London: Penguin.

Heron, J. (1989). *The Facilitators' Handbook*. London: Kogan Page.

Johnson, B. (1996) 'Feeling the fear' in Boud and Miller (1996).

Marton, F., Hounsell, D. & Entwistle, N. (1996). *The Experience of Learning: Implications for Teaching and Studying in Higher Education*. Second Edition. Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press.

Miller, N. and Boud, D. with Brookfield, S, Brown, J., Harris, J. B., Ireland, T., Mace, J., Stalker, J. and Tisdell, E. (1997). 'From teaching to facilitation to animation: crossing the boundaries between traditions and perspectives in the promotion of learning from experience'. In Armstrong, P., Miller, N. and Zukas, M. (Eds.) *Crossing Borders, Breaking Boundaries: Research in the Education of Adults. Proceedings of the 27th Annual SCUTREA Conference*. London: SCUTREA, 487–495.

Miller, N., Leung, L. and Kennedy, H. (1997). 'Challenging boundaries in adult and higher education through technological innovation'. In Armstrong, P., Miller, N. and Zukas, M. (Eds.) *Crossing Borders, Breaking Boundaries: Research in the Education of Adults. Proceedings of the 27th Annual SCUTREA Conference*. London: SCUTREA, 333–337.

Tough, A. (1979). *The Adult's Learning Projects*. Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. Second Edition.

Usher, R. and Edwards, R. (1994). *Postmodernism and Education: Different Voices, Different Worlds*. London: Routledge.