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# **The Existential Nature of Human Learning: Toward a Philosophical Understanding of Learning**

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**Abstract:** *Human learning occurs within our experience of the wider world. Consequently, it is necessary to understand both the concept of experience and something of the nature of the person who experiences it. This paper explores both seeking to relate them to wider theories of learning, and culminates in a new definition of learning itself.*

Learning is an ambiguous concept that is being used as both process and product, i.e. the processes of human learning, and lifelong learning is replacing the term lifelong education. This paper focuses upon the former. But there are a multitude of different theories of human learning (see Jarvis, Holford and Griffin, 2003) although learning itself is a human phenomenon. Each theory may explain some aspect of human learning but since they differ so widely they are each incomplete. Moreover, each is grounded in an often unwritten, and maybe unacknowledged, philosophy of the human being – even a philosophy of human learning. This latter aspect has been sadly neglected by most of us who have written about learning, with the notable exception of Winch (1998) and, to a lesser extent, by my own *Paradoxes of Learning* (Jarvis, 1992).

While I do not want to discuss in depth this wide variety of theories, reference will be made to some of them in this paper, it is significant that in recent years considerable emphasis has been placed upon experiential, including practice-based and problem-based, learning. This has been for several reasons: as a teaching method it has helped overcome the notorious theory-practice gap (see also Jarvis, 1999); it reflects the tenor of the age and has a long and respectable pedigree in thinkers such as Dewey and Lewin. It was popularised by Kolb in a rather over-simple manner – perhaps it was the simplicity of his cycle and the time at which he wrote that made it popular. Nevertheless, it was Locke and later Kant, among many others, who argued many years earlier that all knowledge comes from personal experience. Surprisingly, however, the concept of experience has been left un-discussed by most of the exponents of experiential learning, which Oakeshott (1933) describes as one of the most difficult concepts in the philosophical vocabulary. Once we begin to examine the problems underlying ‘experience’ we are confronted with yet another perennial philosophical problem – that of the relationship of the body to the mind. In this paper I want to enter briefly into both of these debates and show their relevance to learning theory by demonstrating that once we have embarked upon this enterprise we can see both the strengths and weaknesses of some of the other theories of learning.

## **Part 1 The Nature of Experience**

Among Descartes’ central tenets was the need to prove our own existence by thought, i.e. I think therefore I am. But I know that I exist: I know I am, and I do not need to prove it to myself. Because I am, I think! Marquarrie (1973,p.125) writes:

But what does it mean to say, ‘I am’? ‘I am’ is the same as ‘I exist’; but ‘I exist’, in turn, is equivalent to ‘I-am-in-the-world’, or again ‘I-am-with-others’. So the premise of the argument is not anything so abstract as ‘I think’ or even ‘I am’ if it is understood in some isolated sense. The premise is the immediately rich and complex reality, ‘I-am-with-others-in the world’.

But we also know that we are in the world because we act, as MacMurray (1961,p.17) argued, ‘We know existence by participating in existence’. I am, therefore, I act, but also I act, therefore,

I am. Being, and therefore becoming, lie at the heart of our thinking about learning – but thinking *per se* is but one element in it. Thinking is a function of our existence and not proof of it. Being in the world means that we have to experience it and so it is necessary to understand what experiencing it means. I want to suggest four ways by which we can understand this concept - consciousness, biography, episode and sensation:

*Consciousness – the ability to be able to ‘know’ the world:* Chalmers (1996, p.3) opens his book *The Conscious Mind* thus: ‘Conscious experience is at once the most familiar thing in the world and the most mysterious’. He goes on to argue, quite convincingly, that there are two forms of consciousness – a phenomenological and a psychological. The former is about ‘what is *means*... to feel a certain way’ and the latter, ‘what it means...for it to play an appropriate causal role’ (p.12). Clearly in some of the more recent studies recognising the emotional, educationalists are beginning to recognise the difference between the two. Chalmers suggests some forms of phenomenological experience, such as emotions, sense of self, and pain (pp.8-11); he also indicates some forms of psychological experience, such as awokeness, introspection and knowledge (pp.26-27). Consequently, he offers two definitions of conscious experience:

Phenomenological: the concept of mind as conscious experience and as a mental state as a consciously experienced mental state;

Psychological: the concept of mind as a causal or explanatory basis for behaviour (p.11).

*Biography - the outcome of a lifetime:* Experience is seamless and relates fundamentally to my conscious awareness of the external world throughout my lifetime. Oakeshott (1933, p10) wrote:

...the view that I propose to maintain is that experience is a single whole, within which modifications may be distinguished, but which admits to no final or absolute division; and that experience everywhere, not merely is inseparable from thought, but is itself a form of thought.

The seamlessness is a view shared by other thinkers (Dewey, Schutz, *inter alia*). But for Oakeshott experience is subjective and cognitive. He argued that experiencing is always a ‘world of ideas’. He assumed that experience is entirely cognitive whereas we are suggesting that the person is more complex. When we act upon the external world, we are also thinking and feeling about it – we might know how to do a thing and also have the ability to do it (practical knowledge), but we also usually have feelings about it, which may actually be a significant motivation to act. We also are aware, for instance, that sports people train their bodies and musicians their arms and fingers to act in an almost instinctive manner. Consequently, the body acts, sometimes apparently almost without the mind, or in response to an external stimulus, so that experience is more than just the ideas – it is cognitive, emotive and physical.

*Episode – the moment of contact with the world:* In an episodic experience we have may be a direct encounter with the external world or it may be mediated to us. However, the significant point is that at this moment we become conscious and aware of the external world – which I have called disjuncture – when my biography and my interpretation of the immediate world are not in harmony and I am forced to ask questions – why? how?, and so on. We can experience that world through our senses and interpret the sensations that we are having, which is a primary experience. However, most of our experiences of the external world are mediated: we are told about a phenomenon, we see pictures on the television and we are taught theoretical ideas by teachers although we have not had the opportunity of experiencing these for ourselves – they are secondary experiences. Much of what we learn comes from secondary experience and much of

what we are taught in college or university, often called theory, is also secondary experience – they are the interpreted experiences of others that are transmitted to us, about which we need to be critical. The process of providing secondary experiences is what Knowles called pedagogy and, for many educators, this is insufficient and so they provide primary experiences, through role play, simulation, and so on, in order that the learners experience cognitively, physically and emotionally. It is this provision of primary experiences that has come to be known as experiential teaching and learning. Experiential learning, in this limited sense, is also existential but all existential learning would not be considered experiential.

*Sensation – the ability to be able to ‘sense’ the world:* We all have our basic senses from which we are able to learn about the world: hearing; seeing; smelling; tasting; touching and feeling. In the final category, or two categories, we can begin to see the problem that we had with the phenomenological and the psychological since touching and feeling are profoundly different. But the first five also give rise to an interesting issue, e.g. when we hear something it sets off sensations in the ear that are transmitted to the brain – as impulses, but how do these impulses acquire meaning since they have no meaning in themselves for words are arbitrary symbols. The same might be asked of the sensations transmitted by our eyes, our nose, our taste buds and the nerves at our finger tips, and so on. We have to learn them in our childhood, so that our meanings reflect our culture – but we can see immediately that the external world we appear to experience is not the immediate cause of the meaning that we put it – there is a correlation between the two but not a causal relationship. Therefore, our experience of whatever it is, is always socially constructed.

We have now examined four different ways of understanding the concept of experience – each of which is relevant to our understanding of learning. In our relationship with the external world, we are at specific moments conscious, and aware, of it and are recipients of sensations about it which are frequently associated with previous learning experiences which may be cognitive, attitudinal, skills based, belief-based, ethical or new sensations. In our learning these experiences are transformed through cognitive, emotive or behavioural processes and integrated into our biographies. But our understanding of these processes is dependent upon our understanding of the body-mind relationship since the sensations are physical and the biography is mental and also a combination of the psychological and the phenomenological.

## **Part 2 The Mind-Body Relationship**

From the earliest philosophical studies the relationship between the body and the mind has constituted a problem that, although rarely discussed in the literature on human learning, has influenced the way that some scholars have understood it. There is no agreement between scholars about the nature of this relationship and Maslin (2001) suggests five main theories: dualism; mind/brain identity; logical or analytical behaviourism; functionalism; non-reductive monism.

*Dualism:* By rejecting Descartes’ well known dictum, ‘I think, therefore I am’ but we did not thereby reject the classical dualist position which states that the human person is a composite of two completely separate entities: body and mind. However, we will reject the more extreme dualist position that start from the assumption that mind is not dependent upon the body since there are a number of problems with dualism such as the existence of the brain itself since it is hard to claim that an action and a thought about it are separate phenomena. They are con-joint in

some way, and there may be correlation of the meaning in the mind with the activity in the brain rather than a causal relationship. In addition, it is clear that when we act it is our body as well as our mind that performs in unison rather than each act being two distinct elements – the thought and the action. Yet we have already argued that there is some kind of dualism of body and mind when it comes to sensations and experiences, and we will return to this below. In addition, we know that learning is a complex human phenomenon.

*Mind/brain identity:* This is a monist theory that claims that only physical substances exist and that human beings are just part of the material world and, therefore, mental states are identical with physical ones. This raises fundamental problems about the nature of culture and meaning. But, we know, for instance, that when we think brain scans reveal increased neuron activity; Greenfield (1999, p.124) writes:

...there is no magic ingredient for consciousness...the issue is a quantitative one, depending on the degree of recruitment of neurons: the extent of recruitment will determine your consciousness at any one time...

This is a reductionist position but one which points us towards an understanding of learning a little better since it helps us understand how the brain operates and, therefore, something more of the mechanism of thinking (see Jarvis and Parker, 2005). Incidentally, if we can affect the functioning of the brain, we can affect the way that we think, and so we do need to develop a pharmacology of learning.

Nevertheless, being able to locate where a thought is occurring in the brain does not explain the meaning we give to it, any intentions or plans resulting from it, or even rationality itself. Indeed, thoughts are different in type from neurological activity and it is culture rather than biology that shapes the meaning of human life, although I would not claim that biology has no influence at all. Maslin also raises other difficulties but these are sufficient to demonstrate that while the theory has certain attractions, it also leaves many questions unanswered.

*Behaviourism:* A great deal of theory and policy about learning has been couched in behaviourist terms ever since the time of Pavlov. Maslin (2001, p.106) summarises the position thus: 'behaviourism maintains that statements about the mind and mental states turn out, after analysis, to be statements that describe a person's actual and potential public behaviour'. Indeed, we have already seen the claim 'I act, therefore, I am' – and this can, in some circumstances, be regarded as a behaviourist statement. Behaviourism does explain some of the outcomes of the learning process and these can be measured, so that in an age where quantification is important, it is not surprising that behaviourism retains its attractions. Nevertheless, there are major problems with it, such as whether behaviour is the driving force of human being or whether there are other forces, such as meaning, emotion or even thought itself. It seems to me that none of the objections to the mind/brain identity theory are overcome by postulating that everything can be reduced to behaviour. Indeed, behaviourism is weak since it also denies the common sense assumption that I can actually think my own thoughts and do not have to reveal them to anybody. To put it crudely, a good poker player could hardly be a convincing behaviourist. While behaviourism can point to the outcomes of the learning processes, it is incapable of explaining the processes themselves.

*Functionalism:* This approach regards the mind as a function of the brain, so that if we can understand all the inputs and outputs and also the state of operating mechanism, we account for

our understanding of mental states. In other words, the brain is seen as a super-computer. This theory has gained a great deal of currency recently and because of the analogy with the computer appears credible, especially now that we can also talk of artificial intelligence. But we might ask – is the human being no more than a sophisticated computer – especially one that has been programmed to ‘think’? If we were to accept this, then the human being is de-personalised and learning reduced to a computer program. But we know that thoughts have meaning and intention – something that a computer program performing its functions cannot have. Not only this, but computers are thoroughly rational machines and they cannot deviate from their programmed logic, but human beings are not totally rational! It was a computer specialist who invented the term ‘fuzzy logic’ to describe the way that we behave in contrast to the way computers function. In my own research into superstition many years ago, I discovered that all my respondents were in some way or another superstitious, or less than rational in their behaviour (Jarvis, 1980). Freudian psychology also points us beyond the bounds of rationality. Indeed, computers cannot have phenomenological experiences. Maslin raises a number of other objections and, despite the popularity of the analogy, this theory is not at all convincing.

*Non-reductive monism:* This theory is also dualistic in terms of properties but not substances. Maslin (2001, p. 163) describes it thus:

It is non-reductive because it does not insist that mental properties are nothing over and above physical properties. On the contrary, it is willing to allow that mental properties are different in kind from physical properties, and not ontologically reducible to them. It is clusters and series of these mental properties which constitute our psychological lives...property dualism dispenses with the dualism of substances and physical events, hence it is a form of monism. But these physical substances and events possess two very different kinds of property, namely physical properties and, in addition, non-physical, mental properties.

The relationship between the physical and mental properties might be described in terms of supervenience, which is ‘the idea that one set of facts can fully determine another set’ (Chalmers (1996, p.32), which, according to Maslin, has three elements: irreducibility, co-variation and dependency. Chalmers also makes the crucial distinction between logical and natural supervenience. A problem, then, with mental properties is that they cannot be located like physical substances – that is by definition they are not physical and so even the processes that can be seen in brain scans are not revealing the content of the thoughts. Consequently, Chalmers, argues that consciousness *per se* cannot be logically reduced to a physical condition, that is, it is not logically supervenient on the material, even though the mind is dependent on the biological brain. Hence we are left with a complex position: while the mind is dependent on the brain the mental and especially the phenomenological experiences we have are not reducible to the physical. He has, therefore ruled out the most common approach, as have others in e.g. Bergson.

Having examined five different ways of looking at the mind-body relationship we can find no simple theory that allows us to explain it. Exclusive claims should not logically be made for any single theory, although we find these being made quite widely. Some of the theories, however, appear much weaker than others, such as mind/brain identity, behaviourism and functionalism, which is unfortunate since these are the ones most widely cited in contemporary society. We have accepted a form of dualism that may best be explained in the form of non-reductive monism, although we are less happy with dualism *per se*. The human being is both physical and mental. The mind-body relationship remains an unanswered problem, so that in all our theorising

about human learning we might never ever be able to explain the process at its most fundamental level. At the same time, we are conscious that some form of dualism, or non-reductive monism, is necessary if we are to account for the richness of human learning – but in so doing we can see the weakness in some of the widely held theories of learning.

### Part 3 Concluding Discussion

Ormrod (1995,p.5) alludes to the mind/body problem when she offers two definitions of learning: a relatively permanent change in behaviour, or a relatively permanent change in mental associations, both due to experience. In both definitions learning is seen as a product of experience but learning is fundamentally a human process, and this cannot logically be the same as the product. In addition, the fact that she holds these two aspects of mind and body apart demonstrates that there is fundamental weakness in those theories that emphasize behaviour to the exclusion of the cognitive, and vice versa. In both the experience is also the precursor to learning rather than a fundamental element in the learning itself.

In addition, information processing theory sees the brain as a computer, which we have also called into question, and it does not enter into the intricacies of the debate about the mind. Even Kolb's experiential learning cycle does not explore the conceptual questions about the nature of experience or the person who learns and so it is also an insufficient explanation of learning.

Now all of these traditional theories have been shown to be valid within the limits of their own claims but because of the complexity of the learning process few of them have begun to offer a comprehensive understanding of human learning. As a result of these discussions we can now offer a definition of human learning as a combination of processes whereby the whole person – body (genetic, physical and biological) and mind (knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, beliefs and senses) – experiences a social situation, the content of which is then transformed cognitively, emotively or practically (or through any combination) and integrated into the person's individual biography resulting in a changed (or more experienced) person.

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