

Learning from Everyday Life

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When my grandson comes home from school we often ask him – what have you learned at school today? And we expect a response! But if we ask adults – what have you learned from life recently? We might well get little or no response. This was precisely what I find when I conduct research into learning and when I run workshops on the topic of human learning. Many an adult when asked to write down a learning event finds it extremely difficult and this is because a great deal of our everyday learning is incident, pre-conscious and unplanned. In a sense we respond to events in a living manner – but then learning is about life. Indeed, for most people it is, or should be, lifelong long. We all live in a social context (life-world) in which we learn (Jarvis, 1987).

Everyday life is a strangely unresearched subject when it comes to human learning (but see de Certeau, 1984; Heller, 1984; Gardiner, 2000) and while we will not delve deeply into these studies, we do need to recognise their significance if we are to really understand lifelong learning. Fundamentally, there are two states in this life world – one in which we are in harmony with it and the other in which we are in disjuncture. Schutz and Luckmann (1974: 6) describe this state thus:

I trust that the as it has been known to me up until now will continue further and consequently the stock of knowledge obtained from my fellow men and obtained from my own experiences will continue to preserve its fundamental validity. We would designate this (in accordance with Husserl) the ‘and so forth’ idealization. From this assumption follows the further and fundamental one: that I can repeat my past successful acts. So long as the structure of the world can be taken as constant, and as long as my previous experience is valid, my ability to operate on the world in this and that manner is in principle preserved. As Husserl has shown, the further ideality of the ‘I can always do it again’ is developed correlative of the ideality of the ‘and so forth’.

In other words, we can take our world for granted because we are in harmony with it. But the world is not a constant and unchanging place and so there are times when we cannot take it for granted and we are forced to ask questions: Why? How? What does it mean? and so forth. This is disjuncture – we have to find new explanations, new knowledge, new ways of doing things – in other words, we must learn. These are the questions with which every parent and teacher is familiar when children keep asking questions but they also adjust their behaviour to fit into that of their group/family, and so on. But often, as we grow older, we do not ask the questions so openly and we merely adjust our behaviour or our knowledge base although there are times when we may not even notice that we are doing it. We actually take this process for granted and so much of our learning is not only incidental, it is unrecognised. In this sense, learning is both experiential and existential – the philosophical and human basis of learning is often missed in theoretical discussion about learning. But, then, so is its opposite – because we do not always want to change our behaviour, we sometimes want to change the world! I discussed non-learning (Jarvis, 1987) but at that time, I failed to recognise that non-learning can

also be a major strength when we are committed to a cause and do not want to change – but the inflexibility of fundamentalism – both religious and political – can be extremely dangerous in a world that demands degrees of tolerance and a level of deliberative politics (Habermas, 2006). It was the breadth of human questioning and the recognition that in order to understand the learning process that led Jarvis and Parker (2005) to edit a volume looking at learning from a number of different academic discipline perspectives.

In more recent years the significance of learning from experience has been widely recognised although it has mostly been seen in terms of experiences that are created by teachers so that learners can learn the practical side of some theoretical propositions. It has been less frequently used from the perspective of recognising learning from everyday life. There is a sense in which this form of learning from everyday life comes close to the ideas of instinct and even intuition – both of which are important concepts as we endeavour to understand human learning at greater depth. I want to maintain here that, despite the considerable significance of genetics and issues of human evolution, human beings do not have instincts in the sense of species-based innate patterns of behaviour but that we have to learn these and the patterns occur through routinisation, whereas intuition is itself most frequently a learned phenomenon – as we will discuss below.

Learning, then, is a complex process about human living and whilst now is not the place to discuss it conceptually (see Jarvis, 2006, 2008; Illeris, 2007, *inter alia*) we will offer an existential definition here:

the combination of processes throughout a lifetime whereby the whole person – body (genetic, physical and biological) and mind (knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, beliefs and senses) – experiences social situations, the perceived content of which is then transformed cognitively, emotively or practically (or through any combination) and integrated into the individual person's biography resulting in a continually changing (or more experienced) person. (Jarvis, 2006: 134)

In the remainder of this chapter, we will explore the process of human learning in greater detail, then we will look at the social conditions of learning, thirdly we will suggest some of the basic aspects of learning from everyday life and, finally, we will explore some of the conceptual implications of this discussion, such as pre-conscious learning, tacit knowledge and pragmatic behaviour.

Part 1. Understanding the Learning Process

What becomes clear from the above discussion is that while it is individuals who learn, and never groups as a whole, we always learn in a social context. Consequently, when more than one individual is in the same place at the same time and subject to the same external phenomena, then their experiences are similar but not identical. We can, therefore, pursue this argument using a single learner as the basis of our discussion, although we can be sure that the processes are almost universal within a similar culture – although there may be some differences between people of different cultures, as studies on *The Chinese Learner* (Watkins and Biggs, 1996) illustrate.

The Social Context. We can, therefore, begin our discussion on the learning process by looking at the social context, or the sub-culture, within which the learners function. For heuristic

purposes only, we will depict this culture as if it is objectified although in practice it is more individualistic and carried by individual members of that social group.

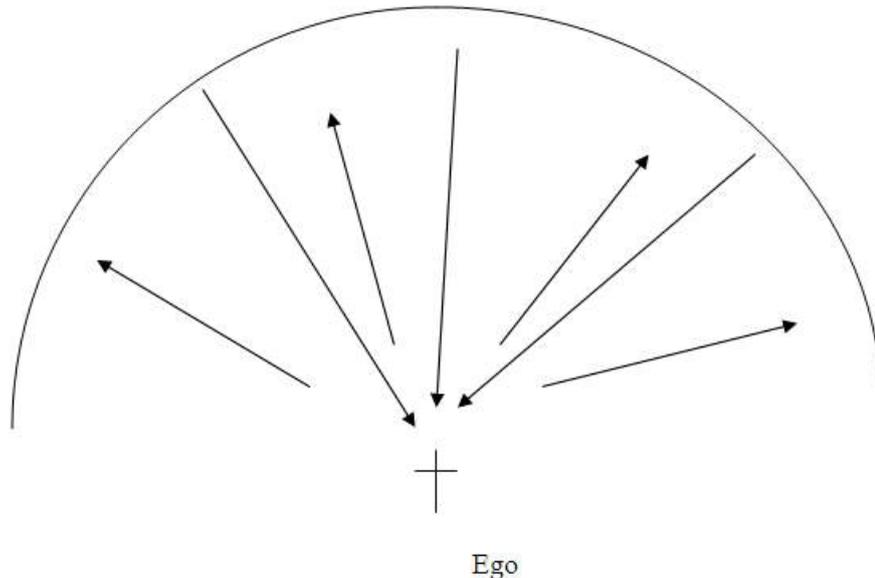


Figure 1: The Internalisation and Externalisation of Culture

In the above diagram (figure 1), ego is the individual learner. The arc represents the objectified culture of the learner's life-world while the larger inward arrows represent the process of internalising that culture while the smaller external ones represent the process of externalising. The two arrows together represent social interaction. The culture is internalised and carried by individuals so that when people meet, the commonality of their cultures enables meaningful meeting to occur. In social interaction there is always an exchange of sub-cultural differences and individuals adjust in response to those differences – in other words learning takes place. With young children and in all forms of didactic teaching the large inward arrows predominate

whereas in normal interaction there is an exchange of sub-cultural differences. It is here that incidental learning occurs – it is often unrecognised and it is also pre-conscious when we are not fully conscious of the extent of the stimulus that we have received and this is often the case in a cognitive world with sense experiences.

Sense Experience. Children are much more aware of sense experience in many ways than adults since linguistic cognition results in our being more concerned with meaning in the interaction that we are with sounds, or with the environment, and so on. Indeed, the environment only intervenes when we might say ‘It is hot in here – shall we open the window?’ and so forth. Yet we are having these sense experiences all the time and children, often being less aware of the cognitive dimension may be more aware of the senses. The following diagram represents this process.

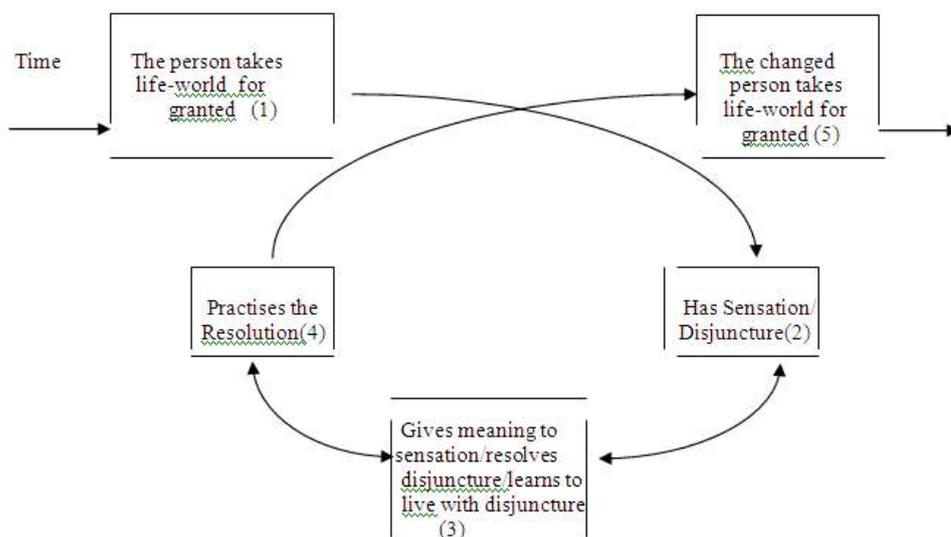


Figure 2: The Transformation of the Senses: initial and non-reflective learning

In the above diagram, we see that the disjuncture is caused by an inability to take the sensation for granted: we cannot give it meaning or we are unsure about the meaning we give it. In other words, there is no connecting arrow from the sub-culture to the individual or vice versa. And so we need to resolve the dilemma caused by the experience (Box 2). When we have an answer to our problem, i.e. we can give meaning to the sensation – as a result of self-directed learning, teaching, and so on (Box 3) – we are able to practise it in a social situation. If our answer is acceptable in as much as the people upon whom we practise our answer do not contradict us in some way, then we can assume it to be socially correct even though it may not be technically correct. As we continue to practise it, so we are able to universalise it and take it for granted, until the next time that a disjunctural situation occurs. Kolb (1984) actually includes generalisation in his learning cycle but my research does not suggest that generalisation occurs immediately following a new learning experience but only after we have tried out the resolution to our disjuncture on several occasions. If we do not resolve the dilemma, then we revert to Box 2 and try again, so that the arrows between boxes 2 and 3, and between 3 and 4, are not unidirectional illustrating that there is a process of trial and error learning at both stages. At the point of taking our sensations for granted, we move to the next phase – when we discuss meaning itself rather than the sensation. Adults and older children are more likely than young children to experience disjuncture in the cognitive domain but a similar process actually occurs in that domain, only in this instance the disjuncture is caused by not knowing the meaning of the event or of some aspect of the experience.

The Learning Processes. As we put these two diagrams together and recognise that disjuncture can occur not only with the sense and the cognitions but with the emotions as well,

we can begin to see something of the complexity of the learning processes through which we all go in everyday life – the point being that in formal situations, the disjuncture is created by the teaching, often didactic, whereas in everyday life it occurs naturally in interaction. But it is also occurs naturally in the environment – we may see beauty etc and be amazed by it – all forms of aesthetic and religious experience may be seen in this light. We are now, therefore, in a position, to look at the complexities of the learning processes as a whole.

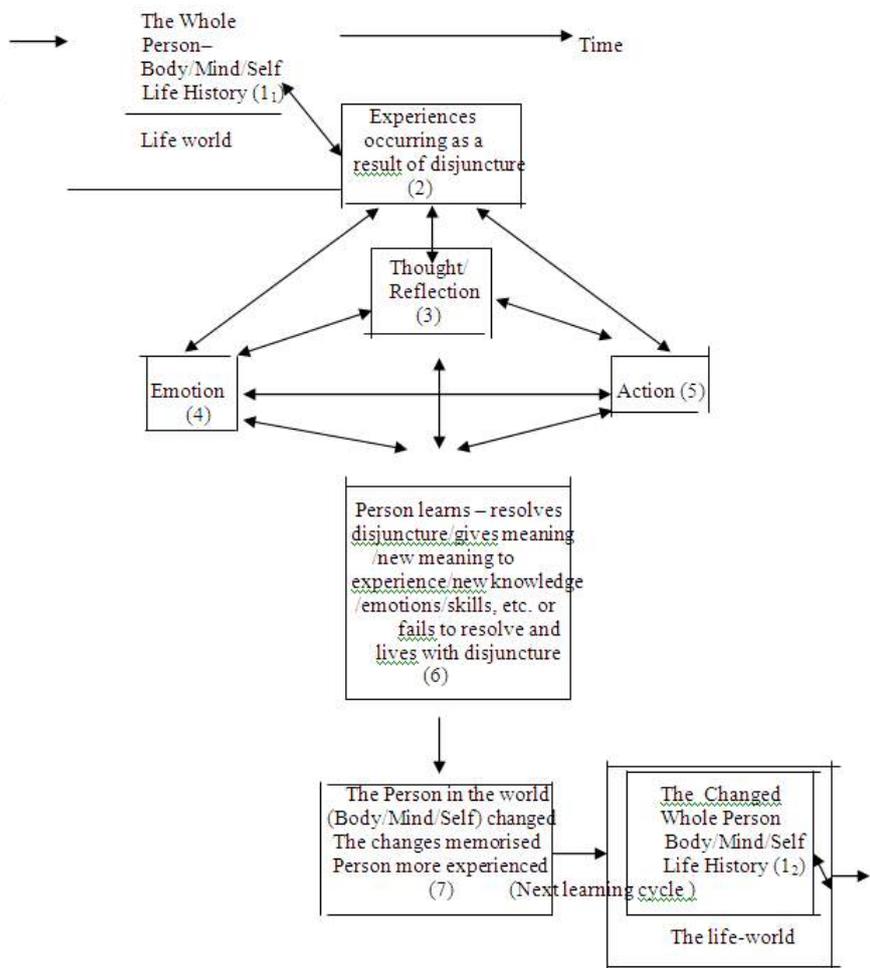


Figure 3: The Transformation of the Person through Learning

Box 1₁ depicts the situation of people in their life-worlds, and is Figure 1 above which we have already examined in greater detail and we would argue that learning stems from social experience but we recognise that that experience is determined to some extent by the nature of both the body and the mind in relation to each other and the external world. However, we continue to live in a taken-for-granted situation until such time as a situation causes us to question this taken-for-grantedness. Hence the arrow from box 1 pointing forwards in time that merely depicts the unquestioning process of much daily living. It is in the social situation that people are most likely to experience disjuncture (box 1), although this state can occur when people are alone, reflect on previous events, or even when they have an experience in interacting with the natural world, so that not all disjunctural experiences occur as a result of language and interaction as some social constructivists hold (see Archer, 2000: 86-117). The state of disjuncture occurs when we can no longer presume upon our world and act upon it in an almost unthinking manner; it is at this point that we have an experience (Box 2,) and it need not be contained within the bounds of language. Indeed, it can and does precede language in small children and in inexplicable situations (Jarvis, 1987, 1997). Experience can be transformed by thought, emotion or action (Boxes 3-5), or any combination of them: the precise mechanisms of these transformations constitute considerable studies in their own right and these have not been undertaken here. Box 6 is a new addition to the diagram and it is included to underline the fact that the outcome of the transformation is that people actually learn or fail to resolve their disjuncture, but this process itself always results in a changed person, even when there is apparently no learning since the experience still affects the self of the learner (Box 7). When people fail to resolve their disjuncture they can either learn to live in ignorance or with an

awareness that they need to learn in order to resolve their disjuncture or they can start the whole process off again. But even when they have learned the process of living is on-going and so, then, is the process of learning as Box 1₂ indicates.

In the above diagrams we have tried to depict the outcome of many years researching the processes of human learning and they also summarise a great deal of the previous discussion about the human learning. One of the major issues in this discussion which cannot be treated here (see Jarvis, 2006) is the nature of experience and interaction and another is the nature of the person. Nevertheless, it is necessary to highlight one of the major conceptual confusions in the educational vocabulary here: there is no difference in the human process in different forms of learning, so that we do not have formal learning, non-formal learning and informal learning but we do have formal interaction, and so on. It is the nature of the interaction that provides for different learning experiences and it is these that affect emotion, motive to learn, and so on.

Part 2. Conditions of Learning

There are a number of conditions that are fundamental for learning to occur and which are basic to everyday living: social interaction and disjuncture.

Social Interaction. The first thing that we need to note about everyday life and about Figure 1 is that the arrows are in both directions which signify interaction. This is the basis of social living: we nearly all live in families; are members of organisations; and so forth. Unless we are meeting with people whom we know intimately, it is hard to take for granted the whole of a process of interaction in which all our senses are operative. Even our nearest and dearest change as a result of their own learning and as the old maxim tells us, the same water does not

flow under the same bridge twice – situations never repeat themselves precisely. It is in meeting with others both within our life-world and beyond it that makes us aware of difference. Social interaction involves exploring difference and adjusting our behaviour to enable the interaction to proceed smoothly. People are different and during interaction we both learn to respond to those differences, accommodate them and even to learn from them. Disjuncture, then, is a normal experience in social interaction.

Disjuncture. The first thing that we need to note here is the complex nature of disjuncture itself: it is as complex as human living in a social context and it may best be seen as a continuum from a short instant of disjuncture to a lifetime of recognising that there are some things in our lives that we can never take for granted, like, for instance, I am prepared to acknowledge that I will live in a disjunctural experience with regard to the knowledge of theoretical mathematics and nuclear physics – in other words, in this complex world I acknowledge that I have to live in ignorance and leave that knowledge to specialists. Hence, we can accept that in some aspects of human living, ignorance is an acceptable response to disjuncture. But disjuncture is still a complex phenomenon. Significantly, we can see that once we discuss the whole person, disjuncture can occur and cause dissonance in any aspect – knowledge, skills, sense, emotions, beliefs, and so on.

- It can occur as a slight gap between our biography and our perception of the situation to which we can respond by slight adjustments in our daily living which we hardly notice since it occurs within the flow of time;
- It can also occur with larger gaps that demand considerable learning, e.g., studying courses and disciplines;

- In the meeting of the stranger, the disjuncture might not only occur in the discourse between them, it might actually occur between them as persons and their cultures and it takes time for the stranger to be received and a relationship, or harmony, to be established;

- In addition, some disjunctural situations – often emotive in category - just cause us to wonder at the beauty, pleasure and so forth that we are experiencing. In these situations, it is sometimes impossible to incorporate our learning from them into our biography and our taken-for-granted. These are what we might call ‘magic moments’ for which we look forward in hope to repeat in some way or other but upon which we might often reflect.

Disjuncture, then, is a varied and complex experience but it is from within the disjunctural that we have experiences which, amongst other things, start our learning processes. There is a sense in which learning occurs whenever harmony between us and our world has been broken, so that the relationship between our present understanding and our experience of the ‘now’ needs to be established, or re-established. In other words, learning begins when we recognise that we are in a state of ignorance but a great deal of our everyday learning occurs at such times as the disjuncture is so slight that we barely notice it. The rather interesting speculation is about when there is no disjuncture and if there was ever a time when human kind existed in perfect harmony with the world.

Part 3. Theories of Learning Involved in these Processes

There are a number of fundamental learning processes that form the basis of learning from everyday life, e.g., copying, trial and error, being instructed, thinking and doing or exploring.

Copying. Imitation is fundamental to our everyday learning: we all recognise that when we go into new situations we watch other people's behaviour carefully and then we copy it do that we feel that we fit into our situation. This is part of the processes of socialisation – when we can imitate and feel part of the whole. In other words a great deal of everyday learning is conformist but it is natural for us to do it since we have evolved to live in groups (Tremlin, 2006). The fact that it is natural displays something of the cooperative or societal nature of human living: it is unnatural to live alone or, therefore, to learn alone. The emphasis on individuality, however, has led many school teachers to condemn copying rather than see it as a fundamental element in everyday living and leaning and use it in their teaching to the advantage of all the students.

Trial and Error. Answers to our questions are not always forthcoming in social situations and so we have to think through some of the problems and try out our solutions until we discover one which works for us in whatever domain we are functioning – cognitive, affective or connative. Often, however, our learning occurs in more than one domain at the same time and through self-directed learning we can work out many of our own solutions but when we cannot, we can often discover the answers either by asking others or by being told by someone else who knows – who may be a teacher or a parent. Not always knowing 'the' answer is something that we learn to take for granted in our everyday life and so we learn to be innovative and imaginative and to some extent this adds to our own individuality. Many of our individual solutions to our everyday problems are not new and we merely re-discover what others who have been in similar situations have discovered before us and, sometimes, these acts of discovery are hardly treated as learning experiences since we tend to assume that this is the way that life is lived.

In this sense, we return to the fundamentals of behaviourism and at this point we can see the validity of such theories but we can also see the weakness when it is treated as either the only way to learn, or when a correct answer to a teaching and learning process is expected – the one provided by the teacher which then becomes both a matter of teacher-power and also raises questions about the morality of such teacher-learner interactions.

Instruction - Demonstration: We are often passive recipients of information provided by word of mouth or by written instructions. In didactic teaching it is the school/university teacher who transmits new knowledge or demonstrates new skills. Learners merely copy a more formalised presentation from someone who is expected to have the ‘correct’ knowledge rather than copying from a fellow learner who may not have such acceptable credentials. In a sense this might be non-reflective learning (Jarvis, 1987) and often it is what teachers expect but much of our learning is reflective.

Thinking/reflecting/musing/planning. We all spend a great deal of our conscious lives thinking – from those forms which we refer to as reflection to the everyday musing to the day-dreaming. Indeed, Schön’s (1983) well known discussion of the reflective practitioner is most frequently applied to the work situation but life itself is reflective practice. Heller (1984:168-170) recognises that in our thinking and planning in everyday life we do take into consideration probability. Thinking is a major part of the learning process, as we saw from Figure 3 above, and there have been a number of very influential studies about thinking such as (Ryle, 1979; Gilhooly, 1996, *inter alia*). Gilhooly (1996: 1) defines thinking as ‘a set of processes whereby people assemble, use and revise internal symbolic models’. Thinking occurs both as reflective processes upon events past but also it occurs when we are planning actions into the future. All

forms of thinking are learning processes and so the question must be asked as to whether learning is synonymous with thinking which is a very complex question but we have already seen that we learn through certain forms of action so that we can safely conclude that they are not the same although there are times when the thinking process is synonymous with the processes of learning although both are also very closely related to consciousness. However, we have to acknowledge that some theorists, such as Ryle (1949), would argue that only one action has taken place. All the different forms of thinking may be regarded as learning and many of them occur in the natural processes of everyday living.

Doing, exploring and investigating. This is also called problem-solving or discovery learning depending on the age group to which it is applied, but at its most fundamental it occurs when we try to respond to disjuncture by seeking to find out the causes of a phenomenon or experience that we do not understand. It can result in self-directed learning but it also typifies Schön's (1983) *reflective practitioner*

In all of these situations we learn to memorise the outcome of the process so that we can repeat past successful acts. We know that the more that we perform the same actions, the more that we will learn to take it for granted and then we will do what Kolb (1984) suggests when he regards generalising as part of the learning process. Often, it is the mere repetition of the process that helps implant the 'answers' in our memories and failure to repeat them that leads to forgetfulness. But the fact that these are everyday occurrences means that they are not necessarily regarded as learning or anything out of the ordinary and it is for this reason that learning is regarded here as an existential process as well as an experiential one.

Part 3. Theoretical Considerations of Learning from Everyday Life

The above discussion gives rise to a number of theoretical issues and in this final section we shall look briefly at eight of these: motivation, preconscious/conscious learning, attitude formation, value formation, belief formation, tacit knowledge pragmatism and the ageing process. None of these can be treated in depth in a short chapter, and we will actually combine some in the following discussion and there is also a sense in which they are not exclusively related to learning in everyday life although they all occur within everyday living.

Motivation. At the heart of many studies of learning lies the concept of motivation although intentionality might be a better concept to use. Human beings rarely act in a mindless and aimless manner – it is regarded as almost unnatural for this to occur – at least until old age. There are very broadly two types of motivation: the one is to remove the uncomfortableness of disjuncture since we mostly prefer to live in harmony with our environment and social group although we recognise that this uncomfortable feeling is a penalty of rapid social change and individuality. Nevertheless, it has always been part of the human condition. The other side of intentionality is seeking to satisfy our desires, hopes and aspirations and so on. Desire is something that is not only self-created but other created by such things as watching others who possess those things that we desire, advertising and hoping for a better life, better world, and so on. Naturally there are many studies on motivation although it will be noted here that it does not occur as a separate concept in Figure 3 and this is because the disjuncture is central to the idea of learning in the social context as the previous diagram demonstrates.

Preconscious/conscious learning. All learning is conscious although we might repress or suppress some of it, but in our everyday life we are not fully conscious of all the things that

occur within our purview at any one time and so our minds take in and acquire many sense experiences without necessarily being conscious of them. When I first discussed preconscious learning (Jarvis, 1987) I equated it with incidental learning although now I would differentiate them. Preconscious is the type of learning that occurs incidentally but it is also unrecognised, so that in the first instance it would be problematic to call it learning at all. We only recognise it when a subsequent experience brings it to our consciousness and we become aware that we have actually internalised an experience previously which is significant in the new experience and which either affects our perception or our interpretation thereafter. Perhaps the most common situation where this occurs is in speed reading when we scan columns of words and take in much more of the meaning than the actual words upon which we focus.

Formation of Attitudes, Beliefs and Values. None of us are conscious of every experience which leads to us holding the attitudes, beliefs and values that we do. At the same time, we are all aware that there are other times when we concentrate on each of these and spend a great deal of time and energy pondering them. It is clear, therefore, that the formation of these aspects of our person is a complex process of both conscious and preconscious learning in everyday life. The recognition of this complexity is significant for learning theory – even experiential learning theory, which has tended to regard experience always as a conscious phenomenon.

Tacit Knowing. Another factor associated with learning in everyday life is tacit knowing. Polanyi's (1967: 4) well-known example that we can recognise a face in a crowd yet we cannot tell how we do this is central to this idea. We have knowledge but we cannot put it into words although through 'identi-kit' photographs we can often recognise the face through the picture. In the same way we recognise many of our sense experiences, like smell, taste, and so on. More

recently, Baumard (1999) has employed the idea of tacit knowing in organisational settings in examining manager's knowledge. Clearly it is not only managers but all experts incorporate a great deal of tacit knowing in their everyday practice since they have learned incidentally from the practice of work itself – but a great deal of this expert knowledge has been lost as mechanisation has replaced expertise. What is clear about the tacit dimension is that in cooperative enterprises and discussion between experts a great deal of their incidental learning is brought into consciousness. It may be that this process also explains the fact that Argyris's & Schon's (1974) distinction between theory in use and espoused theory can be explained by incidental learning and tacit knowledge.

Pragmatism. In everyday life we tend to respond to situations by doing things rather than by considering the theory underlying it and in this sense, we do things and learn by our doing. In this sense, learning is pragmatic. All our knowledge, learning, comes from experience as our understanding of learning above makes clear, so that theory itself must follow experience and learning about phenomena and so practitioner research (Jarvis, 1999) is also based upon this understanding of learning. This is diametrically opposed to the traditional, but now dying idea, that theory always preceded practice. Theory may precede practice in the pure sciences but in everyday life it is often the reverse.

Ageing. The wisdom of the elders was to a great extent the result of incidental and pre-conscious learning throughout a great deal of a lifetime. These preconscious experiences were brought to consciousness in discussion as older people discussed what they had learned in their lifetime. But in a rapidly changing world many of these experiences are now dated and older people's learning from life has been devalued by many people and yet much of it is now about

the technicalities of contemporary living but about the lessons of human relationships and interaction that still has some validity. However, these modern technologies actually cause many people to learn that they cannot learn: it is not uncommon to hear older people (and sometimes younger ones) to exclaim, ‘I don’t know what this world is coming to these days!’ Their lives’ experiences seem far removed from the demands of the present day and they experience considerable disjuncture – in this case they learn that they are cannot necessarily cope, might be considered to be ignorant by the younger generation, and so on. When this happens they may seek to disengage and this can be a dangerous situation since, as we pointed out, learning is an existential phenomenon.

This brief chapter has only scratched the surface of a major dimension of learning which certainly needs a great deal more research than it is currently receiving since it actually helps us to understand the human processes of becoming a person much more clearly.

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