Learning About Learning

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Learning is the process by which a learner goes from not knowing to understanding. “The meaning of “knowing” has shifted from being able to remember and repeat information to being able to find and use it” (Simon, 1996, p. 5). Traditionally, learning might have been thought of as the acquisition of specific content area skills in a school setting. However, I believe that learning is a never-ending cycle that can occur:

- on a very large scale, about world issues, or a very small scale, about yourself
- in school or outside of school
- intentionally or unintentionally
- best by doing.

I recognize the complication of my theory and that I, too, have more learning to do about learning.

How and Where Learning Occurs

Learning can be done on a very large scale or a very small scale. For example, a learner might be learning about a large scale issue such as climate change, or something small scale where a learner could learn how to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Both scenarios warrant learning and are important, but climate change is a global issue while making a sandwich is a personal life skill. Depending on the scenario, both scales of learning are important for the learner to acquire. Any and all types of learning contribute to who the learner is as a person, what their beliefs are, and the set of skills that they obtain.

Learning can differ by location. Some learning takes place in an environment made for learning, such as a classroom. In school learning is often mostly pre-determined and planned to prepare students to be successful members of society. For example, a student might learn how to write a cover letter for a job application in an English class. However, Resnick (1987) argued, “ packages of knowledge and skill that schools provide seem unlikely to map directly onto the clusters of knowledge people will use in their work or personal lives...to be truly skillful outside school, people must develop situation specific forms of

competence," (p.15). Outside of school, learning can occur anywhere - at a grocery store, in a car, at your house, at a movie theater. Take for example learning how to multitask at home when cooking. If making multiple dishes at once, a cook will learn how to manage their time while also physically preparing the meal. Again, both in school and out of school learning are both influential in determining a learner's abilities.

Learning can be intentional or unintentional. One might choose to learn, or learn without realizing they're learning. Regardless, learning takes place. Unintentional learning, I believe, can be the most profound or remembered. For example, a young child will learn very quickly not to touch a pot of boiling water on the stove when it burns their hand. Intentional learning occurs after a learner sets a goal to learn something new. Often, intentional learning takes place in a school setting. In my opinion, the best type of intentional learning is learning by doing.

Learning Through Doing

When thinking about learning at school, consider a typical teacher-led classroom where the students are learning through listening to the teachers' lessons. Although this is how classrooms have been run for most of time, I believe one of the most important types of learning is the kind that takes place from social interactions with others. According to Vygotsky (1978), much of a child's development and overall learning occurs through social interaction. This could be a social skill or even a math skill that a student can learn from their peers. Sometimes a learner can hear a new concept, whether it be social or academic, from the teacher many times and still not understand. If it were a social skill like apologizing when you were wrong, learning it in action might be the most powerful. Likewise, a math skill might make more sense when hearing it from a peer's perspective.

Another important type of learning in school is learning by experimenting. When students are only told how something works, it is much less valuable than if they discovered how something works for themselves. Bransford, Brown, and Cocking, (2000) support these ideas and describe that at times

"teaching by telling can work extremely well…However, teachers still need to pay attention to students' interpretations and provide guidance when necessary" (p. 11). For example, imagine a student is told that if you hold a bell by the metal part, it won't ring. Students learn that if you hold a bell by the metal part, it won't ring. However, if the student is given bells to explore with, they are likely to realize that when they hold the bell by the metal part, they feel the clapper hit the side and no sound comes out. They might also realize that there is no vibration when you are holding it on the metal part as opposed to the handle. This way, students are more likely to understand why the bell does not ring, as opposed to a simple fact. Experimenting allows learners to more deeply engage with all senses and reflect on their learning.

Learning through teaching others is another great way to improve understanding. When learners share their thinking with others, it not only reaffirms that thought for themselves, but it allows others to examine something from a different lens, not only their own. Being able to see your own thinking as well as explain it to others can strengthen the depth of your own understanding. Students can expand on their own thinking and even others' thinking as well. Take for example the student who learns a new way to do two-digit multiplication at school and then goes home to teach it to her parents. Hearing misconceptions from her parents will allow her to deepen her own understanding as she explains the reasoning behind the choices she made while solving the problem.

Lifelong Learning

No one is ever done learning, and this includes me and my ideas about learning. According to Bransford, Brown, and Cocking (2000), "fundamental understanding about subjects...contributes to individuals' more basic understanding of principles of learning that can assist them in becoming self-sustaining, lifelong learners," (p. 5). Although I have presented my current personal theory of how and where learning occurs, and that learning through doing is best, I am a lifelong learner. With that said, I am eager to continue my journey in the world of learning.

References

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