Chapter X

Learning in Personal Trajectories of Participation

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SUMMARY

In the first section I introduce the general approach to learning within the critical psychological paradigm of Holzkamp (1983, 1993) and others. In the second section I sketch a critical analysis of existing institutional arrangements for learning that allows us to move beyond some widespread assumptions in existing theories of learning which unreflectively propagate a point of view on learning affected by these arrangements. In the third section I then outline an alternative approach to the study of persons in social practice. And in the fourth section I demonstrate some implications of that alternative approach for our theoretical understanding and empirical study of learning.

CRITICAL PSYCHOLOGY AND LEARNING

Critical psychology adopts an historical approach to the conceptual foundation of psychology (Holzkamp, 1983). Picking up A. N. Leontjev's (1981) definition of the emergence of the most elementary forms of psychic processes as a mediation of life activity it reconstructs their development through psycho-phylogenetic evolution. While the most elementary forms of psychic processes are fixed in a species specific way, the emergence of elementary forms of learning constitutes the first major qualitative leap in psycho-phylogenetic evolution. Learning makes psychic processes and their mediation of life activities modifiable through encounters with current circumstances. It launches an ontogenetic modifiability of psychic processes and life activities in relation to changing life circumstances and, thus, introduces new forms of individualization on the basis of life activities. A polarity is established between fixed and modifiable life activities with fixed and modifiable psychic processes. The dynamics of this polarity lie at the core of the evolution in psycho-phylogeny and conjure up new qualities of psychic processes. In relation to current debates on genetic determinism, we should bear in mind Osterkamp's (1975) argument that the traditional opposition between heredity and environment - conceived as genetic determination and learning, respectively - is misleading since the species-specific forms of modifiability have a genetic basis. What is genetically determined is not necessarily fixed, but incorporates various forms of modifiability.

1 I would like to thank The Spencer Foundation for support for the development of this work under Small Grant 2000000053.
Throughout the course of psycho-phylogeny, the dynamic relationship between the fixed and the modifiable develops away from the dominance of definitely fixed properties towards the dominance of properties which are so modifiable that they are best understood as general potentialities. While the earliest forms of learning are varieties of a subsidiary learning potentiality which unfolds as a learned differentiation within a fixed frame of species specific activities, later the species specific frames of activities themselves become subject to learning (autarchic learning). What is learned now becomes functionally dominant over what is fixed in the life activities of a species. Before an individual can participate fully in a species specific life, species specific forms of activity have to be learned. This involves a learned modifiability of cognitive, emotional, and motivational processes as well as of their functional links in life activities. An unfolding of such comprehensive learning processes that is not life-endangering calls for the evolution of social formations (flocks, herds, etc.) in which learning members are safeguarded and the results of prior members' learning sustained in learned social relations and traditions.

A basic advantage of the societal, cultural-historical forms of human life over animal forms of life lies in the bringing about of structures, traditions, and means for unfolding forms of life with extensive processes of learning and development. Human life demonstrates the psycho-phylogenetically evolved prominence of the social and its transformation into societal structures of life (as something that is brought about, to be learned and developed by the unfolding of general human potentials) over a genetically fixed functional basis of life activities. To these cultural-historical forms of life belong other forms of human learning and development in which the bringing about of relations, events, and cultural artefacts, participation and observation are key features.

A core element in the general critical psychological conception of human functioning concerns the subject's development of a personal action potency vis a vis his or her immediate situation in the social structure (see Tolman, 1994 for an overview). This development of a personal action potency rests on processes of learning. In accordance with the societal basis of individual life, human potencies and learning may reach beyond the immediate situation into features of the societal structure which are significant for the mediation of the scope of possibilities in the immediate situation. In important ways, the basis of individual life cannot be taken for granted. It must be found and is, hence, problematic. Societal contradictions complicate this problematic by stirring up personal conflicts. In his book on the foundations of learning Holzkamp (1993) reinterprets traditional psychological theories of learning and adds new distinctions on learning. He differentiates acts of learning from other acts, and reasons for learning from other reasons for action, and he distinguishes between incidental and intended learning depending on whether learning occurs in connection with some other activity of often greater importance or particular acts of learning are delineated from the flow of activities because of the occurrence of a learning problematic. He also distinguishes between expansive and defensive learning (with associated reasons) and emphasizes qualitative leaps of learning in which the acts of learning themselves develop.
SOCIETAL ARRANGEMENTS FOR LEARNING

My argument now takes a different turn from Holzkamp's by going into the dependency of traditional conceptions of learning on particular institutional arrangements for learning. My purpose is to gain new angles on learning and to ground the need to develop other understandings of learning. This paper rests on my work on professional practices (Dreier, 1996, 2000, 2002) and on rethinking persons as participants in social structures of practice (Dreier, 1999a, 2002). It is inspired by Lave's work on situated learning (Lave, 1988; Lave & Wenger, 1991) and our longstanding collaboration on trajectories of learning and social practice theory (Dreier, 1999b, 2000; Lave, 1997, 2002). Following Lave (2002) we may say that prevailing traditional theories of learning conceptualize learning as the acquisition of knowledge. This presupposes that what is to be learned exists as knowledge prior to learning it. Basically, learning consists of the following: knowledge is a) transmitted from teachers and textbooks, b) internalized by the learner, c) transferred from the teaching situation into other situations, and d) applied. Perhaps to our surprise the same basic logic can be found in prevailing traditional understandings of other institutionalized and specialized social practices. For example, psychotherapy is the acquisition of insight and skills which already exist in professionals and textbooks. Basically, psychotherapy consists of the following: insight and skills are a) transmitted from therapists and manuals, b) internalized by clients, c) transferred from the therapy session into other situations, and d) applied. Or, to take our own field of practice as an example: basic research is derived from the acquisition of knowledge and skills which already exist in experts and textbooks. Essentially, basic research consists of the following: knowledge, procedures and skills are a) transmitted from expert researchers, textbooks, etc., b) internalized by future researchers, c) transferred from the contexts of research education into other situations, and d) applied. The results of basic research may then be applied in applied research which repeats the same logic: Applied research is derived from the acquisition of knowledge, procedures and skills from basic research which exists prior to the applied research in the experts, textbooks and artefacts of basic research. Essentially, applied research consists of the following: the knowledge, procedures and skills of basic research are a) transmitted from the basic researchers, textbooks, etc., b) internalized by the applied researchers, c) transferred from basic research to applied research situations, and d) applied. Likewise, the implementation and development of professional practices is derived from the acquisition of knowledge and skills from applied research which already exist in the experts, textbooks, and artefacts of applied research. Essentially, the implementation and development of professional practice consists of the following: the knowledge, procedures and artefacts of applied research are a) transmitted from applied researchers, textbooks, etc., b) internalized by professional practitioners, c) transferred from the contexts of professional education and training into other situations of professional practice, and d) applied.

That a similar form of thinking prevails across these and other social practices should make us suspicious and look for more general explanations. This form of thinking is sustained despite being insufficient to guide our understanding of what
goes on in those practices and of catching us up in paradoxes such that new knowledge is supposed to be produced simply by applying old knowledge.

As mentioned above, critical psychology considers learning primarily as a modification of practical abilities and knowledge as the means. By contrast, prevailing traditional theories of learning primarily emphasize knowledge rather than ability. The acquisition of knowledge is the goal of learning, and existing knowledge, or a particular version of it, defines the criteria for successful learning, error and failure. Verbal learning is highlighted and valued over motor learning, and skills in a narrow and often quite mechanical sense are all that remains of practical abilities. 

What is more, the basic structural formula of learning, "transmit - internalize - transfer – apply," presupposes the existence of special, secluded institutional arrangements. Nevertheless, this theory of learning does not allow us a full grasp of the significance of these institutional arrangements for learning nor of learning in these arrangements. Why should we then believe that it holds for learning in other arrangements and structures of practice? After all, these theories study learning within a specialized institutional context rather than as an aspect of ordinary life in and across various places. In fact, they consider learning to occur only within a special institutional context and to be completed within this segregated institutional context. What happens after the teaching situation is merely a transfer and application of what was already learned. So besides privileging knowledge over abilities, this form of thinking privileges a special knowledge, tied to a particular position in a special institutional arrangement. It privileges institutionalized knowledge and expertise over the rationalities of everyday practice, and it reflects an educationalist understanding of learning as rooted in prior expert knowledge and of the transformation of lay rationalities of everyday life within specialized institutions. It is a scholastic understanding of learning, literally speaking of school knowledge and school learning (Dreier, 1999b) that are varieties of knowledge and learning associated with the social practice of schools. This form of thinking is sustained because of its function in the reproduction of these institutional arrangements by those held specially accountable for them. Their accountability is directed upwards in the institutional arrangement rather than downwards and outwards where what is learned should primarily prove itself to be useful. Strictly speaking, then, this form of thinking does direct our understanding of learning both within and across particular contexts in a particular way by claiming that learning is completed within one context, and that the links to other contexts merely consist of a transfer and application of that learning.

**PERSONAL TRAJECTORIES IN SOCIAL PRACTICE**

To get a fuller understanding of, among other things, learning in people's lives, I developed a theory of personal trajectories of participation in structures of social practice (Dreier, 1999a). Such an approach to persons and social practice makes us cease to regard any situation in isolation and instead to consider its place in the social structures of practice. We move from studying how a person deals with one particular situation to how a person conducts his or her life in a trajectory of participation in and across social contexts such as one's home, school, workplace,
and so forth. A particular constellation of participants distributed across different positions reproduces these social contexts. As a person moves from one context to another, his or her position varies, and so does that person's possibilities, resources and degree of influence. It therefore takes different personal action potencies to participate in them, and a person participates in different ways and for different reasons in different social contexts. All this introduces complexity into every person's life and modes of functioning. Faced with this complexity, people do not just shift mode of functioning as they move from one context into another, as some would have us believe. Rather, they must to some degree compose their everyday lives, and certainly conduct them in and across different places in a way that depends on their varying personal scope, influence, and co-participants. Holzkamp (1995) and Osterkamp (2000) highlight the necessity for all people in one way or another to accomplish a conduct of everyday life. Everyone must establish a way to conduct their everyday lives in relation to the societally arranged and institutionalized rhythms of activities across social times and places. In so doing, they must create and routinize sequences of activities in order to be able to accomplish what needs doing. And they must come to an understanding with themselves and their varying co-participants about how to conduct their lives with each other and individually. Self-understanding functions in, and for, personal social practice instead of as an internal representation of "the self". Its practical grounds in a person's conduct of life are emphasized rather than only its structure, i.e. unity, multiplicity, and fragmentation. To accomplish such a conduct of everyday life, of course, also raises various problems.

According to this argument, persons do not fashion their conduct of everyday life in a purely subjective or intersubjective manner, but in relation to societal arrangements for members' everyday lives, including access to particular social contexts and members' participation in them. Some institutions arrange special institutional trajectories for their members movement through them in particular directions toward particular outcomes (e.g., in schools: age-graded classes, different combinations of courses and tracks, specialization through different institutional trajectories). There are also more encompassing societal arrangements for the course and conduct of life trajectories, such as the combination, changing relative significance and replacement of particular kinds of social contexts across personal life trajectories. These societal arrangements are not all-determining. They are significant resources and constraints for the personal unfolding of life trajectories, although our subjective future perspective may be marked by varying degrees of realism, vagueness and confusion and may not often reach as far ahead as our whole life trajectory. For a particular person, the meaning of participation in a particular context is mediated by its place in that person's current conduct of everyday life and by its place in the unfolding of that person's life trajectory across times and places. Furthermore, persons change their conduct of everyday life as they unfold their life trajectory.

This changing complexity of personal lives across the life trajectory implies that people must attend to the ways in which they direct, locate, and prioritize the pursuit of their various personal concerns across times and places. This involves being aware of the distinctions between their participation in different contexts and the various
concerns they pursue in them. They try to keep the pursuit of some concerns out of particular places, although the multiplicity of contexts in which they participate also allows them to displace concerns across different contexts. Many personal concerns are pursued across several contexts and in varying ways as people move from one context to another. Thus, they must attempt to distribute and coordinate their pursuit of concerns across places with different others. They must try to resolve the challenges, dilemmas, and priorities that such a complex pursuit of personal concerns entails. And they must handle the involved transitions and the rearrangements that follow from changes in social practice.

**LEARNING TRAJECTORIES IN SOCIAL PRACTICE**

Do these conceptual elaborations allow us a different understanding of learning in people's lives? First, we cease to study learning as isolated acts of learning and instead locate these acts of learning in more or less complex and far-reaching trajectories of learning. This point of view is related to a critique of believing that learning proceeds - or even proceeds the best - when outcomes of isolated acts of learning are tied to each other in "trees of knowledge" rather than in "landscapes of practice", as Lave (1988) puts it. Next, they make us aware that we face different learning problematics in different contexts and that this introduces a many-sidedness, that is, a richness as well as a complexity, into personal learning. Thus, persons may contrast and compare different learning problematics from different places as well as the different things they learned in these places. That makes their learning richer and more complicated, and it introduces new dynamics and often new learning problematics into their trajectories of learning across places.

What may then happen in trajectories of learning across places? Persons may combine different things they learned in different places in particular personal ways and thus pursue further learning. They may modify what they learned earlier in another (time and) place. Since modifiability is the key feature of learning, here we are talking about continued learning in other places. These modifications are often triggered by reconsiderations and reevaluations in light of the different scope, events, concerns, and learning problematics of the present context. Aside from being modified and supplemented, what was learned earlier may be replaced by learning something new and different that is, it may be un-learned. As a person's situation changes in one or across several contexts, the meaning of what was learned earlier is reconsidered, reevaluated, and changed, and new learning may be triggered. Apparently completed earlier learning may be broken up again and re-learned with a modified outcome. In contrast to theories claiming that learning is finished within one particular situation, in trajectories of learning what was learned earlier most often does not stand out as complete. This, on the other hand, raises other learning problematics concerning what status and credence to grant to what was learned and how to rely on something that is insufficient. Adopting the prevailing cultural standards of certainty, completeness, and permanence associated with knowledge, people may then feel uncertain about whether they really learned anything. Individuals must also find ways to pick up and continue earlier incomplete learning in other times and places in relation to other present situations, scopes and co-
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participants - and that may trigger renewed learning. This includes finding ways to hold on to, modify (i.e., learn) and develop learning problematics, modes of learning, reasons and intentions for learning. Of course, as people live their lives many other things take place, and they are concerned with many other things than the pursuit of a particular trajectory of learning. To find a way to hold on to, and modify, learning involves finding a way to hold on to it among many other things which are also of concern and may compete for a person’s attention - not to speak of co-participants' attention. Learning trajectories are full of interruptions; they are discontinuous. They involve finding ways to get back to them and pick them up again at other times and places and in ways agreed upon by other involved co-participants. If not, a learning trajectory may get lost altogether or the internal continuity of its pursuit may be weakened. Indeed, sometimes a learning trajectory is only remembered and picked up again because present occurrences make us draw a link to it anew.

These features of interrupted learning trajectories taking place among so many other activities and concerns point us back towards Holzkamp's distinction between incidental and intended learning mentioned above. To argue that incidental learning - that is, learning that occurs in the midst of other things which often occupy the learner more - may occur across places, is fully in line with Holzkamp. But as he uses the term intended learning, it only applies to the case wherein a learner delimits a learning situation and a learning action from other, possibly interfering activities and concerns. I argue, however, that intended learning may be pursued amidst many other things in learning trajectories in and across places. In many everyday activities learning is, in fact, not segregated from other things. The distinction between incidental and intended learning is closely related to a distinction mentioned earlier between “just following suit” in a situation as a person moves across places or through life, and the pursuit of concerns, learning, changes, and so forth (Dreier, 2002). These different modes of engagement have consequences for learning. In fact, many learning trajectories must be pursued across times and places in order to succeed. One might then say that not much learning can occur when a person just follows suit, but that is not quite true. A person may just bump into it - incidentally, that is. It may also force itself upon an individual, and he or she may not be able to avoid it - any longer. That then gives rise to other qualities of learning and to a different course of learning.

Let me now turn to learning in connection with educational arrangements, that is, those practices of learning which prevailing traditional theories of learning highlight. The theoretical understanding I am presenting leads to a different understanding of learning even in the institutional arrangement which these theories presuppose. All learners must orient their participation in institutional educational trajectories, and these personal orientations differ among learners and from the official educational trajectories. Learners must also elaborate and pursue their own, often quite complex learning trajectories in relation to the existing educational trajectories. These learning trajectories reach far beyond the trajectories arranged within the institution. Thus, piano students at the Danish academy of music (Nielsen, 1999) arrange learning trajectories which are comprised of exercises at home; working as teachers for children beginning to play the piano; jobs as pianists at private celebrations, in inns, bars, etc.; taking individual classes with particular teachers at the academy; hanging
out to observe their fellow students taking classes or giving concerts at the academy; giving such concerts themselves; participating in clinics with well-known pianists passing by or in other countries, and so forth. And the students develop reasons to distribute and combine their learning trajectories in a particular way. In shaping and trying out these learning trajectories students look out for, make use of, and develop priorities about relevant differences between the involved contexts. They distribute their learning and pursue it differently in different contexts. Even though institutional practices are assumed to be arranged in such a way that they center on one pursuit only and keep out "the rest" - which is a synonym for "the everyday" (Lave, 2002) where one is not supposed to be able to concentrate on things -, participation in institutional trajectories really encompasses a complex set of often competing pursuits. In short, it is important to distinguish between educational trajectories and learning trajectories. Sometimes participants even struggle to create new educational trajectories for themselves, and that involves complex learning. For instance, some young immigrants in Copenhagen struggle to find a way to be educated as social workers which they can combine with their perspectives on doing something for their immigrant group in the city without either getting caught up in the criminal activities of that group or giving up belonging to it on the polished floors of Copenhagen town politics (Mørck, 2000). Finally, people must find room for the pursuit of complex learning trajectories in their conduct of everyday life and life trajectories, as Holzkamp (1995) illustrates with university students. What a person learns, then depends on its relations to the particular conduct of life in which he or she is involved. For instance, like all other patients in a neuro-rehabilitation clinic, a business-manager's learning from the training is selective and depends on its perceived meaning for him in his ordinary life. Thus, he learns little from the occupational therapy training of everyday activities, but soon learns how to run his business in a different way from his hospital bed while pursuing a different way of functioning as a manager when he returns from hospital (Borg, 2001). The establishment of, and changes to, a person's conduct of everyday life and life trajectory involve various, often quite complex and open-ended processes of learning.

Let me finally make nine points about the general view of learning which my analysis promotes. First, Lave rightly points out that because we have all gone to school and been subjected to school learning it is difficult to spell out a different form of thinking about learning. Having gone to school impacts how we think about learning; its meaning for us; our preferred ways of doing, or avoiding it; our evaluation of our potencies for learning and whether and how we may develop them. Consequently, for something to count as learning, it should be like school learning and result in a knowledge like school knowledge. Thus, we may not be aware of, and talk about, much of the learning we pursue and accomplish. Second, there are many personal dimensions to learning, and we develop personal stances on learning and on the significance of what we learn. Thus, salespeople educated at Xerox University develop quite critical stances on the credibility and usefulness of what they learned when they begin to practice as salespeople for the company (Østerlund, 1996). Third, there exist many different learning practices. Learning comes in quite varied guises and varies both with the practices it is a part of and the conduct of life it is involved
Fourth, we must distinguish between a) the learning which enables us to take part in an existing social practice, b) the learning we undertake just to follow along with changes in the practices in which we live our lives, and c) the learning involved when we contribute to changing the practices we are a part of (Dreier, 2002). Prevailing traditional theories of learning cover only the first of these as the acquisition of already existing knowledge while they are doomed to silence on b) and c). Fifth, in traditional theories learning is supposed to work because of an assumed identity between the educational situation and the situation of application; learning is completed in the educational situation and transfer is what combines them. But according to my argument, learning occurs and matters because something different happens in the educational situation compared to other situations, and this difference makes that which occurs in the one stand out and contribute something important to the others. Hence, we should study the arrangement of relevant differences for the pursuit of learning across places. Sixth, learning neither presupposes completeness and permanence of what is learned, nor would learning be possible and make sense if everything was just ad hoc flexibility and negotiation. It would not make sense to learn if it was not relevant in other situations. The conditions of possibility for learning are located between these two extremes. Seventh, we need to distinguish between, on the one hand, variations, shifts, and changes in (social practices and) personal social practices which do not have to entail learning though they sometimes do, and, on the other hand, learning and development (Dreier, 2002). In the latter case, a person's action potencies/abilities and understandings in relation to the changing situation also change. Hence, learning refers to particular dimensions of personal changes, which may be shared by, and presuppose, particular relations with other participants. Eighth, learning is primarily linked to practical abilities, and knowledge is a means of enabling them. Ninth, knowledge is not a preexisting, complete body of knowledge which may furnish a fixed goal and criterion of learning. Rather, learning and knowledge are involved in a process of mutual change in practice.

References


