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5001G Principles of Learning
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A Personal Perspective from Collective Minds; on Knowledge, Learning, Teaching

Knowledge

Had I been asked a few weeks ago what knowledge was, I might have said it was simply information in your mind (Encarta online dictionary). Or it was all the information I had gathered from years of travel. It had never occurred to me to think about the word beyond the dictionary definition. So, delving into my mind and that of over a dozen other great minds in this class has been much like exploring my history books in search of knowledge.

My own quest for knowledge began back in the seventies with a desk, a world map, and a book. At 12 years old my world revolved around the adventures I read about and the exotic locales I planned to see. Without knowing it at the time, those three items determined the path I was to take in life. Back then I thought my books could teach me all I needed to know, and while a book or picture could describe a place in great detail, it could not capture the sounds, smells, or the feel of a place. To have real knowledge of any one thing I had to experience it both physically as well as through my senses. I didn't want to just learn, I needed to know. I had to feel it, see it, touch it, hear it, and try to understand it; whatever it might be. The idea that knowledge is not just gathered through the mind, but through our senses as well, is in line with Piaget's thinking that "knowledge is information we gather from the world around us through our senses" (Desjardins 2010). Often when my memory is triggered it is a feeling, a sound, or the taste of something that is recalled, not the facts, figures or tourist attractions. For this reason I believe that knowledge is developed through both the mind and the senses to form a whole. So, part of defining knowledge for me is when the two sides of my brain unite instead of fight. As the left

side of my brain demands the facts and figures, the right side wants to chill out and experience every sensation. Only when the two sides merge and the gathered information is shared is that knowledge complete.

Much of the information crammed into my brain has been gathered through experience. This of course fits well with (Pierre) Levy's theories that knowledge comes from more than one source and that it can happen anywhere at any time. Ernst Von Glasersfeld also theorized that knowledge was gained from many sources, most notably our experiences, which is something I have in abundance. After spending more than twenty years on this seemingly never-ending quest for knowledge, I have come to terms with the idea that the more I learn the less I seem to know. If you ask me now what knowledge is, I would say it is many things. Knowledge is a product of learning. It is what we know and what we think we know, it is a construction of information retained from both formal and informal sources. It encompasses teaching, and learning in all its forms. It's private, individualistic, and can be either objective or subjective. Knowledge is an extension of the mind, always subject to modification by the learning process. Knowledge is taking what you have learnt and applying it in the real world.

Learning

Having read the leading theorists thoughts on this question of learning, knowledge, and teaching and then discussing it with the other great minds in the class, I have realized that the foundation from which I draw my knowledge has been radically adjusted, and new avenues of knowledge are branching out into other areas of my mind. This change that is occurring in my knowledge base is not unlike Pierre Levy's theories on his tree of knowledge, except our tree is a classroom built in cyberspace. This course has led me to re-evaluate the way I teach, learn and think. It has been overwhelming just how much knowledge has been crammed into my brain in such a short period of time. This learning-on-demand, condensed course made me wonder what Piaget meant when he said that knowledge is spontaneous and learning is provoked by situations. I am having trouble agreeing with either of these claims in relation to these courses I have been doing. I think knowledge can be spontaneous, but certainly not in most formal teaching. In fact the knowledge I have gained in this course has required a great deal of reflection as well as assimilation and accommodation. These have not in any way been spontaneous, although I believe they can be in

less formal learning. The same can be said for learning being provoked by situations, which is common, but not absolute, as when a baby puts something in its mouth. The hand in the mouth is a spontaneous action that is innate; it required neither teaching nor provocation. In this area of learning I agree with Papert, that it is an innate, natural process, but I do not believe it must take place in an appropriate environment; learning can also take place in other environments that are not at all appropriate, like the jungles of Vietnam, or the brothels of India, yet it happens.

Then there is Vygotsky's theory on the zone of proximal development. Since I have already made reference to the summer courses I will use them again in my discussion of the ZPD. These summer courses have been intensive in ways other than heavy workloads in a short period of time. The leap from a Fine Art background to Education has made me feel like one of my ESL students learning a new language. Between the theories, concepts, vocabulary, and terminology, some days I believe I am way beyond my zone of proximal development. Only by reading, re-reading and writing it out a dozen times does my brain finally begin to connect it all. From this experience I do believe in Vygotsky's theory, but I also believe that learning can take place outside of that zone, or I would not have made it through these courses. Perhaps the learning that occurs within the zone of proximal development is what we can handle, but if pushed as we were in these two courses, learning can occur outside that zone as well. On the other hand Vygotsky's ZPD theory could certainly explain why so many ESL students have continually low achievement rates; perhaps the programs they were admitted to, were beyond their zone of proximal development. While I may not be able to fix all the problems associated with learning, at least now I have the knowledge to understand why it is not working. I am also better able to define my perception of learning, which for me has been a life- long endeavour that takes many forms. It is also the process of acquiring knowledge, understanding, skills, values, theories, beliefs, concepts, and attitudes. It can occur through a variety of stimuli and means and leads to a change in your schema. It's being able to look at a problem from more than one angle.

Teaching

Teaching, like many things in my life was something I fell into not something I had actually chosen; in fact it was not a career I had even considered for myself. However, having said that, I now believe this is a profession to which I am well-suited and from which I gain a great deal of

satisfaction most of the time. Teaching does however come with its challenges wherever you work, and until I taught in the Middle East I believed teaching implied that learning would take place. Of course there is no guarantee of that, and more often than not in many international schools the students were not learning. I believe a large part of the problem in second language programs is motivation and relevance. The schools are nondescript with few decorations, the equipment is often broken, and little or no electronic media is available, yet educators expect students to be inspired to learn, when the teachers are not even inspired to teach. So, it is unlikely in that environment that any learning is going to occur, which is why I continually draw on my fine art background to create what I now know is a constructivist learning environment, or as close to one as is possible with few resources. I also make continual use of my photographs to teach a variety of skills because images have the power to break through language barriers, when text and audio can't. It is in these English language programs where I believe Piaget and Von Glasersfeld's constructivist environment is most needed. A place where students have an opportunity to engage in their own learning through some other means than just textbooks, should the electronic media never arrive. This is what I believe Papert meant when he said by engaging students and providing them with the tools, they can achieve their goals, but I am pretty sure he didn't mean the tool had to be electronic.

A similar issue regarding learning arose in a grade five class in Bangkok several years ago, when I was told by the administration to only write nice things and pass everyone. I was absolutely appalled, but apparently in Thai schools children were never required to pass their tests or to take responsibility of any kind for their studies; they were simply moved on to the next level regardless of their grades. It was very clear those students were not going to study if they didn't have to, so I gave them a small incentive, some chocolate. In just one month that simple piece of chocolate dramatically increased student achievement rates and continued to do so every month thereafter. What the results of this personal experiment told me was that even the most unwilling student can be taught if the lesson is relevant or there is a reason. Although Piaget probably would not agree with my methods since he believed it was the process and not the end result that mattered. While that may be true in theory, in reality the end result does matter or schools wouldn't use report cards.

In the majority of international schools the end result matters a lot, and not just to the administrators, for the students as well. And while Piaget is probably right to believe the process is more important than the end result, I doubt educators will ever come round to his way of thinking. In fact in my experience there are very few language schools that would welcome the ideas of Piaget or Von Glasersfeld because many societies still believe in the ancient methods of instruction. The idea that teaching should provide an opportunity for learning to take place was not even something I had thought much about, as it was so far removed from my own experience of education. That is until I went to India, which I found to be a country of vast contrasts and great colour. There was much to contemplate in that country as I sat in an outdoor pavilion being taught the traditional art of miniature painting. Although I had no prior experience with painting, and the teacher's English was severely limited, he was able to teach me to paint in the traditional method that was in use from sometime around the 12th century. In addition to that I was also given the rare opportunity to watch the crushing of semi precious stones that produced brilliantly coloured pigments, as well as the making of squirrel-haired paint brushes, which for me was as 'cool' as any computer program. Sometimes learning can be pretty great, especially if it opens you up to becoming a better teacher yourself. I believe this would be Levy's idea of informal teaching happening anywhere.

I think these informal lessons are important because they provide a knowledge base from which to draw upon when needed. From this base new information can be added or discarded as more accurate data is assimilated and accommodated for. (Piaget) So for me teaching is certainly more than just imparting knowledge or providing information, it is creating an environment where learning can take place and where information can be shared. Teaching is the hope of inspiring your students to learn.

What I have come to realize these past few weeks is that my ESL training is outdated by about two decades and not at all in line with my practice in the arts. Fortunately, the knowledge I am gaining in this program is teaching me much about my own practice, and the ways I can improve it. While I may not agree with everything these theorists say, I can certainly take pieces of their theories and fit them into my schema, and for those that do not fit, they will give me something to reflect upon.

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