

# THE EXPERIENCE OF LEARNING

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## *Foreword*

by WILBERT J. McKEACHIE

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We Americans are terribly provincial on our views of psychology. As contrasted with the pre-World War II period when every psychologist read German and French and knew that familiarity with European journals was essential to being an effective scholar in Psychology, we have now come to read only our own journals, (if any), and to purchase only American books. Our provincialism has had the potentially good consequence of establishing a single language in psychology, English, but it should not excuse Americans from our lack of knowledge of other languages and does not excuse lack of familiarity with scholarly contributions in English not written by Americans. Thus, I want to represent strongly to my fellow countrymen that they will be missing an important contribution to the understanding of teaching and learning if they miss this book written by British and Swedish psychologists.

It would not be fair to the authors if this foreword were to attempt to summarize all of the rich conceptualization found in this volume. Nonetheless, it is important for Americans to realize what this book contains. The authors deal with problems of learning in real educational settings. They bring to bear on these problems both a sophisticated methodology and theoretical positions fully informed by modern cognitive psychology. Their approach offers ways of looking at the phenomena of learning that complement American studies.

Unlike many edited books, this book has a focus—research on student learning in higher education. Also, unlike most writing in this area, it involves learning in two different cultures. The common focus of the research methodology and conceptual framework provides insights which ring true not only for Great Britain and Sweden but for North America and other countries as well. In fact, both those concerned about applications of cognitive psychology to education and those concerned about basic understanding of cognition will find useful and interesting ideas in these chapters.

The research approach used is what Marton calls “phenomenography”. Essentially this is a sort of hard nosed phenomenology in which intensive interviews of learners are systematically collected and analyzed. These may then be followed by experiments testing the understanding gained from interviews. The results are not only useful for theory building because their intrinsic relationship to actual experiences of students also offer compelling insights for teachers. Moreover, the book is written in a

readable and interesting style that holds the attention both of the expert and of the university teacher who is not an expert in cognitive science. In fact, since the book is about learning from the student's point of view, I would expect that many university students would benefit from the book, and I intend to assign it in my own cognitive psychology course for freshmen.

Modern cognitive psychology has stimulated university teachers to give greater attention to the importance of understanding and meaning as contrasted with recognition and reproduction as a goal of learning and higher education. This book gives us not only a great deal of research evidence with respect to the ways in which students achieve understanding but also has clear implications for methods of teaching and testing which help students find meaning — meaning which can be retrieved and used as a basis for further learning and problem solving. Faculty members uniformly think of their courses as contributing to the development of thinking that is more analytic or critical. Yet in practice we often teach in ways that direct our students to rote memorization, and then blame the students for the fact that they have not achieved our objectives.

I have often said in lectures that professors frequently confuse difficulty of a test with high standards of educational value, and that it is easy to make a test difficult without making it a more effective measure of achievement. This book has helped me to see what I was fuzzily describing. It attacks the 'building blocks' conception of knowledge — that knowledge involves knowing more and more details of a particular discipline, such as more historical dates or more historical figures. Test questions are made more difficult as they become more and more peripheral to the phenomenon or as they become narrower in scope, encompassing "very specific details of an event or minor part of a phenomenon." Such a conception of knowledge is frequently portrayed in our short answer and objective test items. Higher education, on the other hand, is generally concerned with introducing conceptions of knowledge involving greater understanding and analytic ability.

At the heart of this book is the notion that students' approaches to learning are affected by their intentions — "students who did not get 'the point' failed to do so simply because they were not looking for it." In short, some students focused on the test in itself — the pages, the words, the reproduction of the textbook, while other students focused upon the author's intentions, the main points, and the conclusions to be drawn. This finding illustrates the value of the methods used by these authors. Our typical input-output models would simply determine that some students had learned the material, and other students had not, but we would not know how these differences in achievement were related to differences in the students' purposes and strategies of learning. "It is the intention to learn from the text which makes people misunderstand it."

Qualitative methods are applied not only to learning from textbooks but also to the experiences of lectures, to essay writing in history and psychology courses, and to analysis of the process used by students in

carrying out assigned problem solving tasks. Finally, the approach is applied to the total educational orientation of students toward university life.

As contrasted with my own and other books on teaching and learning, this book is not prescriptive; nonetheless, it is helpful. What the authors do is to illustrate ways in which learning occurs and how learning has been facilitated by teachers. Readers are then left to work out for themselves how the insights may be applied to their own situations.

In short, the range and depth of the book represent a major contribution to our understanding of university teaching and learning.

## *Preface*

The scope of this book is both broad and narrow. It is about learning, and contains ideas of fundamental importance to all those who are interested in how people learn. The book has a narrow focus insofar as it presents the results of research from a series of related studies into the way students learn in higher education. Its claim to generality, however, stems from the radical nature of both the research methodology and the emerging conceptual frameworks. It provides a way of understanding student learning which has very direct implications for teachers and students in schools as well as colleges and universities, and also for psychologists interested in the phenomenon of human learning in its own right.

The similarities in the types of learning demanded of students attending universities and colleges in different countries make the findings of this research relevant across most educational systems. Or at least the effects of any major differences in the systems can be readily inferred from the variety of educational situations described by the twelve authors. Their experiences cover both Swedish and British Universities and polytechnics, and both conventional institutions and the Open University with its emphasis on distance learning. The main teaching methods—lectures, tutorials, practical work and comments on returned assignments—will be found throughout tertiary education—and in a modified form across the senior classes of secondary education or high schools. The theme of this book is thus of relevance and potential interest to educators in different countries and of different age groups—although it applies most directly to teaching and learning in higher education.

The evidence presented in the book derives mainly from interviews. Thus there is little in the way of complex statistics which would be off-putting to readers who are not familiar with social science research. Rather the findings are built up through the systematic presentation of representative extracts from interview transcripts, so the learners are speaking directly to the reader about their experiences. Of course there are conceptual frameworks derived from the data, and these bring in technical terminology. But the new terms are carefully explained, and are often self-explanatory. The book is therefore a research report—it justifies its conclusions carefully on the basis of data which has been systematically collected and analysed—but it is also intended to be readable.

Although the structure of the book follows the design for a research monograph or symposium—a general introduction followed by chapters by research workers talking about their own research findings, with a series of more integrative chapters to pull these findings together—the

level of writing and the amount of detail presented is intended to make the ideas accessible to a wider audience. There has also been a considerable effort put into creating overall coherence in the monograph. Coherence was easier than usual to obtain because similar theoretical perspectives and research approaches had been adopted by all the contributors. But in addition it was possible to bring the contributors together on two occasions, thanks to financial support from both the Swedish and the British Social Science Research Councils, to discuss first the structure of the book and then to have lengthy and detailed discussions of the draft chapters. The result is a research monograph with a difference: we hope that difference shows.

## CHAPTER ONE

### *Contrasting Perspectives on Learning*

NOEL ENTWISTLE

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#### Introduction

This book is about the experience of learning as seen from the student's point of view. But in this chapter that experience is examined first from perspectives adopted by other groups—lecturers, psychologists, and educational researchers in an attempt to explore the meaning of learning as it is understood by these different interested groups. The student's perspective will be used in subsequent chapters as a way of developing a new conceptualization of learning, but always it will be important to recognise the continuing existence of alternative frameworks for understanding learning in higher education. Each group and, ultimately, each individual, has an interpretation of reality which is in some sense unique. And yet effective communication depends on shared assumptions, definitions, and understanding. Out of this paradox both teachers and researchers struggle to make sense of the contrasting experiences of learning reported by those involved in the process of education. While earlier research tended to use ready-made concepts from psychology and sociology to explain differences in student attainment, the new research reported here develops a set of concepts altogether more accessible to teachers and students and firmly rooted in their common experiences. These concepts provide a radically different perspective on learning which should bring about a better, shared, understanding of learning processes which are currently interpreted very differently by these two groups.

The research focus of this book is higher education. Almost all the detailed evidence in subsequent chapters is drawn from that particular setting, and yet implications, in a general way at least, can be seen more broadly. In every educational system one of the prime considerations of administrators, teachers, and students alike, at each age level, is what we call the outcome of learning—what students can demonstrate of their increases in knowledge and changes in understanding as a result of their experiences in school or college. This book explores *what* students learn and *how* that learning takes place.

Educational research can be seen as careful, systematic attempts at achieving a better understanding of the educational process, with the aim of improving its effectiveness. Our task is thus to describe more clearly how learning takes place in higher education, and to point out how teaching and assessment affect the quality of that learning. From these descriptions teachers should be able to draw their own lessons about how

