

## Learning about learning: a conundrum and a possible resolution

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What is it to learn in the modern world? We can identify four *learning epochs* through which our understanding of learning has passed: a metaphysical view; an empirical view; an experiential view; and, currently, a *learning-amid-contestation* view. In this last and current view, learning has its place in a world in which, the more one learns, the more one is aware of counter positions and perspectives. Here is a conundrum for learning here becomes a kind of un-learning. This learning calls for the development among students of certain kinds of dispositions and qualities. These dispositions and qualities provide resources that enable students to venture forwards to enquire in a world in which every position and every perspective is subject to contestation. Learning here becomes the formation of a *radical-but-active-doubt*. Such a view of learning for the twenty-first century points to a poverty in the notion of 'learning outcomes', if learning is incessant but self-doubting enquiry. This learning has no outcome except the continuing formation – largely a self-formation – of the student's being. This view of learning opens the way for possibilities in curricula and pedagogy, possibilities that both unsettle students but which also help them to develop the inner resources to go on learning in a difficult world.

**Keywords:** learning; learning epochs; being; becoming; dispositions; qualities; problem-based learning

### Introduction

What is it to learn? The question has always been fraught with difficulty but perhaps it takes on particularly added layers of difficulty in the modern age. One aspect of the concept of learning is that, through one's learning, one can go on better than before. One understands the world anew (or at least some aspect of the world) and so is better placed to negotiate one's way through the world. Learning, on this view, is epistemologically efficacious. But this aspect of learning is in jeopardy. For the modern age is replete with challenge, competing values and unpredictability. Consequently, it is by no means clear that learning, understood as a means to negotiate the world more effectively, holds the educational legitimacy it once held.

What, then, against this background, might we make of the concept of learning? Can it still do work for us today? If tomorrow is not going to be like today, and if even today is presenting us with incommensurable sets of readings of the world, some of which challenge not just our actions but our identities, then the concept of learning can only be saved by some major surgery. The idea of learning as a means of securing better guides for negotiating the world has to be put in the dock if not repudiated altogether.

At the same time, learning – especially in the form of *higher* education – was held to be edifying. Through enquiry, one was elevated into a higher plane of being. Newman, after all, spoke of an 'ascent' into a 'philosophical outlook'. The German concept of *Bildung*, too, has connotations of a personal movement through study, into a different order of human being

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(cf. Lovlie, Mortenson, and Nordenbo 2003). But this idea, that learning is of personal value, is also now in difficulty in a world in which the idea of learning is problematic. In a world of contestation, who is to decide which learning is of value? How is it possible to determine which learning might be personally edifying?

Learning is in double jeopardy, therefore. On the one hand, it is not obvious that learning can provide us with a secure basis on which to move forward in the world. On the other hand, it is not clear how it might be that learning can be personally edifying. Learning about learning seems, as a result, to produce a conundrum. Learning suggests a moving forward, and an improvement in understanding; but here, learning seems to have run into a cul-de-sac.

I want to address this conundrum by following a course of reflection on what it is to be – and to become – in a complex world. I shall introduce the three terms ‘hope’, ‘faith’ and ‘venture’. I shall also want to draw on, and distinguish between, dispositions (such as ‘a will to learn’) and qualities (such as ‘fortitude’). And, I shall critique (albeit only as a side commentary) the idea of learning outcomes. I shall argue that it still makes sense to talk of learning in the contemporary world, but only if we broaden our sense of learning to include that of going on in a world in which there are no rules for going on. Admittedly, this is a large canvas to traverse in the course of a single paper but perhaps I can be forgiven for attempting a synoptic view now. Perhaps there will later occasions for more detailed exploration of particular features of the landscape sketched here.

#### Four epochs of learning

The concept of learning has undergone three revolutions, so producing four *learning epoch*, with each epoch reflecting different sets of presuppositions as to the value of learning and the learning journey it afforded. Initially, learning was a matter of departing this world and moving into a different world. This learning was metaphysical, giving one access to a meta-reality. In Plato’s imagery, one was able to escape the cave of illusions and see the world totally anew. In the language of John Henry Newman (as we have seen), one was involved in an ‘ascent’ into a philosophical outlook. This *metaphysical view of learning* constitutes learning epoch 1.

In learning epoch 2, largely since the emergence of science and the enlightenment, learning was seen as efficacious. Through learning, one put oneself into a better position in the world. There was a real and definite world and learning enabled one to know it better. One not only knew more about the world; one was able to do things one hadn’t done before, whether in relation to the physical world or the human world. This learning, this *empirical learning*, constitutes epoch 2.

Then we recognised – learnt, indeed – that the world was changing; and partly as a result of changes to the world made possible by epoch 2 learning. What we learn today won’t necessarily equip us for living effectively in the world tomorrow. Consequently, learning became a matter of moving with the times. Terms such as ‘the reflective learner’, ‘action learning’ and ‘work-based learning’ came to the fore. There were no fixed or universal rules for learning. Learning had to be *in situ*, taking place in discrete contexts. Our learning had to adapt as we went along. Our learning skills had to be ‘transferable’, enabling one to shift easily from one situation to another. This *learning-on-the-hoof in an unstable world* constitutes epoch 3 learning. It was – we may note – learning brought about as a result of learning about learning.

But a further cycle of change in the concept of learning is upon us. For now, we recognise not merely that the world is changing but that it holds within it proliferating and competing frameworks by which we might understand the world. In other words, it is now no longer clear how our learning is to proceed. This is a supercomplex world, a world characterised precisely by confusion as to what is to count as learning. What counts as learning for one group or society

may not at all be what another group or society sees as learning; and there is no obvious way of choosing between the two views. We may note en passant that this state of learning anomie arises partly as a result of learning across the globe in different milieu and different cultures. And new definitions of learning are arising all the time, not least through the possibilities of Internet interactivity. This learning-amid-contestation constitutes epoch 4.

Each of the four learning epochs poses its characteristic problems. Or rather, there is a single dominant problem, and it takes on different forms across the four epochs. The dominant issue is always this: what is to count as effective learning? In epoch 1, in metaphysical learning, the test is one of personal transformation: has one been transported into a new order of being? In epoch 2, in empirical learning, the test is in learning, is one's understanding of the world-in-itself advancing? In particular, has one arrived at secure understandings of the world? Does one's understandings correspond to the way the world actually is? In epoch 3, in learning in an unstable world, the test is that of performative efficaciousness. Is one's learning about the world and about one's learning in the world enabling one to maintain one's effectiveness in the world?

In epoch 4, however, it is by no means clear how to answer the dominant question – 'what is to count as effective learning?' For now, there are proliferating and rival accounts precisely over just that matter. Now, there are all manner of ideas as to what is to constitute learning. There are no agreed criteria of learning. Some say it is getting by in the world; some say it is making money in the world; some say it is learning that is going to save the Earth from environmental degradation; some say – or believe – that it is a matter of serendipity, of what emerges spontaneously from unfettered instant and global communication; some believe that it is what is constituted in practice by 'communities of practice'; some – such as the reiki-ians – believe that it is about coming to find new energies for oneself in a troubling world. At the same time, representatives of each of the previous epochs – the metaphysicals, the empiricists and the performativists – are still with us, pressing their own viewpoints, as competing discourses of learning in society. (For older learning viewpoints never die; they only fade a little.)

This situation is a nice cameo of supercomplexity (Barnett 2000). That is, it is a situation of proliferating and often competing viewpoints over fundamental descriptions of the world before us. If we cannot agree as to what counts as learning, we certainly cannot agree as to what is to count as effective learning. And there seems to be no way through this impasse. On the contrary, the maze seems daily to grow more impenetrable as new definitions of learning arise.

### **Learning conundrums**

It has been remarked that the more we come to know, so our ignorance in turn grows. In parallel to a knowledge explosion has arisen 'an ignorance explosion' (Lukasiewicz 1994). It is not just that we become aware of 'known unknowns' but that our knowledge has made possible interventions in the world such that it changes continuously and so our knowledge of the world is always behind the game. Our knowledge of the world has put the world beyond our full understanding for it permanently recedes before us.

A corresponding situation has arisen in relation to learning. The more we have learnt about the world, so our relationships to the world have grown more complex. And the challenges on our learning continue to mount. After all, human beings are part of the world. So our learning is in part learning about ourselves; and that in turn includes learning about our learning itself.

Here lie conundrums. The more we learn, the more learning becomes more difficult. Learning has an incessantly recursive quality. It cannot help but learn about itself. And that becomes evermore complicated as the world becomes more complex and so too our relationship with and in the world.

A second conundrum is this. Learning was supposed to have edifying properties. It was supposed to lead to a better life or to a better world or to a better state of being. Now, crudely, the reverse is the case. Learning too often leads to a more troubled state of existence or to a more fractious world. 'Better Socrates dissatisfied than a pig satisfied' was the justification for the problematic consequences of learning. But now, in this interdependent age, it seems that it is not just Socrates that is dissatisfied but being as such. Being is now aware that it is dislodged from a satisfied state. A dissatisfied world rests on the shoulders of being. Learning is turning out to be unduly and wearisomely troubling.

The very value of learning is here in double jeopardy. Learning about learning has run us into an epistemological cul-de-sac: we no longer know how satisfactorily – with any degree of consensus – how to learn. And learning about learning has run us into an ontological cul-de-sac, no longer helping to take forward what there is in the world. The value of learning is no longer clear. It seems to have neither personal nor worldly warrant.

Accordingly, the legitimacy of learning is in doubt, beset as it is by its conundrums and cul-de-sacs. Is there a way forward?

### **Being and becoming**

The contemporary world is radically unstable. It is 'radically' unstable because the very categories by which we relate to the world and through which we seek to understand it are contested. Disputes, accordingly, are not so much about empirical evidence – do we have sufficient evidence? Is it of the right quality? Has it been produced through rigorous methods? – but are much more to do with the frameworks through which we comprehend the world. And there is no way of deciding between the frameworks.

Three objections are lodged against this set of claims. The first is to suggest that we can bracket some frameworks while we examine in a piecemeal fashion individual frameworks. This idea led Popper to speak of the myth of the framework (e.g., Popper 1970): he felt that in this way, he could dissolve the point about incommensurable frameworks. The trouble with this idea, though, is that it presumes some consensus over the value background by which one might test a framework; and it is that that is in dispute.

A second objection is that characteristically we don't have hang-ups about our understanding of the world. Certainly, we can and do go on refining it but, by and large, we are in agreement about how to go on in the world. The world exists, we know it exists and we press on in it. This is the Samuel Johnson line: I refute it (the antirealist view) thus! The trouble with this viewpoint is that it is an ostrich viewpoint: it refuses to acknowledge that there are different viewpoints, different frameworks indeed, and that one's own world is not necessarily shared and, in fact, is not shared by many others.

The last objection to the multiple perspectives line is that it is perniciously a relativist point of view and solves no problems. There are disagreements in the world: very well, let us debate them and work them through. In their different ways, Gellner and Habermas were both of this persuasion. This is the 'reasonable people know how reasonably to reason' line of argument. The trouble with this line of thought is twofold. Firstly, there is disagreement over the rules of fair engagement. Secondly, the very idea of rational dialogue presupposes arbitrary constraint on reason itself. Nietzsche, Derrida, Lyotard and Foucault have all put themselves into this latter camp.

Here, we do not have to delve into the details of these debates. The point of these reflections, for our purposes, is to emphasise that learning is fraught with difficulty, for there is dispute over our relationship with the world and for coming to an understanding about the world, *and* for finding agreement or even over the rules of dialogue in the world.

A further troublesome dimension opens up here. It has long been held to be part of higher education that it offers opportunities for human being to flourish and so for human becoming. On this view, a university is a space for students to realise themselves in worthwhile ways; and authentically to become themselves. In a higher education worthy of the name, individuals not just learnt about some aspects of the world – in disciplinary study – but they also came to learn about themselves. In their programmes of study, and through their wider university and student experiences, students are called forth, called out of themselves, to give of themselves in unfamiliar and stretching circumstances.

Characteristically, the situations that comprise the student experience have standards written into them, such that there are limits to what can be done or said, and there is a certain degree of difficulty or personal challenge; and there is a certain durability attaching to them. These features are certainly to be found both in curricula situations whether on or off campus (in laboratories, in essay writing, in group tasks and in studios); and would include off-site situations, including fieldwork and work and clinical situations. These features are even also to be found in somewhat more informal settings, outside the formal curriculum, such as helping with student newspapers, sports teams, student associations or debates and in action in the community. Not infrequently, too, students are brought up sharp against the contestability of the rules within which their activities are placed – again whether in their chosen disciplines and professional settings or in their extra-mural activities.

Students, accordingly, are being obliged to understand and live with the tenuous nature of the frameworks in which they have their being as students. Student becoming, therefore, has a dual character. On the one hand, students come to see the world through new perspectives; the familiar world is made unfamiliar before becoming familiar through conceptual and experiential frameworks. Students move into new spaces. This is an essential part of higher education. On the other hand, students come to realise that the very frameworks that have imparted new perspectives are themselves sets of conventions. It is not just that there are disputes within the frameworks but that the validity or worthwhileness of the frameworks are themselves in dispute.

Student becoming, then, has a Janus-like appearance. The student lives in a new place, and acquires a new identity even; but is aware, even if only dimly, that things could be yet other. The student is here and yet not here. Here lies the ‘authoritative uncertainty’ of which – quite some time ago – Sinclair Goodlad (1976) spoke. The student is both sure and unsure of his or her ground. The student has hold of a rock but it is slippery. The substance of the rock is not illusory; the ways of going on – in essay writing, in the laboratory, in the studio, in the clinical situation, and even in running a student society – have evolved over time and they have a kind of solidity to them. Here are forms of life. But the student has also become aware that these forms of life could be other than they are. *Here and not-here*: this is the nature of the student’s new being. This, indeed, is the becoming promised by a *higher* education.

This expression may seem strange but, in substance, there is nothing new in it. It has been, after all, for a long time part of the self-rhetoric of higher education that it encourages *self-critical* thought. What is self-critical thought if it is not thought that monitors itself? And, in this self-monitoring must come thought that recognises that it itself could be other than it is. And since, as we have seen, being a student involves action – and potentially in several domains – it follows too that the critical self-monitoring has to include the student’s own actions.

So it is part of the very meaning of higher education that it looks to the formation of student being that is both here and not-here. The student has his or her thoughts and actions in the here-and-now but is always aware that those thoughts and actions could be otherwise. And he or she also accrues the capacities to stand outside that here-and-now to self-critique those thoughts and actions. To use a term deployed by Giddens (1995), we may say that the student

acquires the capacities to *disembed* herself; to wrest herself out of the very traditions and forms of going on into which she has been initiated and while still living in them.

### Hope and faith

But what, then, if anything, will serve as a basis on which to found this capacity to live in the here and not-here; this willingness always to displace oneself into a position from which to critique oneself? For by itself, as remarked, learning now becomes a source of unease, and even of personal destabilisation. Far from offering more and more security, now learning can only bring more insecurity. The more one learns, the more one has at one's disposal to critique. Here lies a paradox of learning: before one's learning, what one has taken the world to be was a source of security: the world is like this! Now, learning – the learning characteristic of higher education at least - brings with it a sense that one's perceptions of the world and very concepts for framing the world could be otherwise (cf. Badiou and Žižek 2009). How, then, might being be filled out such that it is more secure amid this higher learning?

The terms 'hope' and 'faith' may be helpful to us here. They are actually interlocking terms but they have their own nuances.

Of the two terms, here, faith is the more fundamental. In grappling with her experiences, in submitting herself to the challenges and the standards inherent in them, the student has to have faith; faith that things may come out reasonably well for her; faith that her tutors and lecturers will be there, prepared to give her feedback; faith that with effort and persistence, she just may come to a fair understanding of the material or be able to take on the skills expected of her. Faith here is an untestable belief and yet, despite its untestability, is a necessary condition of the student's keeping going.

The three faiths I have just identified are all to do with the student's position as a student; her place as a student: things coming out reasonably well; her tutors offering some support in a sustained way; her efforts helping her progress. They all relate to her being as a student, and that *being* being supported and carried forward. We may call these ontological faiths, relating to the student's being in the world. But there are also more epistemological faiths at work. The student has faith that there are some epistemological connections among her experiences; they are not just random experiences. The student has faith that there is some substance to the intellectual and professional fields to which she is being exposed; they tell of the world in some way. And the student has faith that validity comes into play in her own developing accounts of the world: the evaluations to which she is subject are not arbitrary but are influenced by the norms and standards in the fields in question.

Beyond such presences of faith lies hope. The two terms are, as remarked, intertwined. The student hopes that things will turn out well, both today and over the course of her programme of studies. This hope lives in the future. While her faiths can never be fully tested – or thereby even refuted – her hopes can be dashed. The lecturer may not turn up; her assignment may meet with a poor grade; try as she might, still she can't get her head round a concept or master a skill. Today has not gone too well; it may have even be 'troublesome' (Meyer and Land 2005), but perhaps tomorrow will be better. I have just 'failed my interview' for my first job but perhaps I shall succeed in next week's interview.

Faith and hope, therefore, together provide the student with resources for going on, for meeting the day with some cheerfulness. Such resources, of relying on and believing in the world (as in faith) and of thinking that things may yet come out well (as in hope), are especially valuable amid the challenges we identified earlier that a higher learning may bring. A higher learning, it will be recalled, is liable to issue in personal destabilisation. A higher learning – of the world in itself and of engagements with the world – is accompanied with critique that becomes

self-critique. One knows one could learn with deeper understanding or even that there is doubt over the worthwhileness of what one has been learning; one knows that one only has a rudimentary grasp of how to handle oneself and is doubtful that anything approaching a full mastery is within one's compass and, anyway, one isn't sure that the procedures in question are ethically acceptable (the use of animals for dissection purposes).

One's learning in higher education is accompanied by self-questioning and even self-doubt. One knows, if nothing else, that one's learning could be other than it is. In such a situation, faith and hope are especially valuable. I have been suggesting that they provide the resources to keep oneself going. The matter, however, can be put somewhat differently and more strongly. Faith and hope help the formation of the being of the student so as to bring the student into a new and purposeful relationship with the world.

Together, faith (that the world that I understand has some kind of substance to it) and hope (that my learning will help me into a better place of understanding and even action) help one to *venture* forward. Hope and faith give the student the resources to tackle the world, and to learn about it, and to build on one's learning. Through this venturing, one's learning may be connected with one's sense of oneself in the world and one's life plans. Here lies the possibility of something approaching an integrated life. But this venturing, this taking on the world, is only possible through faith and hope.

### **Venturing forward**

In these reflections, I have been implicitly arguing that learning at the level of higher education is at least as much an ontological matter as it is an epistemological matter. Learning, at this level, is in a real sense learning about oneself; and there are levels at which this learning takes place. At a straightforward and basic level, one may learn as to whether one prefers 'concrete' or 'abstract' forms of understanding; whether one prefers local objects or universal objects of one's attention; whether as to the physical world or the human world; and whether a kind of autobiographical learning (where one associates the learning with one's own projects) or a more distant unattached form of learning.

On all these dimensions of learning – and yet others – there are options; and characteristically, even in a single class within a particular discipline, students may vary in their 'learning approaches' and their 'learning styles' (cf. Ramsden 1988; Light and Cox 2001; Brockbank and McGill 2007). And a reflexive higher education will bring one's own learning preferences from a tacit into a full consciousness. There are, though, yet deeper aspects of self that come into play, aspects to which our concept of venturing points.

Venturing forward is but a shorthand for a penumbra of dispositions that carry an individual into his or her learning. In learning, one is moving oneself from one place – of limited understanding – into another place, of somewhat fuller understanding. To make this movement requires certain dispositions. These include:

- a will to learn;
- a will to encounter strangeness (for in higher education, the familiar is rendered unfamiliar);
- a will to engage (for a higher learning requires a personal engagement with the material and experiences to hand);
- a preparedness to listen;
- a willingness to be changed as a result of one's learning;
- a determination to keep going.

To help in understanding these (six) dispositions, we may distinguish them from qualities that have a particular affinity with higher education (Barnett 2007):

- courage;
- carefulness;
- resilience;
- self-restraint;
- integrity;
- respect for others.

The dispositions are fundamental: they mark out what it is to venture forward in general but especially in an age of uncertainty. The qualities are the ways in which individuals colour those dispositions. The qualities bestow a person's character; but in order to have a character, in order to acquire his or her qualities, a person needs to be a person as such, a human being engaging intentionally with the world. And it is through his or her dispositions that a person engages with the world.

The point of mentioning dispositions and qualities is less to develop a thesis about them as such and more to point up the place of venturing in the context of learning. In order for learning to be authentic, one has to venture into learning. And for that, one has to have the appropriate dispositions – such as the six dispositions just encountered. I cannot learn authentically unless I have a will to learn, a will to encounter strangeness, a will to engage and so forth. I venture forward with some confidence through my possession of these *learning dispositions*. And these learning dispositions are both 'moral and epistemic virtues' (Brady and Pritchard 2003) and they can be a natural concomitant of appropriate curricula and pedagogies.

Here, we must return to our earlier point of departure. I argued that learning has passed through four epochs and that the current epoch is one in which learning has destabilising characteristics. In such an epoch, one may easily – as Bertand Russell once put it – be 'paralysed into inaction'. In such an epoch, too, as Yeats put it, 'the worst are full of passionate intensity while the best lack all conviction'. Learning allows one to recognise that one's own viewpoint is but a viewpoint, that other viewpoints are possible and, indeed, are present. One sees all sides of an argument. Why then press just one argument? Learning, on this view, can lead to paralysis. One hesitates to proffer a point of view precisely because one senses and may even be aware that any viewpoint is partial and that there will be contending viewpoints.

It is here that lies the value of venturing. In venturing, one presses forward while unsure of what one may encounter on the way. This is no will to power but a will to explore, to engage, to enquire; and to open oneself to strangeness. It is a will to venture forward.

## Conclusions

We are, I think, in a position to draw some conclusions.

Firstly, the evolution of learning has brought us to a point where the value of learning is problematic. Partly through the explosion of knowledges and critique in the world, learning is always a kind of *learning-to-doubt*, in which the qualifications that attach to learning attach to the very forms of understanding in which learning takes place.

Secondly, and arising from our first conclusion, learning is now in part an ontological matter, affecting the nature of being and becoming. Learning now becomes a matter of a development of human being that is appropriate for a learning-to-doubt. The will to learn becomes a will to live with ineradicable doubt. This is a coming into a mode of being that is continuously unstable, and yet is able to dwell there. A higher learning thus promises just this: a coming not just into a different place but coming into that place with one's eyes open, as it were. So one lives amid continuous movement; restless, never content. But not necessarily always moving forward; more a zig-zag, moving forwards and backwards, as optimism and pessimism succeed each other; as positions are taken up and then surrendered; as alternative perspectives are embraced. In a



genuine higher learning, one learns to accommodate to this flux; and even acquire the resources for actively heightening this flux.

Thirdly, seeing learning as this becoming, this *coming-into-active-doubt*, has large pedagogical and curricula implications. Negatively, it points to a poverty in the idea of ‘learning outcomes’, in which curricula and pedagogies are so shaped as to instantiate certain skills in students. For such skills are points of closure when what is now required is a form of learning in which one is continually opening up for oneself, even amid radical doubt. More positively, the idea of learning as a coming-into-active-doubt opens up new possibilities for approaching curricula and pedagogy as projects to encourage this form of student becoming. Implications arise for the teacher–student relationship, for the ‘stretching’ of the student, for placing the student in situations of cognitive and experiential complexity and for the students in a cohort engaging with each other’s different points of view. Working all this through would be a large and even inexhaustible project.

We may finally conclude that learning can only be given its due as a higher learning in the contemporary world if we broaden our sense of learning to include that of going on in a world in which there are no non-contestable rules for going on. As active and radical doubt, learning has to doubt itself; but then it will always find new resources for continuing that process.

### Notes on contributor

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