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I. Introduction: “Unsettling tradition”

1.1 From ‘education’ to ‘learning’: a change of Discourse¹

There has been and continues to be growing interest in ‘learning’. Explorations of the different kinds of ‘learning’ which have been identified are now more frequent (for a recent summary, see Belanger 2011). The most important driver for this strengthened focus is a desire to move away from talking about education seen as teacher-centred instruction to a more learner-centred approach, not so much from a search for more effective ways of teaching but from increasing calls for the measurement of educational outcomes such as PISA and PIAAC (Meyer and Benavot 2013). But equally newly identified ways of learning, especially in the uses of digital technology, have highlighted the processes of learning independently of educational programmes (see e.g. Jacobson 2012; Erstad and Sefton-Green 2013).

As several writers have shown in recent years, there has been “a remarkable rise of the concept of ‘learning’ ... [A] new language of learning” has been developed, especially in the context of discussions of lifelong learning. The introduction of new concepts based on learning rather than education has led to “the redefinition of teaching as the facilitation of learning and of education as the provision of learning opportunities or learning experiences”, “the transformation of adult education into ‘adult learning’, and ... the replacement of ‘permanent education’ by ‘lifelong learning’” (Biesta 2009 p 37; Federighi 1999 p 1).

1 Some socio-linguists write a capital letter to the word ‘Discourse’ when it refers to the shared uses of language within a specific group (a ‘Discourse community’) alongside customary practices and values, ways of thinking and perspectives, rather than to its general meaning of ‘language-in-use’, ‘talk’, ‘conversation’ (see Gee 1990). I am using the word in this sense in this text. See pages 52-53 for a fuller discussion

1.2 The dangers of confusion

This change has not of course gone unchallenged, for there are dangers in what has been called the “learnification of education” (Biesta 2004; Biesta 2006; Haugsbakk and Nordkvelle 2007; Rogers 1997). For one thing, it leads at times to some essentialism of ‘learning’, that is, seeing learning as if it is only one thing – a view which is now increasingly being challenged. Secondly, it “has made it more difficult to ask questions about content, purpose and direction of education” (Biesta 2009 p 39). To talk about ‘helping someone to learn’ says nothing about the value of what is being learned; it seems to regard all forms of learning of equal value (see Biesta 2009 for a powerful argument on this subject).

But perhaps more pervasively, there is a tendency to see ‘learning’ as ‘participation in learning activities’, although we know one may participate in a learning programme but learn little of what is being taught. And this can lead to “the persisting confusion of education with learning” (Jarvis 1990 p 203). “Lifelong education and lifelong learning are [often] used interchangeably”; “... there is a tendency to treat education and learning as synonymous concepts” (Duke 2001 p 502). But it is not very helpful to see them as the same thing: “... a long tradition of scholarship in the sociocultural tradition distinguishes learning from the processes of schooling” (Sefton-Green and Erstad 2013 p 1). We can use the analogy of flour and bread. Bread is made from flour; but not all flour is bread, bread is *processed* flour. Similarly, all education is learning; but not all learning is education, education is processed, i.e. *planned*, learning. Learning is much wider than education.

This con-fusion of learning with education is particularly harmful when it takes the form of “the use of the word ‘learner’ instead of ‘student’ or ‘pupil’” (Biesta 2009 p 37). In much of the Discourse of lifelong learning (see e.g. Longworth and Davies 1996), the term ‘learners’ is used to mean ‘participants in learning programmes’, whether inside educational establishments or outside (e.g. work-place learning programmes). Non-participants in such learning programmes are frequently referred to as ‘non-learners’. But, as we shall see, this ignores or demeans all that everyday learning which non-participants of learning programmes do, much of it unconsciously. It assumes that formal and non-formal learning are the ‘centralities’, and that other forms of learning such as informal learning, if they exist at all, are way out on the periphery. But there is an alternative understanding; that there is no such person as a ‘non-learner’, that everyone learns informally during the course of their everyday lives. And this view suggests that this everyday

learning, far from being minor or unimportant, is central to all discussions of education.

This change from 'education' to 'learning' in our current Discourses may help to make clearer the fact that there is no consensus to be found as yet as to the meaning of the word 'learning'. Many different definitions are in use at the same time, and when engaging with texts where the word 'learning' is being used, it is important to try to identify the meaning attached to the word in those contexts, and whose meaning it is being expounded. In other words, in each situation, we need to ask, "what does 'learning' mean in this context? what practices are included and what are excluded? by whom? on what authority? and why?" This study seeks to explore some of the disagreements in this field and to propose its own construction as part of the "debates that unsettle tradition" (Sefton-Green and Erstad 2013 p 7).

In the context of the current debates between cognitive psychologists and socio-cultural educationalists (see e.g. Anderson et al 1996, 1997; Greeno 1997; Mason 2007), this study is located within the socio-cultural school, with its presuppositions about learning practices, situated learning (Lave and Wenger 1991; Kirschner and Whitson 1997), social learning (Wals 2007; Reed et al 2010) and learning differences, rather than in the schools of the so-called cognitive revolution (or more properly 'revolutions', see Klahr 1976; Rogoff and Lave 1984; Stich 1983; Baars 1986), influenced as these are by brain studies and neuro-science, with their concentration on problem-solving, memory, consciousness and connectivism. But what has struck me strongly is the way in which consensus (at least in terminology) seems to be emerging in several areas, not least in the appreciation of the significance of the constructivist work of the learner in the processes of learning, and the importance of context for learning outcomes (see e.g. Gelman 1994 and sources cited there; Straka 2004; Schugurensky 2007; Egetenmeyer 2011, 2012). I have tried to indicate some of these emerging agreements, but I am sure more are apparent than I have suggested here.

I am grateful to many people for their help in preparing these pages, not least an anonymous reviewer who reminded me of the importance of the cognitivist school and urged that we try to engage rather than talk past each other.

