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A new learning theory derived from a phenomenological exploration of feelings, thinking and learning through practitioner action research.

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Background

Emotional learning problems are caused by the complex interactions of changing social contexts, genetic and biological propensities, life experiences and transitions tending towards diverse and serendipitous individual learning development. There has been some acceptance of 'emotional intelligence' in the British educational system, but teachers and other professionals have lacked a theory to justify associated work (Goleman, 1996; Gardner, 1993, 2009). The feelings theory I have developed through participative action research over a period of 10 years answers this need, providing a rationale for 'emotional learning' and demonstrating possible teaching approaches. It justifies curriculum adaptation creating appropriate learner friendly contexts and recording 'feelings feedback' in assessing achievement (Hawkins, 2010).

Research Questions

My conclusions about the effects and functions of feelings in learning arose from analysing narrative data derived as a student, a teacher and as an educational mentor, researcher and evaluator. I recorded my own and participants' feelings as I worked with them during learning sequences. In this research, feelings were defined as physical and mental sensations. Four data strands contributed to a learning theory developed over ten years' engagement with different participant groups. I asked the guiding question: "What is the relationship between feelings, thinking and learning?" with an appropriate subsidiary question for each strand. I started by looking at reasons for teenage disaffection with school. While home-tutoring I asked the question: "Emotional blocks: what do they tell us about the learning process?" The narratives arising from working with 12 school refusers (6 boys and 6 girls between 14-16 years of age) revealed complex ecological factors of which as a school based teacher I was previously unaware. In the second strand I asked: "How do feelings affect my learning and teaching?" resolving learning problems and developing my personal and professional insight reflexively. The third strand recorded 8 teachers' reflections asking: "How do feelings affect other teachers' learning and teaching?" The fourth strand explored the theory's potential to inform professional practice asking: "How might feeling-responsive environments facilitate the learning of professionals and pupils alike?" Data was analysed from the educational evaluation for Creative Partnerships of a primary school creativity festival involving six inner city primary schools and a city theatre situated in the U.K (ibid; Creativity, Culture & Education (CCE), 2008).

Methods

Emotional difficulties happen at all levels of educational ability. As editor of a book by a European academic group about pupil underachievement, Montgomery recommended an ecosystemic approach, implying curriculum adaptation to group and individual's needs (Montgomery, 2000). She found that underachievement of high ability individuals reveals 'significant overlaps with emotional and behavioural difficulties'. She believes that 'fifty percent or more' of children 'might show untapped gifts and talents or potential for high achievement if we can only provide them with an appropriate curriculum' (ibid, pp. 2-3). Swick and Williams (2006) find that 'Bronfenbrenner's bioecological models' (1979, 2005) i.e. (1) Microsystem, (2) Mesosystem, (3) Exosystem, (4) Macrosystem, and (5) Chronosystem are helpful to professionals in understanding how to provide appropriate interventions for families experiencing stress syndromes creating serious problems such as chemical dependency, family violence, and homelessness. They find that 'each system depends on the contextual nature of the person's life and offers an evergrowing diversity of options and sources of growth' (ibid, p. 371). It

is not just the sequence and importance of life experiences and transitions in the chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) which impact on ongoing development, but the interaction and effect of established, current and spontaneous feelings in the learning process. Cognitive research findings are compatible with this concept (Greenfield, S. 2000, 2004, 2007; Ramachandran, 2003).

Frame

The research method was developed as a type of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. I narrated my own professional learning journey shifting frames of reference around the guiding question, posing subsidiary questions as a learner and adopting different professional roles. As much of the data was participant generated, their own perspectives were influential. There was a reiterative current of ideas flowing throughout, informed by theoretical literature, my own and my participants' experience. All of this indicates that I (and my participants also to some extent) have been involved in a process of phenomenological reduction in carrying out the research (Bruzina, 2004). In pursuing my own route, I created a hybrid methodology exhibiting ideas found in IPA and Grounded theory (Willig, 2001). I used a combination of thematic analysis and Claxton's positive learning behaviour categories (2002) as a coding paradigm. In this Resilience is associated with absorption, managing distractions, noticing, perseverance; Resourcefulness with questioning, making links, imagining, reasoning; Reflectiveness with planning, revising, distilling, meta-learning and Reciprocity with interdependence, collaboration, empathy, listening and imitation.

Research findings

Feelings are too often dismissed by teachers and learners restricting progress instead of leveraging understanding. Situations which are conducive to thoughtful feelings in learning can be created. Learning development can be enhanced by taking the attitude that feelings are legitimate thought processes intrinsic to learning. It is not necessary to immediately understand or agree with all of these emotional expressions, questioning and disagreeing being a part of the internal emotional adjustment of learning. For example an emotional assertion shared may lead to a leap in understanding which encompasses quite the opposite view. It is possible to use 'feeling rich' methods and contexts which allow for the expression and exploration of feelings, e.g. outdoor, practical, community activities and the arts to enhance traditional subjects. Student cohorts' expectations, culture and context may usefully be researched in devising approaches to teaching and curriculum adaptation. Further adaptation may be necessary through mentoring and monitoring 'feelings feedback' during the teaching process.

The research proved that complex emotional rationales operate in the human subconscious impacting on learning development in progress. Some have a basis in previous experience, but others are spontaneously based in learning moments as they happen. Even though this may seem obvious when able teachers demonstrate their expertise successfully, this area has not previously been researched or argued out sufficiently as an aspect of learning theory (Honan, 2006). Vygotsky's 'zones of proximal development' in learning might be utilised more effectively if 'feelings' were more readily acknowledged by teachers as a matter of professional practice and theory (Vygotsky, 1896-1934). Subconscious feeling based rationales arising from environments and emotional history within learning may be accessed, researched, rationalised, developed and to some extent even predetermined and elicited, when these processes are considered seriously by learners and educators.

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