Modernism's Devastating Impact on Learning:

The Tyranny of Consciousness

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Richard Feynman tells the story of his early days as a Physics professor at Cornell University. He had been working very hard in his lab and was not coming up with any new ideas or solutions. He had decided he was "burned out". He says "They expect me to accomplish something, and I can't accomplish anything! I have no ideas." (Feynman, R. 1985, p. 155). Later, as he thought back, he realized that he used to enjoy Physics. He played with it and had fun with it. "I used to do whatever I felt like doing --- it didn't have to do with whether it was important for the development of Nuclear Physics, but whether it was interesting and amusing for me to play with." (p. 155).

He reports that within a week of recovering this playful attitude, he was walking through a cafeteria. He saw someone throwing a plate into the air. Feynman noticed something in the way the plate wobbled that interested him. He set about trying to understand it just because he was curious. It was hard to see how understanding the wobble of a plate could be useful to Nuclear Physics, but it was the beginning of the idea that led to his Nobel prize.

This story seems to counter most of what modern conceptions of learning have led us to believe. There is almost a puritan ethic around learning which maintains that it should be not fun, that learning is work and play is a break from learning. Students have even told me that they believed they should sit in a straight backed chair at a desk even though they never study that way because it is too uncomfortable.

One of the ways modern thought has impacted our current conceptions of learning is in this privileging of conscious thought and intention. Learning has been technologized while unconscious, dream, vision, intuition and imagination have been marginalized, much to our detriment. Through the lens of modernism, learning is about certainty and control. There is a fixed reality "out there". Learning is an adaptive response to the environment in which one's ideas become more and more

isomorphic to this environment. In this paper, I argue that we need to recover the contribution of the unconscious and develop a view of learning that frees the mind.

Unconscious Thought

Human history has long speculated about unconscious mental processes. Ancient peoples talked about aspects of mind which influenced thought and action by their results even though the processes themselves are unknown and, in some cases, unknowable (Whyte, 1960). Harre' and Lamb (1983) argued that the ancients, mystics, and Jungians believed that unconscious thought was a means of access to "external spiritual or transcendental powers" (p. 647) Others, like Plato, wrote of the unconscious as a way to explain "certain aspects of memory, selective perception or intuition" (p. 647). Freud established the importance of such processes clinically and made them a cornerstone of his theories.

Freud (1963) wrote about the unconscious mainly through studying psychiatric patients. In his view the unconscious was a closet into which one has placed "painful memories and anxiety-laden wishes which had been subjected to repression" (Harre' & Lamb, 1983, p. 648). Under Freud's influence, the unconscious became suspect. It was no longer a source of intuitive or spiritual information and contact, but a dark space where we are influenced by urges we would rather deny.

Freud represented these processes as automatic and mechanical. They are beyond our control and beneath our awareness. Freud's ideas further distance us from our experience. In fact, we are now somewhat suspicious of it. Science is showing us that things are not as they appear. The table that appears solid is "really" a mass of moving atoms. Now Psychology is telling us that our experience of ourselves is not as it seems. Forces we do not intend and of which we are not aware control us.

The impact of this idea on learning is incalculable. The unconscious, which had been relied upon as a rich source of information, imagination, and even access to the transcendental is now a dark source of unexpected and unknowable action bubbling up from a repressed past. Models of learning clearly would not include a contribution from such an unconscious.

Post-Modern Learning Theory

Learning in the modern period is linear, conscious, intentional and unidimensional. Learning in the post-modern world is about relation, pattern, and form. In this new view, mind is many layered, recursive, and related to the external environment in mutually causal ways. There is more room here for the messy kind

of learning characterized by spurts and gaps. It allows for the surprises and seemingly random connections, for the dynamic bubbling up of ideas that form themselves into relationships.

A New View of the Unconscious

Gregory Bateson argues that unconscious thought is qualitatively different from conscious thought. He describes consciousness as linear, partial, and selective. It deals in description, classification, and comparison. Unconscious thought is global. It is the primary means of experiencing relationships between self and others and self and environment. Bateson statess that a system of precise, complex mental algorithms co-evolved in people and a world characterized by such redundancy and pattern. Korzybski says that we construct these relations between the world and ourselves. He said that all order is a result of this kind of mapping process, and cautions us that "the map is not the territory." (p. 68) To continue the metaphor, in unconscious thought map and territory are equated, whereas conscious thought deals only with the map.

Thus, for Bateson, conscious and unconscious thought serve different functions. Unconscious thought is not simply transferred to consciousness, but must be translated with great difficulty. Such translation is best approximated through metaphor. Both kinds of knowing as necessary, each as a correction for the other.

Translation of unconscious to conscious thought is difficult. There is a relation I wish to describe. I try out words and I know when some seem to fit and other do not. I have a sense of when I come closer to "it". There is always a point where I feel the inadequacy of the words, but have to be satisfied with close enough. Through it all there is a clear sense of what "it" is, this relation that I am trying to capture in words. In the lived experience of scholarly work there is a sense, as phenomenologist Robert Romanyshyn says, that the universe would speak through me. The difficulty is in finding a way to write it down.

Bateson does not wholly abandon the Freudian sense of the unconscious. He says that the unconscious layers of mind function in 3 different ways: 1) as the oldest and most primary means of experiencing relationships, 2) as the deep levels to which we sink knowledge or habits, and 3) as the Freudian closet into which repressed material is put

The second layer, the development of habit, is an economy of thought; a way of dealing with knowledge and habits that are sufficiently familiar and sufficiently general that they do not have to be inspected. Bateson says that this

is the layer to which we sink the habitual and, over time, it becomes almost part of the "hardware". (steps)

It is the first layer that has been neglected, in part because we have, until lately, misunderstood emergence. Complex systems are interdependent, such that regulation at one level produces characteristics at another level. The interaction of individual components at one level of such a system leads to the emergence of global properties at another level. This global emergent property feeds back to influence the components that produced it. This is what Stuart Kaufmann calls "order for free"; individual components, operating on local rules, generate what appears to be global order. Linear models historically have misinterpreted this global order as if a chain of dependent events or some form of global control produced it.

Emergent order is one of the delights of thinking. The experience of elements of an idea coming together into a new coherence is one of the satisfactions of human life. Scholars and poets alike know that this kind of ordering can not be forced, and does not occur on a timetable. The best we can do is to have a prepared mind. To wait, as convocation award winner once said, "until the muse in my mind opens the door and is willing to share his wisdom."

Conclusion

The emerging view of learning is a radical departure from previous ones. It is not captured in a simple, well-articulated model, and it may never be. The ideas presented here are rather like a set of fingers pointing at the moon. Ah, but what a moon it is. The emerging view suggests that learning is a fundamental, unconscious process of sensing relationships, redundancy, difference and pattern. We can act on this sense of things, but because much of our learning depends upon social networks, we often need to translate what we are learning into a form which can be shared with others.

Consciousness makes possible shared knowledge and refinement of ideas. The translated form of knowledge is more logical, coherent and consistent and thus, allows us to see the ideas in a different way. This is both its strength and its weakness. As translated knowledge it also introduces errors, gaps, and inconsistencies. Conscious is a good justifier and it deals with its own inadequacy by creating convincing glosses and cover stories. It presents ideas in such a way that they appear seamless. At best, the translation is from analog (unconscious) to digital (conscious), which necessarily collapses information.

Robert Quinn (Deep Change) tells the story about an interview with a CEO about the first five years of the company.

> It was an impressive story about the unfolding of a clear strategic plan. He described the company as moving effortlessly from phase A to B and then to C. This account did not match my understanding of what had taken place. I interjected and described a very different history. When he was challenged with the actual chaotic learning process that had taken place, he paused and then smiled and said "It's true, we built the bridge as we walked on it.
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> Organizational and personal growth seldom follows a linear plan. This is an important principle to remember. When people recount a history of growth, they often tell it in a linear sequence, suggesting a rationality and control that never really existed. (p. 83)

The solution we have developed for idiosyncratic knowledge is to subject it to public scrutiny. That is one remedy which appears effective, especially in the sciences. Another, suggested by Bateson, is to recover the use of metaphor as a way of expressing thought more closely related to the original, unconscious sense. Postmodern thought has recognized that we are storied people and appears to be recovering story, which again retains more of the detail in events and thus presents them in a form more like the way life is experienced.

We have reduced mind to a fraction of what it is and can be. Certainly, we have under-utilized the unconscious. Perhaps as we reclaim these neglected aspects of mind we will re-engineer the conditions we create to foster learning. I hope that we will recognize that learning and reporting on learning are two different functions, occurring in vastly different ways. We have created the conditions to support conscious reporting on learning. Now perhaps we will attend to the need to create the kind of rich conditions necessary for the unconscious development of learning to occur.