

## LEARNING AND MIND: A RESPONSE TO SELMAN

**Stephen Brookfield**

Teachers College, Columbia University, New York

### Abstract

This paper responds to Mark Selman's analysis of my work which appeared in the Vol. II, No. 2 (November 1988) issue of this journal. Selman states that I propose an overly psychologized conception of learning, which is representative of some mainstream ideas in adult education. I respond that Selman has misinterpreted my work by confusing my summary of one perspective on learning (Verner and Little's) with my own ideas. I provide selected excerpts from Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning (1986)<sup>1</sup> in which I argue for a more transactional, interactive, sociological conceptualization of learning.

### Résumé

Je réponds à l'analyse que Mark Selman a fait de mes travaux, et qui a été publiée dans le numéro 2, volume 2, (novembre 1988) de cette revue. Selman affirme que je propose une conception beaucoup trop psychologisante de l'apprentissage, ce qui représenterait une des tendances en éducation des adultes. A cela, je réponds que Selman a mal interprété mes travaux; il a confondu mon résumé d'une des perspectives de l'apprentissage (celle de Verner et Little) avec mes propres idées. Je soumetts des extraits de Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning (1986) dans lesquels je plaide pour une conceptualisation de l'apprentissage qui soit plus transactionnelle, interactive et sociale.

---

I very much enjoyed reading Mark Selman's article, "Learning and Philosophy of Mind."<sup>2</sup> In this piece, Selman undertakes a well developed critique of the overly psychologistic concept of learning. As he points out, this views learning purely as an internal process involving consciousness change which is manifest in permanently altered behaviour. He argues for a more social conception of learning, along somewhat similar lines to those advanced in Peter Jarvis' recent work on Adult Learning in the Social Context (1987).<sup>3</sup> "What is required," Selman writes, "is the

acceptance of a revised conception of learning, one which recognizes the importance of the public, social world, in contrast to one which is situated primarily within the workings of inner, 'mental' space."<sup>4</sup> To which, as I read it, I murmured (internally!) 'Amen.'

What was disturbing to me about Selman's article was to read further and find that he cites my book Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning (1986)<sup>5</sup> as exemplifying the dominant, psychologizing tendency in mainstream adult education which he is criticizing. When in fact it was written as a counterpoint to this trend with the explicit intention of encouraging greater attention to the socio-political dimensions of learning! He states that he is using what he describes as my description of learning as a description which embodies several ideas representative of a dominant approach (an overly psychological one) to adult education in North America. Since my book was an attempt to propose a more social analysis of learning as an alternative to several psychologistic mainstream conceptions, it was surprising to read that Selman was citing it as representative of the very orthodoxy I was seeking to challenge.

Of course, just because I set out to write a book exploring more social conceptions of learning which were alternative to mainstream psychologized notions, does not mean that I succeeded in the attempt. And Selman may well have been accurate in identifying biases, assumptions and misunderstandings in my work of which I was unaware. However, on close reading it is my contention that his analysis is based on a major misinterpretation or misreading of my work. I do not know why such a misreading took place and I accept that it may well lie in my own muddled prose style; but I do know that what Selman claims to be the conceptual core of my work is neither what I actually believe, nor what I thought I had written. This misinterpretation is most vividly seen in Selman's quoting what he claims is my definition of learning. The definition he quotes appears in the chapter in my book on self-directed learning as I talk about the conceptual and semantic confusion surrounding the term 'learning.' Selman discusses the point I make in this chapter that the gerundive nature of the word 'learning' (the fact that it functions both as a noun and verb) has caused considerable misunderstanding. He then refers to my discussion of Verner and Little's idea that learning is a purely internal process while education is a purely external one (though Little may not wish to be held to this idea a decade after its publication).

What is disturbing about Selman's analysis is that he represents my summary of one viewpoint in an intellectual debate as equivalent to my own views. He cites Verner and Little's concept of learning as an internal mental change of consciousness as if this was my own idea. In fact, as I tried to make evident both in the chapter on self-directed learning, and throughout the whole book, Verner and Little's idea that learning as an internal process should be distinguished from education as an external process is only one of several approaches that have been taken with respect to defining learning. In summarizing their approach for the reader, I pointed out that if their idea were accepted, then "the term learning would be reserved for the phenomenon of internal mental change whether that be characterized as a flash of gestalt insight, double-loop learning, or a rearrangement of neural paths. Such internal phenomena would be discernible externally in the form of permanent behavioural change, and it would be by observing such change that we would reason that learning had occurred."<sup>6</sup>

My words were a paraphrasing of Verner and Little's ideas and an extension of what their ideas would mean for how we view learning if we took them as our working definition. They were a summary of someone else's views that were quoted as part of a ground-clearing exercise, a mapping of the intellectual terrain informing the discussion of the concept of self-directed learning. But Selman takes my paraphrasing of Verner and Little's views on this point as my own belief, despite the fact that in this chapter and throughout the book I continually stress the need to attend to the social dimensions of learning. He writes of the passage in which I quote Verner and Little's idea that "citing Verner and Little, he (Brookfield) suggests that learning be used as a noun only."<sup>7</sup> In fact I don't believe it should be used as a noun only at all. What I say is that if you take this approach, then it inevitably leads you to focus entirely on inner mental processes. I do believe that attention to internal mental processes frequently receives short shrift in adult educational discussions of learning, which are often discussions of education rather than of learning. But pointing out this semantic confusion is very far from arguing that all learning be considered an inaccessible, internal, mental phenomenon. It appears that my paraphrasing of Verner and Little's view of learning is being used as something of a straw man, which Selman can demolish as he makes his point with undoubted elegance and style. In fact I believe that learning is far too complex a set of phenomena and processes to have its fullness rendered meaningfully in any simple definition.

What is necessary to begin to understand something as complex as learning is to employ as many diverse theoretical and empirical perspectives as possible in its exploration.

Let me give some quotes from other parts of Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning<sup>8</sup> which will, I hope, illustrate why I was so perturbed at being represented as arguing for a psychologized concept of learning. And of how I tried to redress this balance in the book by stressing the need for attention to the social context of learning and its interactional dimensions. At the beginning of the book I give several examples of adult learning processes and argue for a transactional analysis approach toward understanding learning through which "we regard adult learning as resulting from a transaction among adults in which experiences are interpreted, skills and knowledge acquired, and actions taken."<sup>9</sup> At the end of the chapter on self-directed learning (the one in which the discussion of Verner and Little's ideas are discussed) I finish my analysis by saying that:

the most fully adult form of self-directed learning...is one in which critical reflection on the contingent aspects of reality, the exploration of alternative perspectives and meaning systems, and the alteration of personal and social circumstances are all present. The external technical and internal reflective dimensions of self-directed learning are fused when adults come to appreciate the culturally constructed nature of knowledge and values and when they act on the basis of that appreciation to reinterpret and recreate their personal and social worlds. In such a praxis of thought and action is manifested a fully adult form of self-directed learning.<sup>10</sup>

As I hope this quote makes clear, I was not advocating that learning be considered as an isolated contemplative mental act, but that it needs to be understood as both a psychological and sociological phenomenon.

Finally, let me return to the contention quoted at the outset of Selman's article that "what is required is the acceptance of a revised conception of learning, one which recognizes the importance of the public, social world, in contrast to one which is situated primarily within the workings of inner, 'mental' space."<sup>11</sup> I couldn't agree more. Which is why, on page 7 of Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning,<sup>12</sup> I use C. Wright Mills' concept of linking private troubles and public issues developed in The Sociological Imagination (1959)<sup>13</sup> as an organizing theme for the

facilitation of adult learning. Specifically, I write "as C.W. Mills (1959) observed, personal troubles such as unemployment or divorce occur within an adult's immediate milieu and are often perceived as private matters generated by biographical circumstances. The individual adult may make no causal connection between a personal trauma and broader socio-economic trends or political changes. He or she will see such tragedies as the result of personal inadequacy or individual fecklessness. In reality, it is evident that individual biographies are social products and that private troubles frequently reflect broader structural conditions. Those adults who come to this realization will perceive that their problems are shared by others. A consequence of this awareness is likely to be an understanding that alterations in individual destinies are inextricably linked to alterations in social structures. At some point, enough adults will realize that their 'private' troubles are reflections of some broader structural contradiction and will come together in collective action to create more congenial structures. To Mills, the reestablishment of the severed connection between individual biography and social structures was the task of the sociologist. It also serves as a mission statement for a critical philosophical vision of facilitating learning."<sup>14</sup> I still believe that Mills' analysis of the connection between private troubles and public issues provides an accessible and meaningful guide for adult educational practice. In fact, in a more recent work on Developing Critical Thinkers (1987),<sup>15</sup> I have tried to take this analysis one step further.

Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning<sup>16</sup> is a book full of contradictions, simplified reasoning and ambiguity, and when I get around to stating some of its central ideas again, I hope to do a better job. But one thing I had never thought it was, was an exemplification of an overly psychologistic conceptualization of learning emphasizing inner mental space over the public, social world. It may be that despite my best efforts my ideas were not communicated clearly. If so, I hope that this after-word goes some way toward setting the record straight and I thank Mark Selman for prompting me to do this.

#### Reference Notes

1. Brookfield, S.D. 1986. *Understanding and facilitating adult learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
2. Selman, M. November 1988. Learning and philosophy of mind. In *Canadian journal for the study of adult education* 2 (2). Toronto: Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education, pp. 28-42.

3. Jarvis, P. 1987. *Adult learning in the social context*. London: Routledge.
4. *CJSAE* 2 (2):29.
5. *Understanding and facilitating*.
6. *Ibid.*, 46.
7. *CJSAE* 2 (2):30.
8. *Understanding and facilitating*.
9. *Ibid.*, 4.
10. *Ibid.*, 59.
11. *CJSAE* 2 (2):29.
12. *Understanding and facilitating*.
13. Mills, C.W. 1959. *The sociological imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press.
14. *Understanding and facilitating*, 7.
15. Brookfield, S.D. 1987. *Developing critical thinkers*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
16. *Understanding and facilitating*.