

MORE ON LEARNING: A RESPONSE TO BROOKFIELD

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I would like to thank Stephen Brookfield for his kind words about my article and apologize if through misunderstanding or imprecise language I have misrepresented his views as expressed in Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning.¹ His expressions of support for my call for the adoption of a social conception of learning are also heartening. However, from his further remarks it appears that he does not accept some of the significant implications of the argument I have advanced.

If one accepts the sort of conception I have tried to elucidate, then Brookfield's suggestion that "learning is far too complex a set of phenomena and processes to have its fullness rendered meaningfully in any simple definition"² is seen to be misleading. Learning, at least in its most common usage, expresses a dispositional change - the fact that an animal or person would, under certain sorts of conditions, given certain intentions, act differently than previously, as the result of experience. If one tries to define learning in terms of the possible sorts of processes which produce it, the problem to be faced is not one of complexity, but one of coherence. There is nothing except the result which differentiates 'learning experiences' or 'processes of learning' from other sorts of experience and processes which can be undergone.

More obviously, Brookfield's comment that "attention to internal mental processes frequently receives surprisingly short shrift in adult educational discussions of learning"³ runs counter to my conclusion that description at the level of internal processes is largely irrelevant to the purposes of educators.

Undeniably, Brookfield develops the notion of "the most fully adult form of self-directed learning,"⁴ which he holds to be critical and transformative in terms of both conceptual systems and social realities. His use of Mills' analysis of the relation between what are perceived to be private troubles and the public realm seems eminently sensible given the tendency to blame the victim which is widespread in our society. But I wish to point out that this point is significantly different from my central thesis about a

social conception of learning. What I sought to draw to attention is the fact that all attributions of learning are grounded in agreement about shared human purposes and practices. This is trivially true in the sense that the meaning of any word, including learning, is dependent on agreement in use amongst language users. It is also true in the deeper realization that our use of 'learning' is closely tied to judgments about rationality and human purposes.

Especially given the importance of Brookfield's project of developing a strong normative sense of 'self-directed learning' to be used as a guide for the practice of adult education, it seems essential to be as clear as possible about the concept of learning itself. I am pleased to have this opportunity to engage with Stephen Brookfield in this very attempt.

Reference Notes

1. Brookfield, S.D. 1986. *Understanding and facilitating adult learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
2. Brookfield, S.D. May 1989. Learning and mind: a response to Selman. In *The canadian journal for the study of adult education* 2 (3). Toronto: Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education (CASAE)
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Understanding and facilitating*, 59.