An epistemology of learning through life

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to initiate a conversation exploring the epistemological implications of the many forms that learning may take while attending to the demands generated by complexity. This paper offers a look at an emerging epistemology of learning through life that is increasingly complex and intensifying the demands on our thinking, feeling and action. In this paper we examine the interconnections between learning through experience, the construction of meaning, the process of inquiry and complexity. Specifically, the implications of continuity and interactivity as developed in adult learning theory, the construction of meaning as discussed by constructive developmental theory, the process of inquiry as developed by developmental action inquiry, and the relational aspects of interdependence as presented in complexity theory for addressing the challenges confronting contemporary systems.

Introduction

A paradox of our contemporary organizations and society is that we are accumulating new knowledge at an ever increasing rate, while at the same time we are confronted with the potential disasters of the unanticipated, nonlinear consequences of this accumulating body of knowledge. Even as our knowledge base in terms of seeing learning as a noun is becoming more and more rich, our sense of control over our world is becoming less. It is as if we are becoming less knowing even as we become more knowledgeable. Addressing this paradox, we suggest, requires that we look at the process of learning, and take seriously the implications of understanding learning as a verb.

In this paper we examine the implications of an increasingly complex social reality for the process of learning from experience (Jarvis, 2006; Van der Veen, 2006). In our field of practice as adult learning facilitators, our primary focus has been on educating adults in the practice of participation in groups, systems and society. Critical reflection on this focus has led to our being increasingly challenged by the question, “What form does learning take in the context of intensifying complex reality?” (Nicolaides & Yorks, 2007). Our inquiry into this question has further led us into the connections between four distinct and yet intimately connected disciplines: The paradigms of learning from experience (Dewey, 1938, Kolb, 1984; Mezizow, 1991, 2000), the construction of meaning (Kegan, 1982, 1994; Drago-Severson, 2004), the process of inquiry (Torbert, 1990, 2004) and the principles of organizing found in complexity theory (Cilliers, 1998, 2001, Boulton & Allen, 2007, Prigogine, 1968).

Our intention is to stimulate a conversation with our peers working in each of these disciplines. In a sense, it is an effort at provoking a modest cross paradigmatic discourse (Commons & Bresette, 2006). We believe this discourse is necessary if the field of adult learning and education is to develop in ways necessary for meeting the emerging challenges of our time. At both the organizational and societal levels of life, the limitations of rigid hierarchical structures are becoming evident. Social networks and working within the context of constant and discontinuous change, novelty, and emergent diversity are the norm. Adults are challenged with dealing with these conditions in navigating the challenges of participation in present and emerging futures.

Understanding an epistemology of learning through life

We begin our discussion by looking at the epistemological tenets of learning theory, constructive developmental theory, developmental action inquiry and complexity theory and what may be important to pay attention to as we integrate these paradigms in our working, living realities. In order to accomplish this we return to the work of Dewey (1938) in order to examine the implications of the two core foundations of his thinking, continuity and interactivity. Specifically, we argue that learning theory has tended to emphasize the continuity dimension of his thinking while paying less attention to the implications of interactivity. Indeed, we believe that Dewey himself focused on the continuity dimension in his work (Torbert, 1990).

Next, we explore constructive developmental theory extending the work of Piaget that arguably finds its most contemporary expression in the ideas of Robert Kegan (1982, 1994). We also explore how developmental action inquiry (Torbert, 1990, 1999, 2004) illustrates how we take action in the world. We assert that these paradigms, though distinct, have features that are interconnected and link with the epistemology of complexity theory (Cilliers, 1998, 2001, Boulton & Allen, 2007, Prigogine & Stengers, 1984). These links have important implications for our capacity to create the kinds of liberating disciplines (Torbert, 1990, 2004) and social spaces necessary for systemic renewal, innovation, and reform (Torbert, 1990; Fisher & Torbert, 1991). Increasing the potential for learning through complexity and ongoing innovation requires that we not only transform our ways of learning but that we also transform the structures within which learning occurs (Bateson, 1972; Commons & Bresette, 2006).
Learning from experience

One hundred years ago Dewey wrote that learning from experience requires that we pay attention to the simultaneous dynamics of continuity and interactivity. Continuity points to the on-going process of learning from experience through reflection that takes into consideration the recent past, present, and the immediate future as a way to discern what was a meaningful action from moment to moment. At the same time Dewey recognized that the moment-to-moment awareness was always in relationship to some phenomenon. He described these two dynamics as continuity and interactivity (Dewey, 1938). Gibboney (2006) concisely captures this aspect of Dewey’s understanding of the dynamics of learning:

Dewey sought reality in uncertainty and chance, and he knew that practice is always more complex than theory. He believed that a life lived (one’s experience) presented problems that could not be solved for all time but could nonetheless be intelligently addressed by acting in the world—that is, by doing something. The real-world results of our action come back to us, via snail mail, as consequences—to our pain, confusion, or delight (p. 2).

We are proposing that it is through these two interpenetrating dynamics that learning takes new shapes and influences the capacity of adults to respond to complex demands. “Sound educational experience involves, above all, continuity and interaction between the learner and what is learned. The true learning situation, then, has longitudinal and lateral dimensions. It is both historical and social. It is orderly and dynamic” (Dewey, 1938: XI). Dewey defined education as the reconstruction and reorganization of experience, which increases our ability to direct the course of subsequent experience. Experience has both an active and a passive component, and is comprised of not just what has happened to a person, but also what a person does in interaction with the environment (Elias & Merriam, 1995: 56).

Continuity

Dewey defined continuity in terms of the historical and temporal dimensions of continuous experience, meaning “that every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some ways the quality of those which come after” (1938: 27). It is through the continual dimension of experience that habits form. These habits have their own qualities, fostering attitudes that are both emotional and intellectual, and responding to the conditions of living.

In the subsequent development of learning theory, the emphasis has been placed on continuity. For example, in models of experiential learning such as Kolb’s (1984) well-known learning cycle, the emphasis has been on how we bring our conceptualizations of past experience into our present experiences. Through reflection we make sense of the new experience, which in turn becomes the ‘container’ through which our new experiences are reflected upon and integrated. Learning is a process of continuing to make more inclusive meaning of our experience. At times these new experiences challenge our past experiences and the meaning we have made of them to such an extent that one experiences a “disorienting dilemma” (Mezirow, 1991, 2000). This can lead to an even deeper level of critical reflection that causes a significant reorganization of one’s frame of reference. In either case, however, the focus is on experience, and the learning it produces, being carried within the individual as a form of knowledge. Interactivity has been a sub-text.

Interactivity

Interactivity places emphasis on experience in relationship with the environment; intra-personal, interpersonal and social. This environment is complex and ever changing and it is the relationship between the continuity of experience and the interactivity with these dynamic changing environments that is the catalysis for creativity and innovation. Dewey bases his philosophy on an assumption that all human experience is social: that it involves contact and communication and therefore a responsibility for maintaining mindfulness on the connective aspects of learning. This connectivity describes the principle of interactivity. This principle assigns equal rights to both factors in experience — objective and internal (subjective) conditions (Dewey, 1938: 39). The context matters and the connections from within the context matter as well. The two principles of continuity and interactivity are not separate from each other. They intercept and unite.

Increasingly, however, the role of interactivity has been more visible in the evolving theories of learning through experience (Antonacopoulou, 2006; Boucouvalas, 1988; Boud & Walker, 1990; Fenwick, 2003; Kolb and Kolb, 2005; Heron, 1992). However, dominant approaches to the practice of education continue to subtly, if unintentionally, reinforce the continuity dimension. This is reflected in the popular phrase in adult and continuing education circles of ‘life long learning.’ This notion was established in the work of Philip Candy (1991) in his descriptions of the autonomous learner, characterized “as those people with a strong sense of personal values and beliefs…which give them a solid foundation for conceiving goals and plans, exercising free choice, using rational reflection, having the willpower to follow through, and exercising self-restraint and self-
Emergence: Complexity and Organization

Developmental action inquiry brings together the paradigms of organizational learning, Eriksonian psychology, and Lovinger’s Developmental action inquiry results in the emergence of a more developed framework for making meaning, allowing for an enhanced capacity for aspects of the subjective self becoming objective and therefore available for reflection. In the words of Kegan and Lahey (1984) “Development is always a process of outgrowing one system of meaning by integrating another” (Dewey, 1938: 45). The principle of relationships is emblematic of Dewey’s invitation to view learning as “an ever-present process” that continues growing into maturity.

Continuity and interactivity as inseparable

Following Boucoulavas’s (1988) lead on integrating the relational aspects of a holistic and integrated approach to learning, we develop the focus on the relationship between continuity and interactivity. Seeking a deeper and better understanding of what Dewey communicated as connected and yet distinct concepts seems critical for reframing our thinking toward a notion of ‘learning through life.’ The integration of continuity and interactivity describes a living, learning paradigm that focuses our attention on the necessity of being open “to the emergent reality that composes possibility, action, and intention” (Nicolaiades & Yorks, 2007: 231). Like John Heron (1992) who advocates for learning as the development of our personhood we contend that ‘learning through life’ is fundamental to learning what, borrowing from Kegan (1994), can be called the ‘curriculum of living.’ Dewey describes the failure of education as the lack of mutual adaptation making “the process of learning and teaching accidental” (Dewey, 1938: 45). The principle of relationships is emblematic of Dewey’s invitation to view learning as “an ever-present process” (Dewey, 1938: 52) that continues growing into maturity.

Construction of meaning and the action of inquiry

There is a rich and diverse tradition of research and theorizing in the area of psychological development. These include theories of ego development (Erikson, 1963; Loevinger, 1976), moral development (Gilligan, 1982; Kohlberg, 1973); spiritual development (Folwer, 1981), and thinking, learning and creativity (Basseches, 1984; Commons & Richards, 1984), and self-development through adulthood (Kegan, 1982, 1994, Vaillant, 1977, Torbert, 1990, 2004).

Constructive developmental theory

For the purposes of this paper we will rely on Robert Kegan’s (1982, 1994) description of how adults construct meaning. The contribution of developmental theories is in their description of how adults develop more complex and comprehensive ways of making sense of themselves and their experience (McCauley et al., 2007). Constructive developmental theory is directly built on Piaget’s work, extending the work into adulthood and beyond its cognitive focus.

Constructive developmental theory is constructive in the sense that it deals with a person’s constructions, and interpretations of an experience, that is, the meaning the person makes of an experience. It is developmental in the sense that it is concerned with how those constructions, and interpretations of an experience grow more complex over time (McCauley et al., 2006). The theory takes as its subject the growth and elaboration of a person’s ways of understanding the self over time, both as a natural unfolding as well as in response to the limitations of existing ways of making meaning. “Constructive developmental theory concerns itself with two primary aspects of development: (a) organizing principles that regulate how people make sense of themselves and the world (orders of development) and (b) how these regulative principles are constructed and re-constructed over time (developmental movement)” (McCauley et al., 2006: 636). The core dynamic of these processes is a person’s organizing principle which is subjective and cannot be reflected upon, becoming objective and therefore available for reflection. In the words of Kegan and Lahey (1984) “Development is always a process of outgrowing one system of meaning by integrating it (as a subsystem) into a new system of meaning” (p. 21). This process of aspects of the subjective self becoming objective results in the emergence of a more developed framework for making meaning, allowing for an enhanced capacity for experiencing the complexity of life.

Developmental action inquiry

Developmental action inquiry brings together the paradigms of organizational learning, Eriksonian psychology, and Lovinger’s
stages of moral development extended by the research and work of Cook-Greuter (2004). The work of Bill Torbert illustrates the process of how adults engage in inquiry (Torbert, 1991, 2004). The process of inquiry sheds light on the action of our moment by moment participation, a difficult feature of learning to illustrate and yet meaningful in our advocacy for the development and prototyping of an integrative learning model.

We pay attention to the process of inquiry as a way to illustrate the dynamic learning involved with developing an integrative and adaptive model for the action of learning through the context of ambiguity. The essential feature of the developmental action inquiry is interdependence, defined “in stage-development terms, as action-logics that allow groups of people with shared work to deliberately integrate and mutually transform towards desired ends their otherwise fatally diverse roles, functions, identities, visions, and world views” (McCauley et al., 2006). The intersection of developmental theory (Kegan, 1994; Loevinger, 1976; Piaget, 1954) with action science (Árnyris et al., 1985) deepens our understanding of timely and transforming action in the context of ambiguity.

Integration of learning, development and inquiry makes explicit intersecting dimensions of continuity, interactivity, growth and the making of timely action (Torbert, 2004). Learning in this context means the integration of ongoing reflection and awareness through experience while at the same time in relationship with the environment and its artifacts. Adopting a living learning epistemology that accepts, while not planning for, the potential for maturity, growth and transformation of ways of knowing also remains open to social creativity and personal innovation.

**Complexity theory and complex social reality**

Although the complexity sciences encompass several different theoretical frameworks, our discussion of complexity and our inclusion of a theory of complexity are specific and grounded in some interesting controversy. For some time complexity theory has been sought after as a hope that finally there will be one method that will improve our understanding of, and our control over, complex systems like organizations (Cilliers, 2001). We still want to predict the behavior of complex systems by adopting good models that will let us do so despite the persistent reality that there are very limited contexts where decisions, solutions, and actions are predictable and consistent. Yet, as Cilliers’s (2001) speaks so clearly:

> Models have to reduce the complexity of the phenomena being described, they have to leave something out. However, we have no way of predicting the importance of that which is not considered... The relationship between our description of the world and the world itself is, however, more complex. There is a constant to and fro between them in which our models and, especially in the case of the human sciences, the world itself is transformed. Since our models cannot ‘fit’ the world exactly, there are many degrees of freedom, in which they can move. They are, however, simultaneously constrained by the world in many ways. There is feedback from the world that tells us something about the appropriateness of our models. The situation is the following: there is on the one hand freedom in modeling, and on the other, constraints from reality, but the two are not independent from each other (pp. 3-4).

A related point is made by Boulton and Allen (2007) when they write “We must remember that systems, models of systems and boundaries are all simplifications; they are in effect figments of our imagination, helpful in that they help us label and think about a situation and dangerous if we give them too much credence” (p. 221). Stacey (2003) makes a similar point as he describes systems as processes of human relating and describes through the perspective of complex responsive processes the implications of these interactions to “stay with the experience of interaction which produces nothing but further interaction” (p.3).

**How complexity theory contributes to our understanding of the Integration of learning, construction of meaning, and action inquiry**

The contribution of complexity theory in expanding our notions of learning, development and inquiry is in elaborating the features of interdependence. What we mean by interdependence is a fundamental acceptance of an interconnected and simultaneously distinct reality. Two features we borrow from complexity theory to describe interdependence are the notions of constraints and freedoms (boundaries) with an emphasis on interactivity. Complexity theory argues that constraints are not negative, but provide for the space within which innovation emerges. Constraints not only limit possibilities; constraints are also enabling. By eliminating certain possibilities, others are introduced. Constraints are an aspect in complexity that enable emerging realities to take shape. Understanding the nature of boundaries (constraints and freedoms) from the perspective of something that is enabling is something of a contradiction. Zeleny (1983), whose work focuses on the very human process of decision-making, describes these contradictions as follows:

> All social systems, and thus all living systems, create, maintain, and degrade their own boundaries. These boundaries do not separate but intimately connect the system with its environment. They do not have to be just physical or topological, but are primarily functional, behavioral, and communicational. They are not ‘perimeters’ but functional constitutive components of a given system.
We are provisionally drawing together the paradigms of learning, ways of constructing meaning, and inquiry to see what patterns of interaction emerge between learning, development and the boundaries of our action. This interaction emphasizes how all social systems are organismic, in that they organize social constructs, just as human organisms organize meaning. To make these connections more explicit, we draw these three paradigms together in the following ways. We conceptualize the process of learning as the process that bolsters our considerations for what action to take in the context of a system. We conceive the process of adult development as the process of organizing our affective and cognitive meaning making capacities in service of our learning. The process of inquiry creates the conditions to prototype action while the meta-framework of complexity organizes systems (individual, collective, societal) that interpenetrate each other, forming more likely opportunities for interdependence. We describe these interpenetrating paradigms in this manner to illustrate the potential that exists when these systems with interconnected boundaries that are at the same time distinct create interdependence and therefore conditions for innovation and emergence. “Everything is always interacting and interfacing with others and with the environments; the notion of inside and outside are never simple or uncontested” (Cilliers, 2001: 6).

The boundaries and the dynamics of interpenetration

From within this context, boundaries reveal the dynamics of interpenetration, i.e., the relationships, which cut across different boundaries. The interpenetration of boundaries is part of the messiness of complexity and is indispensable. Cross-communications between boundaries is not accidental but part of the adaptability of the system (Cilliers, 2001: 7).

What is exciting to consider is that part of the vitality of a system lies in its ability to transform boundaries. If, for a moment, we believe that this is possible, then it does not seem like such an improbable leap to also view the interpenetrating construct of learning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paradigm</th>
<th>LEARNING</th>
<th>DEVELOPMENT</th>
<th>INQUIRY</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Specific Features of Paradigms</td>
<td>Integration of Continuity and Interactivity</td>
<td>Construction of meaning Adult maturation</td>
<td>Process of inquiry The actions of inquiry</td>
<td>Boundaries Interpenetration of Freedoms and Constraints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning of Features that engage Prototyping Actions</td>
<td>Learning leads to taking action. Learning that is transformative, adaptive, distinct and interdependent</td>
<td>Development engages the process of evolution, growth, and maturity</td>
<td>A self in movement towards interdependence. Liberating disciplines Moment by moment integrative and mutually transforming action</td>
<td>Complexity of context where boundaries evoke creativity, innovation or synergy through interpenetration</td>
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<tr>
<td>Features of Provisional Action Making Spaces</td>
<td>Space includes the personal, interpersonal and social. Taking form through the ambiguity of forming action</td>
<td>Space include personal, interpersonal and social. Taking form through the ambiguity of making meaning</td>
<td>Space includes personal, interpersonal and social. Taking form through the prototyping of timely action</td>
<td>Space include personal interpersonal and social. Taking form through the ambiguity of interpenetrating feature of systems (individual, group, societal)</td>
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</table>

**Table 1**

*Integrative Approach to Learning Through Life*

We can summarize the above discussion by looking at the intersecting dimensions across each paradigm (see Table 1). Paying development, inquiry, and the attributes of complex systems as mutually influencing in re-constructive transformative ways.

**An integrative approach to learning through life: Integrative learning moment by moment**

We can summarize the above discussion by looking at the intersecting dimensions across each paradigm (see Table 1). Paying
attention to the intersection and integration evokes the possibility of embracing ambiguity and the potential for creativity. Fully realizing this possibility and potential requires being mindful of an epistemology that situates itself in the nexus of ambiguity through continuously adaptive action, not seeking or expecting definitive solutions. Doing so requires adopting a posture of inquiry, rather than expertise. Such a posture strives to realize Dewey’s insight “that thinking and action are just two names for a single process—the process of making our way as best we can in a world shot through with contingency” (Menand, 2001: 360). This posture can take the form of cooperative inquiry (Heron, 1992), collaborative action inquiry (Yorks, 2005), and liberating disciplines (Torbert, 1999).

Integrative learning develops strategic capacity and builds adaptive competencies as a way to approach relationships with the ambiguity and contradictions that appear more frequently as one engages with complexity. Learning from within this context of continued interaction and integration is a pre-condition for creating order and self-organization within a system. Essentially, self-organization is the process of re-ordering different aspects of learning (Maturana & Varela, 1980). Taking the essential elements of static forms of learning and infusing them with a dynamic integrative orientation creates the potential for learning one’s way through organizational complexity.

Learning that is dynamic directs our attention to the implications of adult growth and development throughout the evolution of participation in our systemic contexts. If learning is to lead to the development and maturation of potential, then it requires a continuously active component that is in perpetual relationship to what exists and takes shape in the present reality. Here lies the ambiguity of a living/learning epistemology, it is multidimensional and therefore partial, provisional and respectful of a person’s capacity for learning, growing and acting in a moment.

Different aspects of learning are revealed as we look at its many forms. Learning seen through the perspective of complexity sciences characterized as a trans-disciplinary science (Antonacopoulou, 2006), forms and re-forms, adapting to the demands of the context in which the learning is taking place. This is something that we are postulating within the context of our own interpretation and integration of our understanding of the complexity sciences and what is emerging in the literature of our field in adult learning. Learning as a dynamic force that takes form within the context and relationship of the demands of a situation, organization, nation state, family group is newly described in the field (Antonacopoulou, 2006, Jarvis, 2006). The literature of adult learning continues to grow and expand the boundaries of types learning such as instrumental (Kolb, 1984, Mezirow, 1991), technical (Helfetz, 1994, Kegan, 1994), transformative (Mezirow, 1991, 2000; Kegan 1982, Helfetz, 1994). These types of learning have the potentials to be both reactive and dynamic in a moment by moment inquiry. However, what determines the dynamic potential of each of these learning types are the degrees of freedom and constraints that each boundary at the individual, group, and organization level creates for a capacity for learning through ambiguity.

We would argue that adopting such postures is a requirement for organizations and systems that need to respond to rapidly changing environments where “relying on the past to inform the future is more than unhelpful, it can be positively dangerous” (Boulton & Allen, 2007: 228). It is equally a challenge. Organizations place a high value on expert thinking that focuses on logic, and meeting pre-determined goals. The kind of reform needed to meet this challenge is what Torbert has variously described as reform from the middle (1990) or leading through positive deviance (Foster & Torbert, 2005). The kind of inquiry needed is well described by Torbert (2008):

[A]wareness can follow the interplay that occurs at each moment (and across great periods of time) in oneself, others, and institutions among mission, strategy, operations, and outcomes. This awareness generates ever self-renewing learning, responsibility, integrity, and mutuality by seeking to discern, appreciate, and correct incongruities among these different ‘territories of experience’ (intuitive mission, rational strategy, behavioral operations, and tangible outcomes). Put differently, this awareness never treats one’s current sense of these four territories of experiences as sacred, but rather seeks ever again to taste them.

This awareness requires a particular habit-of-being, as well as mind (Yorks & Kasl, 2002). This requires being mindful of the participatory modes of our psyche. John Heron (1992) describes the participatory modes as “taking the person into the wider reaches of being; both functions (experience and being) are always interacting…” (p.18). Developing this habit-of-being requires new forums for individual preparation for taking action, new disciplines to prototype new action, new spaces for collective preparation for making meaning, and new foundations for societal involvement in organizing our mutual living reality. Table 1 summarizes the points made above and provides a way of looking at these interpenetrations. This preliminary visual representation attempts to illustrate the interaction dynamics of these paradigms. In the form of a visual interpretation, we bring together what we are labeling epistemological features to encourage an environment of an ever-emergent social field that shows us how to see anew the world and our actions.

**Conclusion**

Learning as a dynamic living learning epistemology is more than the acquisition of knowledge to conform to societal and cultural constructs. If learning is to lead to the development and maturation of potential then it requires a continuously active component...
that is in perpetual relationship to what exists and takes shape in the present reality. Here lies the ambiguity of a living learning epistemology: it is multidimensional and therefore partial, provisional, and respectful of what a person’s capacity is for learning, growing and acting in that moment.

From an adult education perspective, aligning practice with this epistemology seems imperative. Assisting learners in preparing for effective participation in society has long been central to the profession of adult education. Traditionally this calling has focused on the development of the core competencies of language and technical skills, preparing them to confront and solve the socio-economic problems confronting them. The focus has been on instrumental skills and expertise. This focus is still important in a foundational way. However, in contemporary society the cutting-edge challenge is in fostering competencies and capacity for dealing with ambiguity and emergent change. While in actuality the world has always been complex, technology and globalization make this complexity foreground, not background for learning through the conundrums that confront us. Whether addressing local and/or global conflicts, making assessments of the strategies adopted by political leaders in addressing social issues, facilitating organizational transitions, or any number of the most significant challenges that confront us, the illusion of predictability is being unmasked. To be clear, we are not degrading the utility of problem solving competencies; we are only suggesting that such competencies need to be seen as a subset of the abilities necessary for addressing the challenges of our times.

We are beginning to learn more about the implications of this epistemological framing for our own practice. It is clear that putting this epistemology into practice requires creating learning environments that involve: 1. keeping the boundaries and freedoms of the learning context fluid; 2. being mindful of the capacities of the participants for making meaning; 3. working with the complexity of real and current challenges facing learners and the assumptions they hold about them; 4. keeping the distinction between expert problem solving and mindful insight ever present; 5. calling attention to both the informal and incidental learning that is taking place; and, 6. providing competencies for addressing ambiguity while seeking to simultaneously foster participants’ capacities for constructing meaning. These learning contexts can include task forces, action research groups, seminars, formal courses, and any number of informal learning settings.

Both learner and educator must learn to be comfortable in these kinds of learning settings. While it’s premature to describe our experimentation with learning environments in detail, we close with a quote from one of our M.A. students in a course on strategic learning. It expresses the experience of a high performing graduate student who is accustomed to ‘getting it’ in concrete terms and learning her way into this kind of learning process:

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Working three days a week, overloading in classes, exploring new occupational opportunities, being a friend, a sister, a girlfriend, a daughter and a granddaughter—I am finding myself overwhelmed with too many things to do each and every day. Wanting to do everything to the best of my ability, I am often at a loss for time and energy. Everything that I do requires that I not do something else. This struggle of being at maxim capacity collides with my confusion over what to do next—and how to prioritize. This is where my ambiguity lives… Therefore, I must not only decide what I will do, but also, what I will not do. I wish that today I could thoughtfully pick and choose my next move; however, I am not there yet. I am at a loss; and yet, this is okay… I will be able to create a situation where I am constantly engaging in strategic thinking and embracing the emergent strategy that allows me to fluidly navigate my way through my reality (and environment) to ultimately achieve personal success. But at this moment, I am going to accept and embrace the ambiguity—the unknown (Anonymous, 2007).
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We acknowledge this quote is an exemplar of our intentions in practicing the enactment of the epistemology argued for in this paper in an academic course. There is much to be learned from a comprehensive assessment of what learning emerged (and did not emerge) in the course. Further research and inquiry is required for realizing the potential of applying this living epistemology in academic settings. Our hope is that in this paper we have created the conditions for this invitation to be taken seriously as we continue to explore the implications of a synergistic living learning platform for innovation and emergence that serves human experience and being through learning.

Notes

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References


