A common exclamation when a teacher has had a ‘bad’ lesson is – ‘They have not learned anything!’ but, in reality, the students might have learned a lot, but not always what the teacher intended. The teacher’s aims and objects were not fulfilled and this was the way that non-learning was perceived – it was a form of what Illeris (2007: pp.158–59) called mis-learning, but it was only non-learning in relation to intended learning, as we will show below. It was regarded as non-learning because the focus was always on teaching and the teacher’s aims and objectives, rather than on the students’ learning. However, in recent years a great deal more attention has been paid to individuals’ learning both within and beyond the educational milieu and it has been clearly distinguished from teaching, so that learning and non-learning are now recognised as having as much to do with living as with education. Learning is a personal process; it is both an existential and an experiential process, and non-learning may be conceptualised within this much broader framework.

It used to be assumed that social living was conformist and that deviancy was the interesting phenomenon to be studied. In other words, non-learning – in this case conformity – was assumed to be the norm and this gave rise to the classic formulation of bureaucracy (Weber, 1947), in which new entrants to the organisation learned the rules of social behaviour and thereafter conformed to the prevailing culture: the bureaucratic culture was regarded as unchanging and the individual just fitted in, and so when the concept of the learning organisation appeared as the speed of social living increased, it was regarded as the antithesis of bureaucracy. The same argument can be made for the learning society.

However, as we have gained a more sophisticated understanding of learning, so the concept of non-learning raises more searching questions that help shed some light on our understanding of learning: these relate to consciousness, awareness and perception. In this paper three forms of non-learning are discussed: the state in which a conscious person does not learn, which is existential and experiential; the state when a conscious person is aware of potential learning opportunities but resists them, which is experiential; and the state where the learners do not learn what they were intended to learn, which is also experiential. In order to do this, I want first to revisit my own formulation and extend that discussion and then I will look briefly at two other studies – those of Knud Illeris (2007) and David Hay (2007: 2008) and colleagues.
Extending the discussion

In my own work I have defined learning as:

The combination of processes throughout a lifetime whereby the whole person – body (genetic, physical and biological) and mind (knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, meaning, beliefs and senses) – experiences social situations, the content of which is then transformed cognitively, emotively or practically (or through any combination) and integrated into the individual person’s biography resulting in a continually changing (or more experienced) person.

(Jarvis, 2009: 25)

Learning, therefore, is a product of conscious living – although there might be an exception with learning as we sleep (see this volume): in a sense we are constructing our own biography whenever we learn. Whilst we live, our biography is an unfinished product, constantly undergoing change and development – either through experiences that we self-initiate or else through experiences that are initiated by others. We actually learn from our experiences and so the question needs to be asked whether conscious human beings can ever not learn, or do we learn from some of these experiences although, like those teachers, we do not recognise it?

Presumption

In my original formulation of non-learning I suggested that there were three types: situations that we take for granted and, therefore, do not appear to need to think about; situations where there are internal constraints, so that we do not desire to learn; and situations where there are external constraints so that, for instance, we do not have the time to learn and we are therefore unable to learn. Since there can be both internal and external constraints, we can see that learning is not an isolated, individual process, but a social one, although certain forms of contemplation do occur in isolation, but by individuals who have gone through many of the social processes earlier in their lives. Learning always occurs at the intersection of the personal and the social/cultural, and in my own work I have argued that learning potentially occurs where there is disjuncture between individuals’ expectation of what they will perceive in an experience and what they actually perceive as they construct their own experience. By contrast, when there is harmony between anticipation and perception, non-learning is a potential outcome. The following diagram illustrates the different levels of disjuncture.

Coincidence is when there is no conscious experience of specific events because we live in harmony with the situation and we can presume upon the world, and this is where non-learning might occur; divergence is when there is a slight difference between expectation and actual perception, and we can adjust our behaviour to respond to the situation without necessarily changing our understanding of the world (our theory/meaning); separation is when there is a larger gap between the two, and this is where we begin to ask questions and learn answers: this is the location of most of our conscious learning; and distinction is when the gap is so wide that we know that, in order to bridge it, we have to undertake a great deal of learning, for example, we have to take a course of study, and in the end the gap grows so wide that we know that we can never bring the two together: this may result in a meaningless or a very meaningful experience. Divergence is a problematic form of disjuncture, because sometimes we can be aware of the difference and the way in which we respond to it and learn, whereas there are other times when there is no awareness of the disjuncture or how we respond to it. In the former, there is conscious disjuncture and learning can occur, but in the latter we often respond to slight divergences automatically, almost unconsciously, and we are not aware that we are adapting to the situation and so we appear not to learn. Non-learning appears to occur when there is no perceived separation between expectation and
actuality of the external world and so we can take the situation for granted. However, perception of an event depends not only on the consciousness of perceivers, but also on their awareness of the situation. In the action domain this might be regarded as a form of practice in which practitioners are merely going through the rituals of the performance without a great deal of thought – they are familiar with it and so take it for granted – or they are thinking about aspects of the practice in order to improve it.

It is clear, however, that we do need to clarify the distinction between consciousness and awareness – many dictionaries define one by the other, but this is not particularly helpful, since they are not synonymous concepts. Without undertaking a full philosophical discussion about the many definitions of each of these terms, consciousness is treated here as a mental state that enables individuals to have sensations from and perceptions of the external world, whereas awareness is regarded as the level of attention that people exercise as a response to an external object or phenomenon. Consequently, conscious individuals may demonstrate high or low levels of awareness depending on their circumstances, interests, and so on. The higher the level of awareness, or attentiveness to the situation, the less likely we are to experience coincidence between the expectation and the actual perception of the situation and this becomes a potential learning situation. Attentiveness to experience constitutes the basis of a humanistic and spiritual way of knowing (Crawford, 2005) and taken-for-grantedness does not occur so frequently. In precisely the same way, Marton et al. (1996) showed how Chinese learners understand things better by constant repetition, because their practice is not mere ritual, but action and reflection. A similar situation may occur when there is any form of repetition in lectures, presentations, and so forth. Nevertheless, if the familiarity with the situation has resulted in lower levels of attentiveness, then there is more likelihood that we will take the situation for granted and no learning will apparently occur. This situation can occur in all four dimensions – sensations, cognitions, emotion and actions.

A question remains, however, as to whether the conscious mind does internalise some aspects of familiar situations without the individual’s being aware of it and whether these internalisations are stored in the mind and take the form of tacit knowledge until such time as they might be brought into the arena of awareness and consciousness in either thought or action, and then become acts of learning. But if these internalisations are never recalled in any way, then non-learning does occur and we can conclude that conscious human beings can on occasions presume upon their world and not learn.

**Internal Constraints**

Internal constraints, which I originally called ‘rejection’ (Jarvis, 1987: 30–31), occur in the latter three stages – divergence, separation and distinction. In other words they impose themselves on learners after those
learners have experienced disjuncture, so that they do have a heightened awareness of the potential learning situation, but do not feel able to learn from it. These are conscious and aware decisions and there may be many reasons for this, such as the desire to protect one’s own self-identity, lack of will, lack of confidence, no wish to disturb the status quo, and so on. For example, elderly, and not so elderly, people might exclaim, ‘I don’t know what the world is coming to these days!’ indicating that the disjunctural gap between their expectation of the situation and their actual perception of it is too wide to be bridged easily, and if they do not learn from the situation they lose confidence and may reject the opportunity to learn a new skill or improve on an existing one – and so no learning takes place; as people age they may not wish to have their own life-worlds disturbed and so they also reject opportunities to learn new things.

While there is a conscious rejection of the opportunity to learn something, those who reject it may actually learn more about themselves, and so incidental learning may occur, but this need not be an inevitable outcome to rejecting opportunities to learn.

**External Constraints**

I originally called this ‘non-consideration’ (Jarvis, 1987: 30) and, like ‘internal constraints’, these situations can occur in the latter three stages of disjuncture but, as we saw above, it takes time to consider some learning situations and this does not always occur in contemporary society. People become aware that they need to learn something as a result of a disjunctural experience but realise, for instance, that they just have not got sufficient time to undertake the learning. This also occurs within educational settings because learners, listening to a lecture, may not have time to consider a point that the lecturer has made before the lecture progresses to another point. Indeed, because of poor technique, it could be argued that the lecturer does not achieve the learning outcomes that were anticipated. Whilst time may be a major external constraint, there are many others. When confronted with external constraints, learners do not control the nature of their experience, nor the speed with which it changes, while others can control the nature of the potential learning experience or how or when it is offered to the potential learners. Many external constraints could be considered here that would take us far beyond the remit of this brief chapter – but external control is also implicit in the third form of non-learning. All that the learners may learn in these situations is that they need to learn, but have not been able to respond to the potential learning situation within which their experience has occurred: they might learn that rapid change is not conducive to learning and that some of the intended learning opportunities are lost. It is this type of experience that has given rise to the slow movement (Honore, 2004)

In conclusion, we can see from this discussion that there are clearly two different scenarios – the one could be called ‘everyday life’ (Heller, 1984), while the other is the teaching and learning, or an institutional, one. Two forms of non-learning occur – the state in which conscious individuals may not learn anything from being in a situation and the state in which individuals are aware of the potentiality of learning from their situation and do not avail themselves of it. Non-learning, like learning itself, is primarily about everyday life and we can see this in the discussion about presumption, but non-learning is also to be found amongst both types of constraint. Failure to achieve intended learning outcomes that can be found amongst both forms of constraint may not actually be non-learning *per se*, since self-learning may occur, as well as learning about other things about and within the experienced situation.

**Other studies of non-learning**

Illeris (2007: 158), in his chapter entitled ‘Barriers to learning’, starts his discussion by acknowledging that he has built on my types of non-learning, although he nowhere considers the possibility of conscious persons not learning because they presume upon their environment, only of them rejecting opportunities to learn when they are aware of them. Actually, he does not deviate far from the types discussed above, but he names
them as mis-learning, defence against learning and resistance to learning. At the same time, he is clear that non-learning actually refers to ‘when the intended learning does not occur’ (Illeris, 2007: 157), which restricts his discussion and to that extent he is not in a position to discuss my first type of non-learning, but only the other two, which are constraints and a failure to achieve intended learning outcomes. However, he does include one other situation – ambivalence.

Mis-learning, as we saw right at the outset of this paper, is a failure to obtain the desired learning outcomes. Defence against learning consists of the mental defence mechanisms that protect the learner’s self-identity, and this occurs through rejection, blocking or distorting. He cites Thomas Leithauser’s (1977) list of defence mechanisms in Leithauser and Volmerg (1977): from Andersen et al. (1993: 24) that relate to learning: reduction – ‘of course I know this’; harmonisation – emphasising unimportant common traits in conflicting conditions; displacement – ‘not my department’; levelling – ‘this is really no problem’; personification; and scapegoating mechanisms. Illeris suggests that these defence mechanisms illustrate reasons why people do not learn from potential learning situations and he points to the possibility that non-learning might also have neurotic features, or be the result of phobias.

These mechanisms can co-exist with his category of resistance to learning and are sometimes difficult to distinguish from it. He regards these as predominantly biological, as part of the human equipment in the struggle for survival, that block some forms of learning while enabling other opportunities to occur that further develop learners and fulfil their lives’ potential. Illeris’s discussion of resistance then points to what can be learned as a result of the initial resistance. Ambivalence, which is very similar to resistance to learning, occurs when people are forced into certain forms of learning that are required by society, but which the group of persons in particular would prefer to forgo.

Illeris’s discussion on barriers to learning is more related to my constraints of learning and to the second form of non-learning – that is that non-learning is equivalent to not responding to the opportunities that are presented by potential learning situations. His mis-learning, however, relates to not learning the intended outcomes of teaching and learning situations. And it is this type of non-learning that is adopted by Hay (2007) and Kinchin et al. (2008). In both of these papers, Hay and his colleagues had used the concept of non-learning as one possible outcome to teaching, the others being surface and deep learning within a higher education framework. They fit their argument within the scholarship of teaching and learning and have researched their work empirically. They have argued that, by encouraging rote learning, chains of understanding that result in a form of stasis discourages learning that leads to change, which is for them an indication of learning. They make the point that:

teachers and students are complicit in a cycle of non-learning … that allows the maintenance of an ‘economy of practice’ resulting from an audit culture … that maintains the status quo.

(Kinchin et al., 2008: 98)

In this case, being complicit in a cycle of non-learning that maintains the status quo is actually creating a constraint that inhibits students learning more and, in this instance, it is a manifestation of the second type of non-learning.

Concluding discussion

Three types of non-learning have been discussed here – the third, mis-learning is probably correctly named, but should not be included within discussions of non-learning. The second type of non-learning accepts that the non-learning occurs within a potential learning situation and that the learners could have learned, had the constraints not been there. The study of some of the internal constraints, as Illeris suggests, might highlight different phobias and neuroses, whereas the external constraints clearly demonstrate the social nature of learning and the social power that some people have that enables them to control or even inhibit other people’s learning. In both these cases, potential learning situations exist, but the non-learning occurs
because individuals are unable to avail themselves of them. It is only in circumstances with which we are so familiar that they allow us to presume upon the situation that the possibilities for non-learning arise, simply because we do not feel the need to focus upon specifics that might create disjunctural situations and so commence a learning process. Such non-learning occurs in everyday life in all the dimensions, but it is rarely researched or discussed.

References


