Part I

Approaches, Concepts and Theory
Chapter 1

Learning Theory and the Construction of Self: What Kinds of People Do We Create through the Theories of Learning that We Apply to Their Development?

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INTRODUCTION

Learning has been understood and theorised in a number of dramatically different ways over the last several decades. The variety of teaching, training and learning facilitation...
methods is also, and perhaps not surprisingly given this, vast and varied (Huczynski, 2001). The organisation-based practices of education, training and development, ‘human resource development’, organisational development and learning organisation initiatives look very different from the different theoretical perspectives. Furthermore, the different schools of thought are suggestive of very different lines of action that might be taken to facilitate learning and development.

The aim of this chapter is partly to offer an initial mapping of some of this variety so that both theorists and practitioners can be more aware of the variety and alternatives, including those that may be different from their current beliefs and practices. Another aim is also to argue that each different theoretical perspective on learning carries with it a ‘concept of self’ or concept of the ‘learning entity’, which is also extremely varied.

It is argued that whatever any effort to teach, educate, learn or develop tries to do, successfully or otherwise in the specifics of what is learned—understanding, ability, values etc.—the notion that ‘the medium is the message’ (McLuhan, 1964) also applies. An attempt to facilitate learning asserts a form of self for the target of the learning. In some circumstances learning facilitation therefore has a second-order effect; it creates a self-concept or identity in the learner. However, this is not always the case; in other circumstances the subject of learning facilitation may have an identity or form of self concept already established which is at odds with, or at least different from, that assumed or asserted by the facilitation process. In this circumstance, the process and outcome of the interaction is likely to be varied and unpredictable, containing hidden or overt conflict, contestation and misunderstanding. It is a common finding on research on the learner’s experience of being taught that the reactions and experiences generated by what appears outwardly to be the ‘same’ stimulus to learning is extremely varied between people (see Marton et al., 1984). This suggests that this pattern may be the norm rather than the exception.

It is also argued here that the differences in the concept of self embedded in learning theories, the practices applying them and people themselves subjected to attempts to facilitate their learning are not mere technical differences. The differences are about fundamental values, ethical stances about the human condition and philosophical stances on the nature of life and existence. The conclusion, whether we like it or not, is that both theorising about learning and working with the methods, styles and practices of facilitating learning is, in that sense, a philosophical and ideological endeavour.

Different theories of learning construct greatly contrasting views of the person or self that works in, on or for organisations. It follows from this that the differing forms of self asserted in learning facilitation in an organisational context, and how this interacts with existing employee identities, are likely to have a profound effect on the nature and form of the organisation in which this take place.

A final strand of the argument in this chapter is to do with change over time. Although it is certainly not the case that theories of learning, and the practices associated with them, have succeeded one another in a neat chronology that can be located in easily defined eras in recent history, there is without doubt a historicity to them. The theories and practices, and the people who developed and championed them, do belong to different time periods and their work reflects broader theoretical and practical trends crossing their eras. Something can perhaps be made of the complex evolutionary flow involving ideas and practices related to learning, linked to broader social, economic and organisational patterns.
SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT ON LEARNING AND THEIR EMBEDDED CONCEPTS OF SELF AND THE LEARNING ENTITY

This part of the chapter presents a summary of 14 perspectives on learning, and attempts to crystallise the essence of each of them. It then interprets the concept of self or the learning entity embedded in each. As will be seen, this distinction is important. At the beginning of the broad progressions through the theories of learning are those that see the individual as a stand-alone learning entity. Next come those that see individuals learning, but very much in a social context. Then there are those that see learning as very much shaped by, and dependent on, features of the social and material context; and finally there are those that locate learning in some wider process in which the individual or ‘person’ is but one part, and by no means a special or privileged one.

A number of prefatory remarks are in order: first, a common format has been adopted, to assist comprehension [this is a reflexive issue in this chapter—how do I help you understand what I am arguing? Ausubel (1968), belonging to one of my earlier schools of thought, suggests that giving people an initial structure for cognitive material helps—and pragmatically I have always found this helpful in this kind of situation!]. Each school of thought is given a name and a brief description. Following that, an attempt is made to capture the essence of each school in the form of an indicative statement that tries to capture the general principle that might follow from it as a guide to an approach to facilitation of learning. Finally, the construct of the self or learning entity is labelled and described.

Second, as may be obvious, this enterprise involves summarising in a few sentences and paragraphs vast areas of thought and practice that can and do fill volumes, and constitute the work of whole careers and the programmes of whole research groups over long periods. Live members of these can be guaranteed to deplore the simplistic nature of my enterprise, dead ones to be spinning in their graves. I do aspire to be able to identify something of the essence of each approach to learning, but would be the first to admit to not capturing the full richness and variety or, perhaps more importantly, not being able to portray some of the differences and alternative formulations within each approach. I still hope it is worthwhile for the intended purpose.

Third, the split into 14 areas is somewhat arbitrary. It is a bit like a cake that can be cut into more or fewer pieces, and the dividing cuts make in different places. This is to some extent a personal choice.

Fourth, the ordering is somewhat personal, being roughly the order in which I have encountered them since hearing my first formal definition of learning in a first-year undergraduate psychology course in 1963. This may have some idiosyncratic properties, but it must also reflect some broad changes in interest and development in the theory and practice of learning.

Finally, some of the schools of thought are primarily about learning and quite recognisable as schools of thought on learning. Others, which tend to be the later ones like post-modernism, activity theory, actor network theory and critical realism, are broader meta-theories or philosophical orientations with foci well outside any specific boundaries of learning as a phenomenon. I include them because I believe they have special implications for learning not covered elsewhere. This is why I include them and why I concentrate on the aspects of them that I believe have implications for learning.
Table 1.1 summarises the schools of thought on learning and the concept of self that I suggest is associated with them.

**School One: Conditioning and the Connectionist Approach**

- **Summary.** The *conditioning* school of thought is the behaviourist psychological approach that represents learning as the establishment of a linkage between a stimulus and response in perception and behaviour, respectively. The classic sub-theories are those of classical conditioning (Pavlov, 1972) where a ‘new’ stimulus, through association with an existing stimulus attached to a response, becomes attached to that response also; and reinforcement theories, where a response that happens to follow a stimulus which is then rewarded becomes ‘attached’ to that stimulus, or the reverse if punished (Thorndike, 1913; Thomas, 1974). This approach to learning is the basis for a large amount of empirical experimental research and theorising, which accounts for complex behaviour like language through the chaining together of simple stimulus–response connections. In both cases the product can be thought of as habit, and the process as one of establishing association through the two different processes outlined. Although this way of thinking about learning has been criticised for its mechanistic nature, or interpreted as only applying to very basic forms of learning, and not ‘higher’ forms of intelligent and moral and conscious human behaviour, Skinner has argued that it can be the basis for a more general social theory of learning (1971).

- **Essence of orientation for facilitating learning.** One should be clear about what behaviours one wants people to be capable of, and arrange to elicit and reinforce them.

- **View of self and the learning entity.** A mechanical view of the self.

**School Two: the Trait Modification View**

- **Summary.** Trait modification theory is based on the concept of the learning person or entity being describable as a set of characteristics, and learning as a change in
this profile of characteristics. As a theory it is more specific on learning as product than it is on learning as process. There are a whole variety of specific theories within this category, often associated with the psychometric tradition of research (Guilford, 1954), which proposes specific categorisations of traits and often associated measures and measuring instruments (e.g. 16PF, Myers Briggs type indicator—although the underlying constructs of this latter come from jungian theory mentioned under the later school of psychodynamics). In the more applied world of training it is common for ‘knowledge’, ‘skills’ and ‘attitudes’ to be taken as three broad categories of traits, which define learning goals and outcomes. In the training and development world the whole approach of profiling people and jobs on trait profiles, and the great majority of ‘competency’ approaches to managing learning, are implicitly or explicitly based on an underlying trait modification perspective (Schroder, 1989; Short, 1984; Boyatzis, 1982). Within this perspective one of the main enduring debates is between ‘nature’, i.e. those characteristics which are fixed on the basis of genetics or some other assumed structure, and ‘nurture’, those characteristics which are changeable as a result of learning. Thus, this perspective emphasises the question of what can and cannot be changed, or changed through a learning process. This perspective also raises the question of characteristics that affect the learning process itself, either directly through the idea of learning styles (Kolb, 1974, 1984; Honey & Mumford, 1992), or indirectly through the proposition that personality characteristics may influence how learning takes place. The complication that this perspective raises for both the theory and practice of learning is that not all learning entities may learn in the same way, which would imply that an adequate theory of learning would be a contingency theory, viz. different processes for different people.

- **Essence of orientation for facilitating learning.** It is essential that one should ‘profile’ the knowledge, skills, competencies, personality attributes, values, competencies and abilities that people do have and should have, understand which of these are capable of being influenced by training and development, and run programmes accordingly, with attention to their fits to learning styles.

- **View of self and the learning entity.** A specification view of self.

**SCHOOL THREE: THE INFORMATION TRANSFER APPROACH**

- **Summary.** The information transfer approach regards the product of learning as a stored product in the form of an informational commodity. The theoretical issues of the learning process are ones of transmission, communication, organisation, storage and retrieval in the learning entity. This way of thinking implies that the product of learning is knowledge as an objective commodity, publicly owned and acknowledged, and, at least in its simpler forms, having straightforward truth value. The primary orientation to learning as a process is learning as memory, and the theoretical and practical problems that are seem or acknowledged by this perspective are to do with how the learner takes in information, how it can be presented to be internalised, how the learner organises their knowledge—like a filing system or library so that it is stored and can be accessed (remembered) when it is called for. This perspective leads, in terms of the practice of helping learning, to a concern with imparting knowledge in an organised way and helping the learner achieve organisation as well as storage of knowledge. This
way of thinking about learning (Ausubel, 1968) can be seen as embedded in practice as well as theory. For example, the design and rationale of higher education institutions can be interpreted as having activities of research that generate knowledge, libraries and the like that store it, and teaching that disseminates the knowledge to students. When this way of thinking is dominant, teaching staff are primarily seen and valued as subject experts, teaching methods are primarily one-way knowledge transfer ones, examination and assessment is primarily based on test of information recall. Arguably, many applications of information technology to learning are and will be, because of its information storage and transmission capability, primarily based on this perspective.

• **Essence of orientation for facilitating learning.** The primary task is to communicate information on ideas and procedures effectively and assist the learners to organize this information so that they can access it in their memories, and utilize it in appropriate circumstances.

• **View of self and the learning entity.** A recorder view of self.

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**School Four: The Cognitive School**

• **Summary.** The cognitive school of thought sees the learning process as one in which the learning entity develops its own mental model or cognitive map of itself in its context, and uses this to plan and regulate its behaviour. Here knowledge is essentially personal and subjective, in contrast to the objective and public form envisaged in ‘information transfer’. Learners develop their idiosyncratic cognitive maps, modifying them to help them make increasing sense of their experience and take actions that help them achieve their outcomes. Kelly’s theory of personal constructs, and its associated repertory grid methodology, represents one formulation of this approach (see Bannister & Mair, 1968). Historically, the gestalt orientation to psychology (Kohler, 1929), in seeking to acknowledge a holistic mind behind behaviour, fits with this view. Miller et al. (1960) develop the metaphor of the cognitive map to account for behaviour and skill as the equivalent of ‘itineraries’ that are drawn from maps to suggest how skills and behaviour might derive from knowledge.

• **Essence of orientation for facilitating learning.** The important thing is to help students/learners develop, test and improve their own mental models of the organisational situations they do or will deal with.

• **View of self and the learning entity.** A knowing view of self.

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**School Five: The Systems Theory Approach**

• **Summary.** The cybernetic/autopoietic perspective is essentially the application of systems theory to the issue of learning. The learning entity is seen as a system within a context, normally adapting to that situation by developing an understanding of it and using this understanding to guide its behaviour in its environment to allow it to survive and attain its purposes. The concept of autopoiesis modifies the standard systems view of an entity surviving as a system by adapting to its context, towards a view in which the system acts to modify its context in a way that is to the advantage of the system. Pask (1975) gives an academic treatment of this perspective; it is treated in a much more applied way by Romiszowski (1970). Maturana & Valera (1980, 1992) develop
the concept of autopoiesis in the context of biology; Morgan (1989) applies it to the human development and organisation world. Much of business gaming and simulation in general as a teaching/learning process can be seen as based on this idea of learning, based around the notion of simulating a learning environment (Armitage, 1993; Gibb, 1974; Taylor & Walford, 1978). Systems thinking as also a major perspective in conceptualisations of organisational learning (Senge, 1990; Beer, 1972).

- **Essence of orientation for facilitating learning.** It is useful to put students/learners into situations that simulate the management and leadership work situations that they do or will face, where they analyse, decide and act, and get a simulated response to their actions.
- **View of self and the learning entity.** The discovery view of self.

**School Six: The Humanistic and Existential Approach**

- **Summary.** Humanistic/developmental approaches to learning typically attempt to acknowledge an emotional, affective aspect of learning as well as an intellectual/cognitive one, and often encompass an idea of a natural trajectory of learning towards a ‘fully developed’ state. They tend, in their simplest forms, to assume a ‘good and true’ human nature for the learner that will lead to fulfilment and a good life and, indeed, society, if authentically acknowledged and expressed (see Rogers, 1969, for the classic treatment). Theories in this category are implicitly or explicitly normative, tending to the view that the natural trajectory of development is also the ‘right’ one. Some theories, notably Kohlberg (1981), address this directly, presenting the theory of one of moral development. The closely related existential point of view is essentially a philosophical one, but one with important implications for learning. The essential point for learning is that existentialism challenges the traditional assumption implicit in much thinking about learning, that ideas, beliefs, thought and decision making precede and determine action. Existentialism, at least as articulated by Sartre (1970), proposes that action precedes and generates meaning. In this perspective, learning and creativity are closely allied; wilful action, in a domain not prestructured by existing meaning and habits, is the generator of new meanings.
- **Essence of orientation for facilitating learning.** In helping people learn it is important to see them as complex, full human beings like ourselves, and not to use some model that simplifies them as learning entities. This involves respecting individuals’ own processes for development and growth.
- **View of self and the learning entity.** An essential view of self.

**School Seven: Social Learning Theory**

- **Summary.** Social influence theories of learning take a more sociological or social psychological view of learning, in contrast to the more individualised psychologist orientation of the schools of thought summarised so far. Here the learning entity is taken to be primarily a social construction, and what is at stake is identity or identity formation—how the learning entity is perceived and self-perceives, and including the question of whether the ‘learner’ has a unitary and individualised identity, which is not to be taken for granted in the more fully developed forms of this school of
thought (see e.g. Gowler, 1972, for an articulation of the primarily social view of the person). Socialisation (see Van Mannen, 1976), both as a process and an outcome, are a prime focus in this perspective, and more psychological and empirical work in this tradition focuses on the processes by which identity and self-concept are formed and the conditions that influence this. However, this perspective does not only cover identity; it would interpret even technical skills as only being learnt to implement some kind of occupational or role identity, technical skill being as much or entirely about having reputation for a certain kind of performance, rather than some objective technical ability to achieve a material performance.

- **Essence of orientation for facilitating learning.** Central to educating managers and leaders is the creation of processes by which they achieve ‘identities’ as managers and leaders—in their own eyes and in the eyes of others.
- **View of self and the learning entity.** An identity view of self.

### School Eight: Psychodynamics and Related Approaches

- **Summary.** The psychoanalytic school of thought is intended here in the broadest sense to label that body of approaches, following Freud (1938) and Jung (1923), that use the concept of the unconscious and various forces and sources of energy as a framework within which to propose interpretations of experience and behaviour as created by dynamic interactions between conscious and unconscious. As well as providing the theoretical basis of a whole class of therapeutic programmes, this approach has been embodied in popular methodologies such as transactional analysis (Barker, 1980) and, through the work of Bion (1961) to various group learning methods, and organisational change (DeBoard, 1978). Central to this view is the idea of the unconscious, which has content that interacts dynamically with the content of consciousness in the shaping of experience and behaviour. Different sub-schools within this general one differ on how they see this dynamic working, and how fixed this is, or itself open to change through learning. This school of thought also underlies and relates to various therapeutic practices and offers interpretations of the therapist—‘patient’ relationship. These ideas can be and are also applied to the teacher–learner relationship. Ideas like ‘projection’, in which either party sees in and attributes to the other features which are in fact their own, and ‘dependency’ in which one relies on the other for the validity of their beliefs and justifications for their actions, are examples.
- **Essence of orientation for facilitating learning.** It is important to recognize that any learning process that is going to affect a person’s ability to perform a management and leadership role is going to involve the realignment of the dynamic balance between conscious and unconscious forces and processes in his/her psyche.
- **View of self and the learning entity.** A mystical view of self—in the sense that, via the notion of the unconscious, the person is a mystery to him/herself and others.

### School Nine: Post-modernism

- **Summary.** Post-modernism is a broad intellectual movement asserting the end of modernism, the start of which is usually located anywhere between the beginning of the Enlightenment and the commencement of the industrial revolution. The end
of modernism is located in recent decades, although the case for the continuation of modernism can be made. Post-modernism has, perhaps fittingly, multiple definitions and descriptions. These include the end of a sense of progress (the growth of science and technology and the sense that it will solve all problems), the end of an overarching purpose for knowledge—knowledge to cope better with the world, knowledge for human enlightenment, and knowledge for its own sake. In fashion and art it leads to a pastiche of former styles in new combinations. The notion of the ‘end of progress’ has profound implications for learning, since much of our implicit and explicit thinking about learning is that it is progressive—getting better, more skilled, more able to cope, more mature and so on. Post-modern learning is just a new temporary combination, a temporary alignment to a new temporary set of circumstances. The post-modern view also questions the notion of an integrated self that is the author, or agent, or point of origin of action. Post-modernism talks of the ‘decentred and fragmented’ self. Post-modernism is a sense takes the view that an integrated self-originating purposive action is a modernist idea. From a post-modern point of view, the idea of an individual self is something strange to the modernist era and perhaps to Western culture. From this point of view, the individual self is not something real or natural, but rather a cultural idea belonging to a particular era. The idea of self is a cultural idea that we absorb and the rolling, evolving culture in which we live ‘prints’ certain cultural identities on us, and we are the carriers rather than the creators of these. Decentring takes the person away from the position of being the origin of meaning and action. Many ways of thinking about learning support the idea of helping the person have a consistent self and identity that is stable and without inner contradictions. Post-modernism takes the other view—it is inevitable and necessary that we are multiple, inconsistent and changing selves all the time. Post-modernism comes in an optimistic and pessimistic forms—and typically the message is that both apply. The optimistic view is that we can be whoever we want to be, and create whatever realities we want to, in the carnival of life. The pessimistic view is nihilistic—life has no purpose or meaning, nothing is any more or less true than anything else. Gergen (1991) provides a good treatment of some of the issues that this perspective raises for us in contemporary life.

• **Essence of orientation for facilitating learning.** In today’s world, managers and leaders have to be helped to feel comfortable with having confused and multiple identities, live with unclear or multiple senses of direction, and with being just a part of complex and chaotic flows that they cannot understand.

• **View of self and the learning entity.** The decentred and fragmented self.

**School Ten: Situated Learning Theory**

• **Summary.** The notion of situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) emphasises the collective, local and informal nature of much learning. In this view, learning in the outcome, product or noun sense exists in ‘communities of practice’ that share a way of doing things. Individuals come to share this collective learning through a process of ‘legitimate peripheral participation’, from which they are slowly incorporated into collective practice and community membership. This view of learning casts it essentially as a natural and informal process in which individuals become absorbed into the beliefs and practices of a group as part and parcel of becoming a member of it.
However, there have been attempts to apply this idea to the deliberate facilitation of learning by setting up groups of people with shared areas of practices in a way which is intended to help them share their experiences and develop their practices.

- **Essence of orientation for facilitating learning.** Management and leadership is best, and perhaps can only, be learnt by a kind of informal apprenticeship involving being a beginner-participant in the situation where the management and leadership is going to be practised.

- **View of self and the learning entity.** The communal self.

**School Eleven: Post-structuralism**

- **Summary.** The post-structural perspective constitutes a broad conceptual movement in the social sciences (Sturrock, 1979), which may not be a learning theory as such but has important implications for it. Broadly speaking, this approach argues that there is very little, or in the extreme nothing, that is fixed that generates psychological, social, linguistic or cultural phenomena. Rather, behaviour, experience and phenomena of all kinds are generated by temporary learnt operating beliefs that determine both the generation and perception of behaviour. In a metaphor, these things are generated by ‘software’ rather than ‘hardware’. This perspective reframes many existing theories of learning. For example, humanistic phase models of human development were mainly proposed by their originators as structural truths about human personality, but can be reformulated in a post-structural perspective as ‘learnt’ assumptions shared by certain cultural groupings in certain eras. In the psychoanalytic domain, a post-structural reformulation has been proposed by Lacan (1977), who has suggested that Freud was right to propose the unconscious, but that the way the unconscious is structured is not fixed. A reaction to this point of view, reasserting the significance of structure as an inherited characteristic only modified in the very long term by Darwinian processes, has emerged under the banner of evolutionary psychology (Barkow et al., 1992).

- **Essence of orientation for facilitating learning.** It is a mistake to think that there is anything fixed or ‘hard-wired’ about people in terms of what they are like and how they learn. People can be constructed, and construct themselves, in all kinds of ways, in terms of both how they learn and what they learn to be.

- **View of self and the learning entity.** The ‘vacant’ self.

**School Twelve: Activity Theory**

- **Summary.** Activity theory continues the theme that it is not possible to understand and locate learning as a phenomenon that is entirely within an individual. It does not deny or question the notion of the person or the individual, but argues that what they are and do, including how they learn, can only be understood in the context of some important features of their situations. These include the activity or task in which they are involved, the tools (in very broad sense of the word) and resources they have access to, and the other people, social systems and structures that are part of their context (see Blackler, 1993, for an introduction to activity theory applied to organization and management. In this view the individual still learns, but in a way that is fundamentally shaped by his/her context in terms of the tasks and purposes he/she pursues alone and
with others, the social and cultural context in which he/she operates, and the material and non-material tools that are available to him/her.

- **Essence of orientation for facilitating learning.** People only learn in a way that is deeply entwined and integrated with the tasks and purposes they are learning to achieve and perform, the tools they do and could have to do this, and the other people and social context in which they do this.

- **View of self and the learning entity.** The contextualised self.

**School Thirteen: Actor Network Theory**

- **Summary.** Actor network theory, like activity theory, emphasises the notion that the ‘individual’ or ‘person’ is deeply embedded in, and just part of, a context. This includes tools and technologies, social processes and structures, and institutions. This whole context, including the person, is an interactive system. As far as learning goes, actor network theory argues that learning is a property of this whole system. Within this view it makes just as much sense to attribute learning to the tools and technologies in a situation as it does to attribute it to the individual or person. However, it cannot really be attributed to any single part of the system because it is a system-wide phenomenon (see Law & Hassard, 1999; Hassard, Law & Lee, 1999). Actor network theory thus casts learning as a long-term characteristic of human, social or material systems by which the individual is carried along, and sees very distinct limits on the extent to which the individual can unilaterally reshape him/herself and his/her contexts.

- **Essence of orientation for facilitating learning.** What actually learns is systemic networks, including people, tools, resources, purposes and tasks, the material, social and the cultural legacy associated with domains of practice. To the extent that we can address individuals as learners, we have to recognize that they are just one element in such complex systems, and no more important or significant than any of the other parts.

- **View of self and the learning entity.** The co-evolving self.

**School Fourteen: Critical Realism**

- **Summary.** Critical realism is another broad philosophical view of the world with profound implications for what learning might be. In relation to learning, critical realism points us to the question, ‘What is there that exists in the world that might be learnt about, and what are the implications for its form and nature for learning?’ Critical realism asserts that there are ‘real’ things in the world with properties—effects that occur regularly, but are contingent on surrounding circumstances. But included in the ‘real’ are the ideas and concepts that we have about things, and the second-order ideas that we have about our ideas. However, critical realism neither accepts that there is a predictable machine-like world out there that can be discovered as a predictable system, nor that (as implied by post-modernism) there is nothing but an evolving sea of ideas, concepts and cultural meanings. Rather, the world is a complex open system with emergent properties—new things happen all the time due to events and entities coming together in combinations never previously occurring. Critical realism focuses our attention on the question of what there is to learn about, what its properties are
and what the implications of this are for how we learn about it. The outcome is that
learning is a kind of active detective work to understand how events and entities are
playing out in particular circumstances.

- **Essence of orientation for facilitating learning.** Helping people to learn to manage
and lead is best done by developing them as practical action researchers, continuously
working out the dynamics of the situations that they deal with, which have properties
of varying degrees of stability that are always recombining in new forms, but none the
less have some features capable of anticipation.

- **View of self and the learning entity.** The hermeneutic self—i.e. a self that reflects on
itself as it tries to make sense of itself and the world of which it is part.

### CONSTRUCTIONS OF THE SELF IN PERSPECTIVES ON LEARNING

This extremely, and probably dangerously, brief sketch of some of the main perspectives
on learning suggests a range of constructions of the ‘self’ implicitly and explicitly
formulated by them, as summarised in Table 1.1.

Whether the summaries are fair, and whether the specific concepts of self that I have
associated with them are formulated as well as they could be, must be open to questioning
and debate. However, the argument is hopefully sufficient to demonstrate that there is a
great variety of conceptions of self at work in our theories of learning. Returning to some
of the questions and arguments in the opening paragraphs of this chapter, this hopefully
provides a basis for considering a number of points and the implications of these for any
practice that is to do with attempts to facilitate learning.

Any attempt to facilitate learning is going to involve methods and approaches, and
these are going to be based, implicitly or explicitly, on ideas like the above. Whatever else
these do in terms of aiming at specific or general learning outcomes for the learner, they
make a ‘pitch’ at the learner as a certain kind of self. In some cases this may help to create
the learner as the kind of self assumed by the learning approach, e.g. as an employable
commodity to fit an organisational machine, or as an autonomous self asserting the right
to self-creation.

In other situations, the asserted ‘self’ may be in conflict with some pre-established
learner identity and self, and this conflict or clash may explain some of the ‘difficulties’
that can occur in events to facilitate learning. It would be hard to argue that there are
any decisive rights and wrongs in this field of learning theory and practice. To find a
practical approach in the light of all this complexity, the best line to take is probably that
acceptable constructions of the self needs to be negotiated between learning facilitators
and learners as part of the relationship. This idea has probably been best developed in
terms of the value of ‘learning conversations’ by Harri-Augstein & Thomas (1991), who
advocate this kind of discussion as part of learning events.

The sources of variety and differences between the different ways of thinking about
learning, and the constructions of self that they carry, are certainly more than factual and
technical differences. They reach right back to major alternative philosophical views
of the world and fundamental ideological and moral perspectives associated with them.
It follows from this that ‘learning conversations’ need to be a dialogue to establish
some working consensus (or way of working with a dissensus) on these philosophical
and moral issues. Given the pivotal role of education, training and development in our
TABLE 1.2  Suggested clusters of learning theories and concepts of self

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1–4</td>
<td>An individualised, passive and machine-like view of learning and the self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4–6 (and 8?)</td>
<td>An individualised but agentic, purposive view of the self as learner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 and 10</td>
<td>A social view of self—individuals as existing in relation to other people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9, 11–14</td>
<td>Learning as a system- or context-located phenomenon with the person/self as a node in this process, with variations of status in relation to learning. In this category learning is in a system-wide context, in which the individual is deeply embedded in the totality of this, which is not only social, but technical and ecological as well</td>
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...society and economy, it can be argued that the way we negotiate the forms of ourselves in learning events is pivotal to the reproduction and revision of our social, economic and political lives.

Mention was made of the historicity of our ideas about learning. The schools of thought discussed here do not fall into a neat chronology, but there is some rough ordering of them in relation to ideas that have been at the forefront over the last 80 years. These can be very roughly grouped. Using the numbering in Table 1.1, the clusters shown in Table 1.2 can be suggested, which give some sense of how our conceptions of learning and the self have themselves developed over recent history.

There is a clear sense of progression here from individual passive and active learning, through the social to a more fully integrated concept of learning. In choosing and negotiating approaches to learning and the views of self that go with them, we have the opportunity to choose towards which of these stages of development we wish to move the contexts in which we work. Post-modernism notwithstanding, if we move to the later concepts of learning we may have the opportunity to move humanity, and organisations through which it expresses may of its aspirations, to a more sustainable relationship with the world.

REFERENCES


