Learning and Practice: Agency and Identities

edited by Patricia Murphy and Kathy Hall
(Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2008, 211 pages)

Learning and Practice is the first in a series of three books that are used in the Master's in Education program at the United Kingdom's Open University. Comprised of 13 chapters, 11 of which are journal articles or chapters from other books, it provides a variety of educational strategies that focus on socio-cultural and participative learning.

The book is divided into three well-organized sections. The first section, "Mind and Learning," has three chapters, each with a different focus on the action of learning; these chapters form the foundation for the remaining two sections. In the first chapter, McCormick and Hall look at the influence of school curriculum on learning and claim there are three levels of curriculum analysis. The first level, "specified curriculum," focuses on the aims of the content. The second, "enacted curriculum," which, according to the authors, is the level where most analysis occurs, considers how knowledge is selected and transmitted. The final level, "experienced curriculum," examines the impact of the curriculum on learners' learning experiences. The authors argue that this level is seldom attained since it requires a firm understanding of the meaning of learning. In the second chapter, Usha Goswami focuses on neurology and its impact on learning. The author reviews several studies and provides evidence in support of a variety of concepts, including the "sleep on it" concept, the positive outcome of which has been demonstrated by learners who, when tested on a computer skill the day after they learned it, performed the skill better than they had the day before. As well, this challenging but informative chapter dispels three common myths about right- and left-brain learning. In chapter 3, well-known author Etienne Wenger focuses on communities of practice, describing the concepts of meaning, negotiated meaning, participation, and reification.

Chapters 4 through 8 make up the second section of the book, "Culture, Tools and Learning." In this section, authors discuss aspects of socio-cultural learning and how they affect a number of issues, including learners and participation, organizational learning, gender issues, the use of testing in assessment, and portfolio use in teacher education in Norway. Author Anna Sfard's chapter on the "participationist" discourse considers societal and personal development in terms of communication and participation.

The third and final section of the book, "Identities, Agency and Learning," chapters 9 through 13, presents a number of perspectives on issues of identity and learning. In chapter 9, Deborah Hicks describes the progress of a working-class child in primary school. The child likes to be active and work with his hands, but he does not value the school learning experience and is in jeopardy of having to repeat second grade. The author offers strategies for students who, like this youngster, learn better outside the classroom norm. The remaining chapters discuss individual positions and identity based on culture, gender, class, status, or caste across cultures. In one of the book's many case-based chapters, Wolff-Michael Roth and Stuart Lee consider the meaning of scientific literacy and its importance for communities by discussing a project in which they brought together school children and community members to explore problems in a local creek. They found that because all of the students were engaged in the project in some manner, through the division of labour, the project had an impact on the entire community. In the book's final chapter, an article written in 2000, its author John Seely Brown discusses the impact of the Internet on society and on education. Although many of the concepts he outlined in that article, such as high-speed Internet, have come to pass, Brown's ideas are still current since the Internet continues to evolve, change, and expand, and its impact on learning continues to fascinate us as it does so.

Learning and Practice offers a wide range of different approaches to learning and practice. Featuring a variety of topics drawn from across a broad field, one of its particular strengths is the use of practical examples and case studies and the resultant provision of research-based strategies.

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