Learning-as-Experience: A Phenomenological Account of Educative Erlebnis

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1. Objective

The event of learning is the Achilles heel of the “discourses” or “language[s] of learning” dominant in education today (Meyer-Drawe 2008; Biesta 2012). We have almost no empirical access to or control over this event. It can’t be caused or guaranteed, and its occurrence is visible (if at all) only post facto, e.g. as learning results. For phenomenology, however, learning-as-experience forms a key moment in lived experience (Erlebnis). It appears as something that occurs and can be fostered through the variation of experience known in phenomenology as the epoché or reduction. In describing learning-as-experience, this paper sheds new light on contemporary discourses of learning—from the intricacies of the learning sciences to the effortful learning advocated by the growth mindset.

2. Framework

Learning-as-experience, like any other experience is structured by intentionality. Intentionality refers to the fact that in being aware, we are first always aware of something—generally in terms of its purpose, or simply, its relevance. A computer keyboard appears as something for typing, a screen as something for display. In short, in perceiving “something as something,” this “as something” marks what is called the “significative difference,” which is the locus of all phenomenological concern:

that something shows itself as something, that something is meant, given, understood, or treated in a certain way… The formula something as something means that something (actual, possible, or impossible) is linked to something else (a sense, a meaning) and is at the same time separated from it. (Waldenfels 2011, p. 21)

This separation is not the opposition between something that is “actual” and something “subjective” superimposed upon it. Subjectivity cannot be entirely arbitrary, entirely “subjective” because in the significative difference, something, as Waldenfels says, is always “linked” to that which it is taken to be.

However, when we are aware of or engaging with “something as something” in this way—basically all the time—we are never immune to interruptions, disappointments and surprises.
When we get used to seeing “something as something,” for example, the thin upright surface on our desk as a screen, it can suddenly appear rather different: It can flicker and go blank, appearing as a black surface rather than as images to be seen or words to be read. Edmund Husserl explains:

Expectations [are] …essentially susceptible to disappointment in all circumstances. Perception brings something new; that is its nature. To be sure, it may have a prefiguring that stems from the past of consciousness, something new arrives in accordance with something already familiar, something already constituted as past for me. (2001, p. 263)

Husserl is saying that such departures from expectation—whether they result in shock or exasperation, or merely a raised eyebrow—are an ongoing part of experience. Waldenfels describes this non-conformity of expectation and experience using the word **widerfahren**, generally translated as “befalling.” In Waldenfels’ sense, the substantive **Widerfahrens** been rendered as “counter-happening” (English 2013, p. 119)—a kind of “experience against the grain” or “experience despite oneself.”

3. Evidence and Objects

In resisting the flow of experience, some interruptions or discontinuities can move us from un-self-aware “pre-reflective” experience to experience that is **explicitly** reflective. In these moments, we become aware of what we are experiencing as **such**, and further, become aware of ourselves and our world in a new and different way. Experience can be said to turn into **learning**. This learning, however, is not the gradual acquisition and accretion of new facts and abilities to form a stable and substantial “knowledge base.” It is instead “a **restructuring** of previous experience that changes how we relate to the other and to the world” (Schratz & Westfall-Greiter 2015, p. 5). To understand “knowing-how” can be referred to Käthe Meyer-Dawe’s (2008, p.2) “oblique observation”: in an “oblique observation” one can understand and achieve the pre-rational, pre-predicative, and pre-reflective through reflection (ibid., p.118). Such a perception is not directed to one thing, but rather applies to the pretence of perceptions embedded in a particular situation. It is thus not directed to a **what**, but rather captures an object in **how it shows itself**, or in the “[...] way something respectively comes to sight, to execution or into discussion” (Waldenfels 1998, p.22). This is the “unthematic” in an awareness, according to Iso Kern (1975, p.76 et seq. [emphasis by author]), and an “oblique” repetition of consciousness: while consciousness is straightaway repeated in the direct reflection, “[...] a more complex basic form of mindfulness mirrors the reflection in more pregnant sense. The repeated consciousness is no longer centered **accordantly**, no longer in the same direction of interest, but rather in a reversal or **reorientation**. This is done by no longer directing one’s interest to consciousness, but by bending back its intention to any unthematic moment of the same. It captures some moment in realized consciousness, which indeed belongs in this consciousness, but is not objective within it.”

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1 In German: Es handelt es sich dabei um das in einem Bewusstsein Unthematische, nach Iso KERN (1975, S.76f. [Hervorh. i.O.]), um eine „oblique“ Wiederholung von Bewusstsein: Während in der direkten Reflexion das verengewärtigte Bewusstsein sozusagen geradewegs wiederholt wird (z.B. in der Erinnerung sehe ich nochmals die Gemse auf einer Bergkuppe), „[…] spiegelt
Günther Buck, who was the first to describe learning in these ways, characterizes it in terms of the reflexivity of experience itself: “Only in experience, thus turning back on itself, which at the same time is a change in our capacity to experience, lies the actual educative power of experience” (Buck 1989, p. 3). As Andrea English puts it, one develops “a sort of awareness of oneself as other that is indispensable for transformative change and learning” (2014, p. 93; emphasis in original).

Gunther Buck introduces a special term, Umlernen, which can be translated as “re-learning” or “un-learning,” and he explains its meaning as follows:

_Umlernen_ [...] is not simply the correction of this or that idea that one had about something; it also means an alteration of one’s “disposition,” that is, of one’s entire horizon of experience. He who learns as “umlernen” is confronted with himself; he becomes conscious of himself. It is not only that certain ideas change, rather, the learner himself changes. On account of this essential negativity, the process of learning is the history of the learner himself. (Buck, 1969, p. 47; as quoted and translated by A. English 2014, p. 96)

“Essential negativity” here refers to what changes, what is heterogeneous and uncertain—as opposed to that which is certain and in this sense, “positive.” This negativity is the history of the learner specifically as learner, but at the same time, it may not be a history that we as learners are inclined to recall or retell. Merleau-Ponty sheds light on this in his description of the “behavior” of learning:

It does not unfold in objective time and space like a series of physical events; each moment does not occupy one and only one point of time; rather, at the decisive moment of learning, a “now” stands out from the series of “nows,” acquires a particular value and summarizes the groupings which have preceded it as it engages and anticipates the future of the behavior; this “now” transforms the singular situation of the experience into a typical situation and the effective reaction into an aptitude. (1963, p. 125)

Learning in other words, is a heterogeneous, often difficult process or series of “nows” that, in retrospect, are subsumed by the moment of success. We are much happier in the “effective reaction” that has become “an aptitude,” than we are in the a-typical and ineffective moments that are necessarily a part of this process. “The unthought hurts because we’re comfortable in what’s already thought,” as Lyotard (1991) has noted. To think, and also to learn, then, is to be able to
simply “to accept this discomfort” (p. 20). Moments of learning are those in which the familiar is lost, but what will replace it is as of yet unknown. As Käte Meyer-Drawe observes, we cannot say at any one point that “we are now beginning to learn;” we can only know “we have learned” earlier. Learning in this sense is located “at the threshold between no longer and not yet” (2008, p. 15).

4. Substantiated Conclusions

a) For the Learner

From the perspective of the student him or herself, then, progress in learning does not appear as one of rational systematic construction—a process complete with scaffolds and developmental zoning as seen in the constructivist learning sciences (e.g., Reiser & Tabak, 2014). It is not the rational order of curriculum planners and textbook authors—one in which the learner gains new knowledge based precisely on the logic of that acquired previously. Each learning event is instead characterized by disruption, unfamiliarity, fissures, distantiations, perturbations and imbalances. It is a distantiation from that which is familiar, and is in this sense is also an experience of inner distantiation and alienation.

b) For the Teacher

Of course, the teacher has an important role in working supportively to ensure that students do not withdraw from difficulty and discomfort, as Schratz & Westfall-Greiter 2015 point out. But to further understand the role of the teacher, we need to return to the notion of the significative difference. Simply put, it is the teacher’s task to work with and through this difference. It is to encourage the student or child to see something as something else: To see two lines intersecting at right angles not as random marks, but as the letter “t.” To later see similar marks as the x and y axes of a two-dimensional graph. To teach and instruct, in other words, can be seen as a kind of phenomenological eidetic variation—a way of encouraging students to view something as something in a variety of ways.

However, this process is NOT as simple as it might initially sound. When we first come across something, we do not perceive it rationally; instead, we encounter it experientially and holistically: “an object looks attractive or repulsive,” as Merleau-Ponty (quoting Koffka) suggests, “before it looks black or blue, circular or square” (p. 28). A multiplication table might simply look to the child like a patterned space or a Sudoko puzzle earlier seen at home. Engaging with the child learning multiplication can the demand a special, phenomenological act on the part of the teacher: Namely to bracket his or her own conventionalized understandings, and in this sense, to perform a kind of eidetic variation on his or her own understandings. This can take the form of a “vari[ation of] the perceptual object,” as Husserl explains, through what he calls “a free optionalness—undertaken in such a way that we keep perception fixed as perception of something” (1970, S. 70 emphasis added). The perception, say, of $2^{10}$ is no longer a foregone conclusion. It is instead open to a range of understandings and interpretations. We must “abstain”
as Husserl says, from the simple “acceptance of its being, [and] change the fact of this perception into a pure possibility, one among other quite ‘optional’ pure possibilities - but possibilities that are possible perceptions” (1970, pp. 70-71; emphasis added). Only when we are open in this way can we then hope to gain some access to the child’s or adolescent’s own “perceiving as.” And for the teacher this can involve some of the discomfort, unfamiliarity, fissures and distantiation that were attributed to student learning above.

The task of pedagogy, then, is to accompany the child in his or her “perceiving as.” Above all, it is an exercise in gaining insight into how something becomes relevant. This entails the development of a way of thinking that focuses on “heterologies”—on the possibilities for differences in experience, perception and understanding (e.g., de Certeau, 1986). Thinking of Merleau-Ponty’s description, this means resisting one’s own aptitude, avoiding the typical situation that one has already canonized in one’s own understanding. It means trying to lighten the load of the student through one’s own experiential, phenomenology or “abstemious” labor. It means accepting one’s own version of the “discomfort” of which Lyotard speaks, and in this sense sharing—at least to some extent—in the self-alienation that the student herself is experiencing.

5. Scholarly Relevance

Teaching in this sense can be characterized as a trusting giving not so much of knowledge or something to be learned, but of one’s support in bearing of the arduous burden of learning. Advocates of the growth mindset are often keen to see this burden bravely borne by the student—namely through individual effort, persistence, and belief in one’s own ability to learn (e.g., Dweck 2007). We can derive pedagogy’s aims as developing the emancipatory potentials of the responses of each individual to the different questions of life. Responses can be all kind of actions, reactions, or interpretations. Such responsivity is directed to different areas of life insofar as our knowing and knowledge about subject-object-relations are dependent on the way how they are constituted; a tree is not the same for a biologist or for a forester, for a gardener or for a child. They all look at the tree differently, regarding it as a biological niche (biologist,) as part of a wood (forester,) as a ground for building a tree house (child,) etc. by their specific knowledge responding to it. This specific knowledge can be cognitively controlled, as well as there are non-conscious, non-intentional, instinctive and automated forms of knowledge. Pedagogy, also Didactics, can thus be seen as staging knowledge in order to get its regarding as - status in sight and working on these possible responses to a phenomenon. The prevalent task of pedagogy is thus to render a situation for the development of responsivity. This involves the event.

But as learning-as-experience shows us, seeing a learning child’s effort and persistence as something good in and of itself is hardly a risk-free or harmless proposition. The results of distantiation and alienation can all too easily become overwhelming—especially among those already feeling uncomfortable or isolated. Conceptualizing the practices and purposes of education in terms of only one thing—student learning—can lead to what Mayer-Drawe
diagnoses as the “high-speed” or “revved-up” learner, one who must ultimately bear the burden for educational outcomes alone, while the teacher simple guides or facilitates (2008, pp. 125-155). However, understanding both learning- and teaching- “as-experience” suggests that this burden is something that very much very much shared by teacher and learner. Teacher and student are bound by a mutual experience of risk and trust as they together explore the spaces of significative difference.

References:


