

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LEARNING

Volume 10, 2003

Article: LC03-0299-2003

Learning

The Balance between Observer, Participant, and Agent

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WHAT LEARNING MEANS: Proceedings of the Learning Conference 2003



Edited by Mary Kalantzis and Bill Cope

International Journal of Learning
Volume 10, 2003

This journal and individual papers published at <http://LearningConference.Publisher-Site.com/>
a series imprint of theUniversityPress.com

First published in Australia in 2003-2005 by Common Ground Publishing Pty Ltd at
<http://LearningConference.Publisher-Site.com/>

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ISSN 1447-9494 (Print)
ISSN 1447-9540 (Online)

The International Journal of Learning is a peer-refereed journal which is published annually. Full papers submitted for publication
are refereed by the Associate Editors through an anonymous referee process.

Papers presented at the Tenth International Literacy and Education Research Network Conference on Learning.
Institute of Education, University of London 15-18 July 2003

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Introduction

Systematically taking the view of the Cologne approach of interactive constructivism, I will give a short and introductory description of how theoretical understanding of learning processes has been subject to change in our view of learning and teaching in theory and practice in the present. Among many facets I wish to focus particularly on one issue: I will consider the three perspectives of being an observer, participant, or agent for teachers and learners. The sense of these distinctions lies in finding a new epistemology about learning and expanding the multimodal ways of learning and our understanding about that.

A Theoretical Introduction

The Cologne approach of interactive constructivism has offered quite a lot of reflections and instruments for creating a constructivist classroom¹ that by now are very well known and practically used in German teacher education and training. They are not only educationally discussed², but situated in discourses as given by the later Foucault and other poststructuralist writers like Jean-Francois Lyotard or Jacques Derrida, they reflect postmodernity in the way of Zygmunt Bauman and Anthony Giddens and are influenced by cultural studies.³ In the field of educational theories, they draw on diverse approaches, that flow from a multimodal, multidimensional and multiparticipant understanding of learning processes like the ones presented in the last years in multiple ways by the Learning Conference. It is an essential claim of the approach not only to elaborate suggestions for practical instruction, but to reflect on the broader and more basic conditions of reconstruction in the context of culture and time.

In this paper I will try to analyze three perspectives that have been helpful in our Cologne teacher education. In our search for as much participation as possible for all students in learning processes – a way we call the constructive side of learning (“as much construction as is possible, as much reconstruction [reproduction] as is

¹ Quite similar cf. Marlow/Page (1998).

² Cf. for the German discussion Reich (2002, 2003). Cf. for similar discussion e.g. Science and Education (1997), Fosnot (1996), Lambert (1995, 1996), Larochelle (1998), Steffe/Gale (1995), Tobin (1993) among many others.

³ Reich (1998, 2 Vol.). For a short introduction in main aspects of the approach see Stefan Neubert:
URL: http://www.uni-koeln.de/ew-fak/konstrukt/texte/introduction_of_interactive_constructivism.pdf

necessary”)⁴ – the distinction of the roles or perspectives of observers, participants, and agents led us to avoid simplifying realistic views, and to reach a crucial constructivist approach which does not pursue any copy theory of learning. I will present to you some of the main theoretical aspects of these perspectives. In the German exposition of the Cologne program we use a lot of concrete examples to illustrate the bearings of these theoretical perspectives (Reich 2002, 2003). Unfortunately I have to confine myself here, for reasons of brevity, to explaining the theoretical core concepts. I hope that I will have the occasion for providing exemplary applications in another contribution some time in the future.

One main question arises again and again in analyzing learning processes: To what extent is it possible for us⁵ to step out of the concrete learning situation in a way that will enable us to critically view that situation? This seems to be an indispensable step if we want to prevent ourselves from indulging in realistic intuitions or illusions, in conventional habits, or in sophisticated discursive language games that are by no means relevant to our actual life situation. There are a lot of answers to those questions. For me three possible answers are of high relevance, because I think that we have to accept three offences of our expectations:

- What we once considered to be natural experience has turned out insufficient for explaining or justifying learning.⁶
- Conventions will never be complete, and it is only within clearly restricted fields – particularly those of technology – that they may claim relatively permanent and general validity and reliability.⁷
- In postmodernity, due to the idea of a variety of possible discourses, the interpretation of contents and relationships of learning has increasingly been qualified and rendered ambiguous.⁸

However, it seems to me that corresponding to the offences mentioned above, there have also emerged three considerable improvements concerning the learning situation of any learner:

There has been an increase in freedom, for example for the learner to choose what s/he will learn and for what end s/he will learn it.

Regardless of the contents, there has been an increased awareness of the import of relationships influencing learning. Relationships have to be designed actively, in order that learning will gain in human resources as well as in emotional and imaginative powers.

There has been an increase in possible and changing perspectives each learner has to perform in order to orient her/himself on her/his own as well as with the support of others and prove her/himself during a lifetime learning process.

⁴ The German term “Rekonstruktion” is very much used in the sense of reproduction like a model or replica of something. But as constructivists we hold like Piaget or Vygotsky that this too must be an active process of learning.

⁵ Be it in the role of the teacher or in that of the learner, no matter what the issue or the subject or discipline of learning.

⁶ Reasons for this change are e.g. articulated in Popkewitz/Pereyra (2001).

⁷ This view is founded in the claim that a theory of learning is always a dimension of social practice. Cf. Lave/Wenger (1991), Lave (1988).

⁸ Not only diversity, plurality and ambivalence are main signs of postmodernity, but also the lived relationships, in which we live these dimensions and communicate about them.

To meet the new tasks resulting from these developments, I suggest, it is reasonable and fruitful to distinguish three perspectives:⁹ the perspectives of observer, participant, and agent. I suggest that it is particularly important to always distinguish these three perspectives during the learning process, to develop them as a means for more effective learning processes and to keep them balanced, so that we may actually profit from the increase in possibilities:

Being an observer, I will focus any of my senses on what surrounds me and on what I am thinking and doing while perceiving. I will take the position of a self-observer establishing or reflecting on my own expectations, claims or norms. And I will take the position of a distant-observer, either observing other observers, participants, agents, and recognizing and judging their expectations, claims, and norms, or transcending my habitual position of observing to look at myself critically from an imagined outside position.

I will not collect single observations only, but condense repeatedly occurring events into more complex observations. As a member of a particular culture I will observe within the given context of this culture, according to its norms of observation. That is why my observations will never be interchangeable, even though, due to postmodernity with its plurality, its variety of possibilities to choose, and its lack in overview, there may be an overwhelming multitude of varying observations.

I will appear as a participant to those observing (i.e. to myself or to others), as long as I am a member of a community (organized by chance or institution), that shares particular ways of finding meanings and of communicating, and that will provide the context for my observing and acting over a limited period of time. While being an observer I seem to remain free, being a participant I will always be attached to numerous basics of understanding that have long been fixed and are necessarily connected with my participation: Commitments that nail me down on being a feminist, a Christian, an atheist, a member of an ethnic group, of a scientific, social, economic or other community with its particular interpretations, political parties, etc. Constructivism, too, means an attachment to participating within previously determined limits. In postmodernity I will then no longer possess one single (complete, non-fragile) identity nailing me down quite exclusively, but I will share overlapping, partially ambivalent, sometimes also changing participations, that may well result in a number of inconsistent connections or commitments (I may, for example, participate in ecological groups while at the same time driving a car). It will be part of my ambivalent experiences that, while interpreting, I will often construct a clearly shaped world view, thus joining other people, while at the same time, as an agent or an (ignorant) observer, I will betray those interpretations by not behaving according to the ideals resulting from them.

Being an agent¹⁰ I will act without first observing, it often seems. Moreover I sometimes seem to be able to act without participating. But this may only apply to very spontaneous action, when momentarily I forget about the context of my action – and then others may always reproach me for my forgetfulness. My actions, as a

⁹ Dewey (1985) made a distinction between spectators, actors, and participants to describe specific roles in learning. I try to reconsider these terms and reformulate them in a constructivist way.

¹⁰ It is difficult to translate the German term “Akteur” into English. “Agent” is not used in the narrow sense of someone who acts for or in the place of another authority. More broadly it is always used in an active sense. It describes someone doing or acting on his/her own.

rule, will to a certain degree be anticipated if not planned. Previous observations and participations play an important role with that planning. Oftentimes, however, that role cannot be exactly defined, because participation implies contexts of idealisation that remain ambiguous. What is more, my actions may produce blind spots that my observation is not able to control. But I will fail to carry out an action with good reason or to reflect on it, unless sufficiently coming up to my roles as an observer and as a participant.

Observers

In modernity, observers were quite strictly directed by an “order of things”– the phrase used in the English and German translations of Michel Foucault’s “*Les Mots et les Choses*”, i.e. they were first of all searching for laws ruling world and nature, those laws being supposed to reflect or at least clear up as unambiguously as possible objects and world. Search has not come to an end in postmodernity, but it has been considerably qualified. While observing we now find that to a large extent there is an “order of perspectives”, i.e. the previous selection and codification of interest, power, habits, feasibility, that is determined by scientific as well as non-scientific discourses, not at all controlled by neutral aims. Postmodernist theorists therefore doubt the “order of things” apparently so well established. They duplicate possibilities of how to think and also demonstrate through re/de/constructions that by no means was there always but one correct and sensible way in the past nor is there at present. To the postmodern observers modern society appears to run the risk of looking at the world from a schematizing perspective. An order of reason, of rational discourse is supposed to correspond to the order of things, if possible. Therefore teaching used to have itself directed by an order of contents. Higher education was to be dominated by knowledge and the criteria of pure rationalism.

In postmodernity this point of view has still been maintained. However, orders now turn out to be determined by views or perspectives: Tell me about your ways of viewing things, and so I’ll tell you about what you do (not) see. As we may no longer claim completeness of subject-matter and contents, we are facing another risk. There seems to be the menace that observers as well as observations be arbitrary and interchangeable:

- What happens if everybody is admitted to observing, even if lacking sufficient previous knowledge of the objects to be observed?
- What happens, if everything within observation appears to be equal, if different observers no longer will be able to distinguish between the important and the unimportant?
- What happens, if we no longer continue the previous generation’s observations to a sufficient degree, if anything becomes devaluated or interchangeable too quickly?

Questions like these show us the risks that, in our present culture, entail permanent discussions and misunderstandings as well as necessary communication. Social constructivists¹¹, observing present cultures as to changes they may observe and reflect upon, will argue as follows:

¹¹ Cf. for a survey Gergen (1991, 1994).

It has become more and more questionable in our present culture to exclude any specific observer perspective, e.g. perspectives of minority. As to a lack of knowledge resources, experts, too, will have to accept more willingly that their own assumptions are not considered valid merely on the grounds of tradition or habit. This applies to constructivist assumptions as well. A risk will arise, when irrational judgments on interactive communication increase in influence, when strategies of hegemony are pushed through against democratic procedures by means of sheer (for example economic) power.¹²

A culture that allows for and produces diversity will necessarily get into considerable confusion, bearing risks as well as the chance of resourcefulness in finding viable specific solutions.¹³

One of the characteristics of postmodernity is its enormous tendency towards acceleration. To critically reflect on this acceleration (not being ready to accept whatever fashion may be offered to us next) requires a considerably broadened range of observing, for it is the very “order of things”, especially when we consider the present market supply, that will tempt us and tries to nail us down on a given perspective. To resist that temptation we need to practise a way of observing that will respond to the attendant ambiguousness that critically reflects upon the “order of perspectives”.¹⁴

Constructivist education and learning theory in the sense I understand it will therefore claim that the role of the observer be characterized by variety of observers and by openness. This applies to any age group. To exclude particular observers would mean to increase the risks instead of diminishing them. In our present culture, what counts is rather to admit and to reflect upon the observer’s role with much more intensity than was done in former times. This requires that in our roles as observers we learn to take the perspectives of self- as well as distant-observers to change our observing positions in order to better understand others or to understand them as being different. It requires that we use our observations for establishing constructive as well as critical perspectives on our lived cultures.

Participants

If we were but observers, our freedom would be more extensive than it is at present. To many of us, indeed, freedom appears to be particularly extensive when we are observing in a predominantly virtual manner that does away with real life constraints. Nevertheless are we mistaken by the idea of virtual freedom, for observing always means being a participant at the same time. And being a participant means being committed to agreements previously established within our culture. In modernity these commitments used to be chosen deliberately. People were supposed to have a “world view” to be questioned about. The risk, however, was that this particular world view would restrict comprehension and appreciation of other world views, thus limiting, from the very beginning, the chance of communication and development. On the other hand there was a

¹² Cf. for example Laclau/Mouffe (1985).

¹³ Cf. for a broad analysis Bauman (1993, 1997, 2000, 2001).

¹⁴ I tried to describe this in more details in Reich (1998). Cf. also Bauman (1987).

considerable advantage, for there were certain basics of communication to count on, as for example the moral standards to be taken for granted. Values and value systems were more or less clearly defined, though considerably varying according to social classes or groups. Education theory, too, used to and was supposed to deal with the question of world views. Theories had to be justified with regard to the preconditions they were based upon. Although this is still true today, and we find a variety of accepted world views, justification of such views has become more difficult to manage. In our postmodernist way of life we have become accustomed to recognizing varying interpretations depending on varying contexts. No longer do we feel at home within one particular world view, we tend to be wanderers moving from place to place, from situation to situation, from time to time, searching for varying views, for varying worlds. The procedure of communicating has now gained priority over joining a particular community of participants sharing but one particular world view. One view is no longer regarded as fundamentally and naturally valid with respect to everything and to all of us. The transition to postmodernity, far from having affected all of the areas of life yet, has so far been but a cultural tendency against certain aspects of modernity. Nevertheless, a specific kind of risk characteristic of the postmodern situation has already been emerging. In modernity the risk consisted in too readily attaching me to an understanding supposed to be valid for all rational subjects. In modernity people were not afraid of trying to derive and understand any phenomena from a strong rational position. This would often result in limiting the possibilities of understanding other or foreign rationalities.¹⁵ In postmodernity the risk has changed. Now the risk is rather lack of understanding. Insofar as communication will be based upon nothing but apparently arbitrary negotiations upon judgment often lacking sufficient knowledge, the result will often be lack of understanding providing neither *one* deepened view nor *one* explaining theory nor *one* normative set of explanations. Thus incomprehension results from lack of knowledge or from merely superficial knowledge.

Interactive constructivist education theory does not see itself as an education theory of incomprehension. It aims at building up an understanding without insisting on choosing but one single model of understanding. A constructivist learning theory, therefore, depends on a radical concept of democracy to connect conditions for participation in learning processes with successfully performed acts of communication, considered as necessary and meaningful. In a culture like ours the risk of incomprehension often involves excessive egoism, oppression of minorities, neglect of social concerns in the view of unjust distribution of resources and their accumulation with few people, into social hardship and coldness, as well as into racism or similar aspects of lacking solidarity. This happens particularly when the solidarity of the better-off, of those having at their disposal the essential resources, no longer sustains a perspective adjusted to social concepts, and such aims as equalizing and fostering. Here, however, the modern legacy left to

¹⁵ As Levinas observed, this type of “thinking the same” made possible, among other things, what happened at Auschwitz: To deprive others of their different perspectives by means of a particular ideology that grants ultimate justification to my own truth, then to abuse them as an evidence of the soundness of my prejudices and ultimately to make possible their destruction. There are numerous nuances to that “thinking of the same”, reaching to subtle ways of oppression seemingly legitimated. Cf. Reich (1998, Vol. 1, 250 ff.).

postmodernity represents the most important touchstone of how postmodernist ways of life and demands for freedom may be realized in the long term: As resources will be redistributed among few beneficiaries, the social majorities' expectations of freedom will accordingly fail to be fulfilled. This applies to learning as well. To support but elites reflecting the existing social classes¹⁶, or to limit participation in cultural achievements that from a democratic perspective should be fostered generally as opportunities of learning, will result in learning systems having to develop compensatory elements in order not to lose at all an orientation guided by the idea of equal opportunities. Anyway, the idea of equal opportunities as an imperative of Enlightenment has long lost its plausibility as a realistic aim. Which does not mean, though, that we should lose touch with that aim altogether, at least not if we want to keep to the modern emancipatory demand for opportunities as equal as possible. In this sense the demand is still an essential *ideal precondition* of a postmodernist democratic way of life.¹⁷

Obviously, then, constructivist educational theory necessarily involves perspectives on participants in communication procedures: Cultural viability in education means that teachers realize that the claim to equal opportunities is in any educational situation an aim as well as one of the biggest illusions in education. The fight for more resources to be spent on education is nevertheless a fundamental one, if educators want to achieve democratic aims and want to keep to an orientation aiming at resources and at solutions.

Teachers and learners need to be champions of education speaking out for the necessity, the resources and the costs of learning. Children and youths must have the chance to participate adequately in today's societies. If they are not allowed to, their education will not be sufficiently protected against an infringement by thrifty, careless people lacking orientation towards the more distant future – as are particularly short-sighted politicians interested in maintaining their power first of all, having their decisions guided by the attempt to offer short-lived satisfaction to the interests of particular groups of voters. Teachers and learners will have to confront short-sighted social planning, short-lived material interests, and greed for superficial success. Although, today, we tend to transfer from the field of economy to other areas of life the credo of postmodernity telling us to get a maximum of profit from a minimum of effort, that transfer is not viable with respect to learning.

To grant diversity of observers and openness, a constructivist approach is dependent on democratic conditions, and democracy may profit from a constructivist way of thinking as well. Such an education theory can only be realized under democratic conditions, because other political systems fail to sufficiently grant the variety and diversity of observers. This diversity implies forms of participation varying due to varying communicative interpretations. Of course such variation always takes place within the frame of an interpretive society where interpretations are being negotiated between consensus and dissent. It further implies sufficient opportunities to act according to the individual's aims of self-actualization while at the same time rendering social respect to others. It is exactly these qualities so essential for postmodernist life that may in turn be supported by the constructivist approach.

¹⁶ This was a result shown by the part of the PISA-study assessing the German school system.

¹⁷ Cf. the critical pedagogy of Giroux (1992, 1993, 1994). His work provides many valuable and helpful perspectives for developing educational ideas for the present.

Agents

In modernity being an agent within an educational process is mostly dominated by the attitude of saying “I shall” instead of “I will”. In modern age the predominant aim is to achieve *one identity*, a procedure to be considered as a progress and as a development logical in itself. The agent is supposed to continuously observe her/himself in a way that will help to integrate her/his own efforts and the demands made on her/him from outside into one unity. That identity, however, is mostly viewed from a perspective dominated by rational discourse. The agent is supposed to proceed in a reasonable, justified, knowing, and rational manner. There is a risk involved in the control necessary here. For to the same degree to which constraint becomes manifest as a component of that control, the subject fails to retain the autonomy he¹⁸ is meant to develop when, as a result of having gained an understanding, he is becoming an agent in his culture. Educational science, therefore, has given special emphasis to the understanding of how necessary it is to adjust oneself to given structures, to deal with self-constraint, i.e. the understanding of secondary virtues as means of developing autonomy.¹⁹ So far this applies to any emancipatory approach aiming at educating a critical cosmopolitan. In postmodernity the emphasis has shifted from “I shall” to “I will”. Identity has become a manifold phenomenon. It will break down into a patchwork of identities, of roles changing according to changing situations: None of those identities will remain stable forever. In an interplay of responding to and rejecting each other they seem to be a simulation of formerly established, solid roles and realities, having now changed into a variable, accelerated, short-lived game of subtle differences and irrelevant differentiations. The limitations of rational discourses have been realized. This is how we discovered the age of communication, of relationships and emotions, i.e. of phenomena considered as more or less unimportant even until the sixties of the twentieth century.

One of the biggest risks that agents in educational processes will have to take in postmodernity is the indifference created in an age of lost overview and partial simulation. Why should I be interested in my fellow human being’s existence with all its depths and abysses, when games are so entertaining and rather egoistical? Why help others, when I myself do not profit from it immediately? Why get involved in complicated analyses and complex views to establish and implement an educational theory and teaching methods, when my efforts appear as extraordinary compared to the normal expectations? Why be the one to do more than the others do?

The loss of overview tends to be used as an excuse, and justification of our indifference. Actually postmodernity will offer an excuse for everything. And in the face of the acceleration of knowledge production, of the quick disintegration of curricula supposed to be safe, of the lack of time to achieve a more detailed knowledge, almost all of those involved in education seem, sooner or later, to be

¹⁸ Intentionally I do not use the phrase s/he here, because in modernity theories of agency exclusively focus on male constructions of identity.

¹⁹ Norbert Elias developed a theory about self-regulation and self-control. “...a social apparatus is established in which the constraints between people are lastingly transformed into self-constraints. These self-constraints, a function of the perpetual hindsight and foresight instilled in the individual from childhood in accordance with his integration in extensive chains of action, have partly the form of conscious self-control and partly that of automatic habit.” Elias (1994, 453).

drawn to a limitation of aspirations. This limitation can be seen in a positive as well as in a negative light. On the positive side, it stands for an increase in freedom. But the negative importance of that freedom. On the negative side it implies a possible decrease in solidarity, e.g. an increasing failure of compensatory education.²⁰

A constructivist theory of learning like the Cologne approach, however, claims to be a thorn in the flesh of the indifferent. It aims to particularly spur those who want to be left with their peace of mind. There are some points which are especially important at that:

Constructivist teaching and learning are attitudes aiming at an actively reflected balance of “I will” and “I shall”, repeatedly wanting to and having to negotiate anew about how to find that balance, thereby counting on constructive solutions first of all. This means that there is no excuse for remaining indifferent.

Learners and teachers are supposed to jointly examine their resources and to search for an action aiming at solutions and being constructive (as far as possible), reconstructive (as far as necessary), and deconstructive (criticism is always necessary).

They are supposed to consciously regard themselves as agents and to design the radius of their action as wide as it gets within their time, location and possibilities.

While doing so they are supposed to reflect upon their participation and to make transparent what preunderstandings this participation implies or how each of them participates in a different manner. Participation should be divided among them (mutual reflection of varying resources and interests, too).

They are supposed to act according to the demand that each observation might open a new opportunity not realized so far, openness thus not turning into interchangeableness as it would when only contemplated upon from a detached stance, but turning into active participation and use.

The Interplay of the Three Perspectives

If we would neglect one of these perspectives, our view would suffer a lack of differentiation: We would see ourselves as observers only, involved in neither participation nor action; we would overplay the importance of participation instead of asking for a potential variety and diversity of observers or for more opportunities to act; we would remain in action for action's sake without reflecting upon observations and conditions of participation influencing our actions or resulting from them.

To distinguish between those three perspectives will enable us to understand that constructing realities is a difficult and complex process. A constructivist learning theory considers constructions of reality in their connection with conditions of observing, participating, and acting. To grasp these conditions marks a change in our understanding of learning processes. It stands in contrast to a naturalist education theory which gives preference to natural worlds and hides the constructions which are embedded in these worlds.

To illustrate this I would like to refer to three learning action levels we use in Cologne constructivism (Reich 2004). In what way are immediate subjective

²⁰ This is one result of studies about the German school-education right now.

experience, conventional experience, and discourses related to the roles of the observer, the participant, and the agent?

Diagram 1 shows us that on the level of immediate subjective experience²¹ the observer obtains some concrete knowledge of the objects present in the world. However, s/he will be given particular images, will be guided indirectly, as soon as learning is used to generate selective perceptions.

| | immediate subjective experience | conventional experience (regulated dialogue) | discourse (open dialogue) |
|--------------------|---|---|--|
| observer | subjective evident, but guided indirectly | observation is directed | reflected variety of observers and observations |
| participant | an interpretive community is implicitly taken for granted | an interpretive community is normatively favoured | various communities are for choice without any universal privileges existing |
| agent | experience of acting | favouring particular actions | reflected acting |

Diagram 1

Learning or teaching roles and action levels

On the level of convention we will switch to a particular perception carefully directed by the teacher. The learner’s beliefs and opinions may still be explored by means of regulated dialogue, for example by question-reply-teaching; the correct reply, however, will always have been fixed in advance. The learners will not enjoy the game of question and reply for quite a long time. That game is not sufficiently appropriate, either, for them to achieve competency for using methods and for behaving according to social norms. It is therefore important to further specify observations, even if they seem to be determined by an externally designed setting. At least we always have to ask: When? Why? By whom? Did alternatives exist for ...?

It is but the level of discourse that helps to enrich observation by allowing for a variety of observers as well as of observations to be taken into consideration during the process of selecting and justifying particular conventions. This is one of the fields preferred by constructivist education. It is here that learning by inquiry and observation takes place, including many observers as well as manifold observations. In discourse the phenomenon of interchangeableness may be reduced as far as it gets, for only then is it actually possible to first observe, and realize and then discuss the contexts, the ways of justification, and the radius of validity.

To the participant, immediate subjective experience, as conveyed by traditional learning theories, appears as a way of tacit communication not supposed to be questioned and usually established by authority, a way of communication using

²¹ The German term inspired by Hegel is “sinnliche Gewissheit” (sense certainty). It is quite similar to primary experience in the sense of John Dewey.

openness of perceptions to convey a particular view. The teacher already presents a selection and an interpretation chosen beforehand. Even with young learners that way of tacit participation must be questioned, as it will result in their being ready to uncritically trust the images offered to them. Considering the ecstasies of image worlds offered to us by the mass media, it becomes obvious that learning and teaching theories, too, need to make strong efforts to break the tendency towards a naive identification of the concrete image with education (supported by demonstration and visualisation too naturally taken for granted). This applies as well to dialogues regulated by convention, aiming at nailing the learner down on participating in *one* singular communication. Here, too, it is necessary to search for justifications and to reflect upon what aspects may be or actually have been omitted, thus to protect the learner from expecting ready solutions to any single issue, solutions that may quickly become outdated with situations of life changing. Compared with this, participation in discourse will grant an extending process of understanding of how selection always takes place in view of the plurality, inconsistency and ambivalence we have to deal with when selecting nowadays:

- plurality, because there is more and more communication dealing with realities due to various versions of reality for choice; here an individual viable justification of the particular choice to be taken will have to start;
- inconsistency, because today there does no longer exist any one single approach to communication apt to explain everything definitely and completely, without contradiction and with universal validity; learners therefore need an overview over various approaches to be able to make choices sufficiently justified;
- ambivalence, because in any approach, compared with others, there will be omissions, each approach bringing particular advantages as well as disadvantages; here it is necessary to start discussion considering those advantages and disadvantages and to realize that it is impossible to harmonize extremely different expectations and solutions with different preconditions; i.e. it has to be realized that to gain a viable choice may at the same time mean to take a loss in some other respect.

To the agent, immediate subjective experience represents a space for action providing, in a very concrete manner, an experience of action through directly experiencing a particular situation. As to the learning process this will raise the question what may happen to immediate subjective experience as soon as observations or reflections on participation get involved. On the level of conventions teachers tend to urge learners to act in order to derive a particular image from the situation, a distinct perception, a definite conclusion. Regarding immediate subjective experience it would mostly be more promising to look through the experiences just made in a slower, more deepening, and individual manner to turn them into hypotheses. From such hypotheses there might result conventions, but these conventions are the more ready for deconstructions in the degree that diversity of observations is made sure. In this way, too, a discursive action level may gradually be arrived at, reflecting alternatives and relating them to experiences made before.

Finding a Viable Balance between Teaching and Learning

To distinguish the perspectives of the observer, the participant, and the agent may help teachers as well as learners to balance out teaching and learning, if only they become aware of those perspectives and of the effects resulting from them. What do we gain by such balance?

To find a balance means, as far as it gets, to avoid one-sidedness, partiality and dependence while developing our learning.

Taking the role of an observer means to observe and reflect upon the actions that constitute the processes of teaching and learning. While in the past it was the authoritative, know-it-all attitude considered common with a teacher, it is rather the ironist that is called for today. S/he is not meant to be a person treating others with irony or even behaving cynically, but expressing an attitude Richard Rorty characterizes as necessary in postmodernity²² to prevent us from despairing of the demands we are confronted by our heritage of modernity. The ironic attitude referred to is a wise, not aggressive, but thoughtful as well as humorous one: The ironist will know about the coincidence and the limitations of our knowledge; s/he will know that there exists neither completeness nor any definite copy of reality nor an absolute harmony of the interests and the desires of all human beings; s/he will endure her own ambivalence and will not be frightened, if confronted with contradictions, deficiencies or paradoxical phenomena; s/he will know herself not to be free from contradictions, paradoxes etc., either; s/he will be able to laugh at it and make others laugh without having to make a fool of anybody for it.

Being an ironist I have to take a multiperspective position. I cannot confine myself to my personal view only nor take one single other position as a model. As an attitude of reflection, this kind of postmodern irony characteristically aims at making us learn how to see and to laugh from various perspectives. We have to learn to laugh about our own perspectives and their respective one-sidedness, for only too often do we become the victims of our exaggerated claims.

Is there a training to be an ironist? Self-awareness, above all, seems to be necessary to get to know oneself better by way of reflected interaction with others. Therefore it is essential to any learning training that we offer communication-training and courses for raising self-awareness as well.

Being a participant in learning or teaching processes, I will always be prejudiced due to reflections having taken place beforehand as a result of the particular interpretations I am favouring according to my professional and educational competence. If I want to expand my individual perspective, I have to learn how to take the role of a moderator or facilitator capable of organizing communication processes between different groups or individuals in a way that discussions, be they open or guided, shared or varying, held partially in consensus or remaining in dissent, may become possible and mutually enriching. To achieve this aim I will have to acquire the necessary techniques and experiences.

For teachers this seems to be more difficult than for other participants in communication processes. This is because of their traditional teaching roles: The first and decisive precondition for a teacher's role is not to defend him/herself against others by justification and exclusion, but to keep open various opportunities

²² Cf. Rorty (1989).

of participating for each and any learner. If participation is restricted to but one world view, opportunities get unduely reduced. That, however, will basically hamper against learning participations, for the focus on but one world view cannot be regarded as viable in postmodernity. To grant viability in our time, we have to allow at least the description of various possibilities of interpreting this world view or another – be it with respect to professional or other aspects –, in order to avoid an a-priori-fixation, and that is to avoid intellectual stagnation. This will not hinder any teacher from defending particular opinions and using them against others, provided that the justified opinions of others will be given an adequate space, too.

Democratic participation, therefore, is an essential concern within the constructivist approach. By democracy, however, I do, like John Dewey, not mean any form of democracy administered from above nor a merely representative apparatus resulting in nothing but disenchantment with politics. Democratic participation will not take place to a full and sufficient extent until all of the participants are allowed to contribute their views by democratic procedures: in selecting issues, methods, in judging, in designing and interpreting situations etc.

I am an agent, eventually, when acting as a teacher or learner. Here we got the teacher's classical role having us so willingly become blind to either of the other requirements. Being an agent I will use what knowledge teacher training or any other education taught me and what I found out through experience to be my personal possibilities and ranges of action.

Overplaying that role I will tend to look but for concrete remedies in a rather narrow way. I will easily overlook the fact that an attitude like this may result in lacking distance, in lacking any deep dimension to my actions as well as in lacking a vision of my acting itself. Moreover, when overestimating the role of the agent, we will be tempted to overemphasize our own acting and to nip in the bud the learners' possibilities of action by favouring, for example, class teaching. And sooner or later we will be complaining about those learners' passivity.

The opposite mistake, however, would be to underestimate action and to neglect the agent's role. A teacher cannot teach by confining her/himself to taking the roles of observer and participant only. It is the status of being an agent that articulates and realizes the teachers' as well as the learners' visions, likings, motives, demands, appreciations, acknowledgements, and intentions. We cannot provide any definite plans for action nor describe complete action-schemes appropriate for any learning situation whatsoever. But we can try to be agents creating actions in very different and individual ways, thus enlarging the viabilities of the learning processes we are involved in. While acting we will experience that there are difficulties to be dealt with. To tell what action is or is not viable with respect to whom will be part of the reflection everybody has to participate in, if we claim to reflect on viability in education at all. To judge and evaluate viabilities is a fundamental claim made by constructivist education. This claim applies not only to teachers, but to learners as well (teachers at any time being learners anyway). Looking at the learners we immediately realize further practical and concrete implications. For balancing their learning, the following aspects are particularly important:

- Being an observer, the learner will, first of all, have to distinguish between her/his perspectives as self-observer and distant-observer. With learning it will be necessary to continuously shift perspectives in order to compare my own versions of realities to other versions of realities. It will be

necessary to take the perspectives of others as well as to position, from an outside, my own view, thus evaluating, in a manner viable with respect to my own development, the given resources and solutions. This process will be accompanied by switching from an attitude of contemplative, more passive observing to one of more subtle observing, to an active, open, plural observing responding to ambivalences and hybrid cultural aspects. Learning is about how to find one's place within varying situations and contexts then, while observing how to assess events and opportunities for action. This implies taking an attitude of fundamentally multiperspective character.

- Being a participant, the learner has to perform self-intended participations, which need to be supported by means of cultural opportunities of learning. Compensatory measures considering particular, socially and culturally disadvantaged groups have to be included here. Given the conditions of postmodernity, learning will create a symbolic, social and cultural asset, the benefit of which may, however, be either endangered or fostered by economic capital. Learning is an opportunity for learners to be led from conventional to discursive participation. Discursive participation is the only means to grant freedom of choice, provided that freedom is realized democratically together with others. This level of discourse in advance implies that there is no "innocent discourse" (Stuart Hall) in the sense of discourse being beyond power relations. That is to say discourses even in science always entail procedures of exclusion. Constructivist education has to critically reflect and deconstruct such exclusions in joint learning experiences of learners and teachers (Giroux 1992).
- Being an agent in a complex postmodernist world it does not suffice for learners to realize their demands and needs through imitative actions. S/he will have to switch from an imitative attitude to fundamentally experimental acting continuously combining knowledge with actions, resources with solutions, ideas with realizations, theories with practice. Any participation or observation not integrated into action nor resulting in meaningful learning will be thus rendered untrustworthy.

The three perspectives proposed here are of a discursive kind as well, they call on us to have discourses on educational affairs in a broad and multiperspective way. With learning, involvement in discourses can never be started too early, it is practicable even at an elementary level of learning. When discovering her/his image in a mirror for the first time, a child learns how to view her/himself as an observer, s/he intuitively grasps the opportunity to look at her/himself from outside. Already in children's games there appear qualities of participation combined with rules we have to understand first in order to understand the meaning of those activities.

Though in our very first actions we are agents already, it is but gradually that we become conscious of how the agent's role is to be combined with that of the participant and that of the observer. Whoever may help us to realize the three perspectives in our learning, he will help us to more efficiently help ourselves to obtain a more complex understanding of ourselves. In favour of an active learning we have to partake in the selection of contents and relationships. That may as well help to avoid superficiality and mere imitation, to achieve differentiation and to

combine democratization with education. As John Dewey already saw quite clearly more than half a century ago, there will not be any long-term democracy, unless democracy is observed as an open and unfinished project, experienced and created through active participation and lived experimentally through action.

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