IN TRUST WE LEARN: A PRAGMATIST VIEW ON LEARNING

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Abstract

In this paper, I question the very nature of what constitutes learning. In doing so, I use pragmatist stance to elucidate the relationship of knowledge, meaning and truth. Central to my argument is that at the outset such relationship demands the pivotal role that the notion of ‘trust’ plays in transcending learning. By drawing on the case of the teaching of ‘life cycle’ delivered in primary science course, I explicate the constitutive roles of trust to proceed learning among prospective teachers. Accordingly, trust in learning: 1) invites students to eagerly traverse from known world to unknown world; 2) engages students to fruitfully conceive meaning in use; and 3) interweaves aesthetically their learning stories to live by. In addition, epistemological and ethical consequences in order to transgress learning are discussed in the context of primary teacher education.

Keywords: learning, pragmatism, trust, primary teacher education.

INTRODUCTION

‘Learning’ has become an alluring language in education. Biesta (2015; 2010), for instance, reveals the discursive movement of learning as the phenomena of ‘learnification in education’. This can be identified from the language used in describing various aspects of education. For example, pupils, students, event adult are now labelled as ‘learner’. Moreover, teaching is redefined as ‘facilitating learning’, ‘designing learning environment’, or ‘harnessing learning experience’. Even the role of school is supposed to be ‘learning community’ or ‘space for learning’. Even more, adult education is also regarded as ‘lifelong learning’. Hence, education might be precisely viewed as ‘learning to learn’. According to Biesta (2015), the rise of learnification is resulted from various influences: 1) criticism towards authoritarian forms of education in the language of teacher-centred and Freirean banking system; 2) progressive and constructivist views’ of student-centered learning; and 3) neo-liberal policies regarding to the idea of personalised learning. Overall, learnification has exerted the language of learning into research and policy in education, even it becomes common language in everyday practice. Hence, one might ask: what is learning?

There is indeed a danger in learnification because it prevents one to see thoroughly the nature of learning and its relationship with the significant role of education in one’s life. According to Biesta (2015), education provides opportunity for learners to ‘learn something from someone for particular reason’. Hence, educationally the question of learning is not only about what is learning but also it involves the content (what is learned), relationships (from whom) and purpose (why). In other words, learning is teleological and it is closely related to the nature of knowledge and social interaction. In short, learning constitutes purposive interaction between the known and the knower within which such relationship creates meaning. Epistemologically, the question about the nature of meaning making brings us to interrogate the notion ‘truth’ in learning. And one might ethically ask again: what is learning for?

In addition to Biestanian reflection about learnification in educational practice, I also would like to introduce the phenomena that I refer to as ‘learnification’. The term comes from my reflexivity upon educational praxis that I have studied for almost a decade. It simply literally means that one ‘learns something from someone for particular stance’. To the greater
extent, learnification has similar origin with the rise of learnification. However, it takes different setting which comes from the historicity of Indonesian education system. We can trace it back to the origin of national school system aiming at resisting stratified school model delivered by the colonial government. However, attaining independent, democratic and socially just education system is unease. Starting from the indepenence day, the nature of educational praxis was strongly imposed by the ruling orders who exerted their particular ideology based on their imagined communities. It can be fairly stated that the nature of educational praxis was not only teacher-centered in nature but also more on state-centered. To use Foucault (1984) term, educationally there was power/knowledge relation that governs the structural arrangement of learning. It has epistemological consequence in which particular ‘truth’ was imparted by the authority to both teachers and students. Under such conforming surveillance, we might ethically ask: what is truth? Or unconsciously we urge to question the politics of knowledge: whose truth? Even in the realm of the ‘truth game’ one might ask for more: can we trust what truth is?

The foregoing highlights the importance of learning as well as the risk of learnification and learnification in education. In addition, what intriguing me most is the current elucidation of learning as stated in the Law of Education System (UU No. 23/2002). It is simply said that learning is a conscious ‘transformation from unknown to the known state’. However, I consciously curious to such an obscure notion. Therefore, I take the task to philosophically interrogate the notion of learning and make the case that might challenge the prevailing discourse on learning. By drawing on the vignette taken from the course of ‘life cycle’ delivered to primary student teachers, I reject the idea of learning as tranformation from the unknown to the known state. It is indeed quite the opposite. Therefore, I would argue that learning is ‘transformation from the known to the unknown world’.

**Pragmatist view on learning**

Many would regard my radical view as a serious challenge to the taken-for-granted notion of learning. However, a closer examination to the idea of learning reveals fruitful insights. Traditional psychological account views learning as stimulated behavior resulting in particular responses. Meanwhile, cognitive psycholology considers learning solely as mental models of the world governed by underlying cognitive structure. In this regards, behaviorism assumes that learner has deficit capacity that needs something to be infused into, while cognitive science tradition recognises the pivotal roles of learner’s experience in determining the logical coherence of mental representation (Driver & Easley, 1978). In the language of genetic epistemology, a learner structurally constructs his reasoning (Piaget, 1970). However, these traditional stances are likely to conceive learning as structured hypothesis-testing in relating the sensory data with mental model. Whether learner makes different meanings in different situations is questionable (Lidar et al., 2009; Wickman, 2006). Moreover, sociocultural perspective avers that learner’s understanding is situated in particular discourses (Cole, 1996; Wertsch, 1993; 1998). It argues that learner’s reasoning could be facilitated by providing conditions for action or doing particular practice. However, the question is whether what is learned in one situation can be used in a different situation (Lidar et al., 2009; Wickman, 2006).

The predicament that these traditional views has in common is that they need to consider the dynamic relations between psychology and culture in learning (Lidar et al., 2009). Indeed, they strongly hold dualistic view (mind vs. world) of knowledge as representation of things out there to be discovered and displayed (Biesta, 2014). Knowledge, therefore, concerns with things distinctively identified by immediate correspondence between a proposition and reality. Hence, learning something as representational would end up in true-
false distinctions. Thus, learning is epistemologically defined as how one gets reality right, that is, the transformation from false reasoning (alternative or unknown conception) to true reasoning (known conception). However, knowledge is basically fallible: it introduce the possibility of mistake. Therefore, we need a theory of knowledge that aims at pursuing possibility rather than certainty (Biesta, 2014).

The certainty inherent in the correspondence theory of knowledge hinders the contunity of interaction between mind and world, knower and known, subject and objet, as well as psychology and culture. It is within such transactional ‘and’ that epistemologically learner always copes with reality (Rorty, 1991). This pragmatic view assumes that learning is purposefully transforming one’s habits in dealing with situations (Wickman, 2012a; 2012b; Lidar et al., 2009). To reveal the purpose, learner needs to experience something in order to make sense of it. Through embodying in action, learner might recognise the purpose of the activity by juxtaposing what is (ir)relevant in particular situation. Hence, the purpose purports the transformation of both the learner and the situation. In this regards, learner is constantly anticipating his surroundings as both are part of classroom culture. Therefore, learning is progressively defined as entering to new but unknown reality; i.e. learning is coming into the new world. Accordingly, the function of habits is important in responding to the whole activity as well as to institutional customs: learner is encountering novelty. Hence, transforming habits demands continuity of experiences in relation to purpose. The outcomes are contingent, fallible in the sense that no one knows what the future might bring so that there is no universal and eternal reasoning. Rather than distinction, the principle of continuity enables us to see that learning is transformation from known world (prior experience) to the unknown world (future consequence) situated within particular action and intention. Therefore, we never attain to what the truth of the world is, yet we always trust what the new world might become.

Learning trust

Pragmatism offers comprehensive view of learning as an experience by means of the transaction between learner and situation resulting in the double relationship: learner influences and is influenced by the situation. Accordingly, knowing, as particular forms of experience, supports learner action as to reveal its consequence (Biesta, 2014). Hence, knowledge in pragmatist stance can be viewed relationally in which ‘causes become means and effects become consequences, and thereby things having meaning’ (Dewey, 1929, p. 236). Rather than defining knowledge as distinctive truth, pragmatism views knowledge as warranted assertion. It is a kind of inference that is closely related to the possibility of control toward something uncertain. This is an important encounter to the unknown future. However, the principle of continuity and transaction of experience makes us believe to always ameliorate what we are heading to. And one would find that the future is full of surprise; it demands one to just entrust what will be happening. In what follows, I highlight how I come to understand the importance of trust in learning.

As pragmatist, I fully believe that my students are capable learners who can make meaning through their interaction with the enviroring situation. For the last three years, I have designed primary science course aiming at enriching students experiences to transforming their habits in coping with the butterfly life cycle. Previously, I delivered the course by exposing visual representation. However, a pragmatists demands comprehensive activity that engages all aspect of learning: cognitive, affective and conative. Therefore, in February 2017, I set the task in which each student was instructed to nurture the caterpillars, observe their development and make narrative report about the project. I perceived that the task would engage the students to achieve the course objective: by nurturing the caterpillar, students learn
about and with the idea of metamorphosis. When I discussed the project with the students, many of them were both afraid and surprised, even some female students were screaming and complaining. However, I encouraged them that this individual project would give them fruitful endeavour.

A week later, we discussed the progress of this metamorphosis project. At that time, most of female students were still afraid of touching the caterpillars. In doing observation, for instance, they sought help from their peers in measuring the length or cleaning the jar. However, there were female students who were so brave, bold and confident enough to interact with their caterpillars. One of them was Tisa. She showed me her caterpillar put on her right hand and touched it gently. Later on, when I walked around to see the other students, I was surprised by the messy situation near Tisa. Tara was screaming as Tisa held Tara’s hand and tried to transfer the caterpillar from Tisa’s hand. At that moment, some students were approaching to both of them. Some encouraged Tara, the other followed her screaming. After several trials, finally the caterpillar was in Tara’s right hand. She immediately closed her eyes and shaked hand while screaming again. However, a second later, as her eye opened, she looked at the caterpillar and said it was amused. Eventually, Tisa held Tara’s left hand and led it to the caterpillar. Tisa encouraged Tara to touch it. At first, Tara looked afraid but she moved her index finger approaching the caterpillar. She finally smiled and said it was cute as she touched it. She was confident and she was not afraid anymore. She said to me that previously she had bad image about the caterpillar. Immediately, Tara perceived the beauty of the caterpillar. What surprised me more was that eventually Tara took Desi’s hand. With the help of Tisa, Tara encouraged Desi to take a try. The situation was similar to Tara and finally Desi also encouraged her peer to do so. From that moment, there were the other students who acted like Tisa and Tara. Through the project, while observing the butterfly metamorphosis, many students underwent their own metamorphosis about their learning: They shifted from being afraid of to become confident to interact with the caterpillars. Finally they were happy to see the butterfly flied high or fell sad as their caterpillars died.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The vignette depicts the constitutive role of trust in learning among primary student teachers. It invites them to eagerly traverse from known world to unknown world: They engage in new experience. To proceed learning, one cannot question everything in action because it has no significant consequence, unless one really embodies it. In this case, Tara initially questioned about the risk of having interaction with the caterpillar. However, as Tisa held her hand tightly, it prevented Tara to further doubting the bad consequence that might occur. As Tara touched the caterpillar, she perceived that what she was afraid of did not happen. Hence, Tara learned about the aesthetic experience of living with the caterpillar.

Tara’s case shows that one learns something through an encounter, e.g. Tisa and caterpillar, that fills the gap, e.g. the risk of touching the caterpillar. It is through encounter that Tara fully construed meaning in use, e.g. learning by touching. Furthermore, Tara’s case also reveals the nature of powerful learning: it interweaves aesthetically the metamorphosis of both the butterfly and the students. Thoroughly, learning as transformation from known to unknown world involves the metamorphosis of both the learner and the situation. They are coming into the new world together. Finally, I would argue that the idea of trust in learning from pragmatist stance might be considered as compelling response to the discourse of learnification and learnifixation.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


