Chapter 1
Learning across Social Spaces

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ABSTRACT

This case explores the mutual link between education, structural evolution, social spaces and institutional change. It develops theoretical perspectives and illustrates them by practical cases. Three approaches of learning (psychological, evolutionist and ontological) lead to specific targets for successful learning settings, both for individual and societal learning. A series of structural transitions seems to best characterize the genesis of economies, civilizations and targets. "Space" is here understood as being created by social, esp. communicative action and can hence be generated anew by pervasive learning processes. Learning across social spaces means both intercultural and interdisciplinary learning and places learners into diverse systems of meaning. In a series of cases for learning settings, especially dialogic intercultural learning is identified as a key path to a harmonious development of nations.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

1. What theoretical standpoint should we adopt towards learning?
2. Can our lessons learned from individual learning also be applied to societal learning?
3. What does civilisational evolution tell us about suitable targets and methods of learning?
4. Does "institution building" have a natural place in civilisational evolution?
5. Is it helpful to think of social space as a substrate and tool for our learning procedures?
6. Will the emerging "network society" support the creation of meaning, i.e. societal learning?

The following chapters will provide answers and the case studies will show implementations.

WHAT IS LEARNING?

Several basic approaches can be taken towards learning. The direction in which one understands learning predetermines the learning setting considered as optimal. Consequently, it is a prerequisite to reach clarity about how one might understand "learning". This chapter proposes:

1. learning as mental structural change (psychological approach)
2. learning as leapfrogging biological and evolutionary cycles (evolutionist approach)
3. learning as creating new (mental, existential) spaces by reflection (ontological approach).

In any case, it will be useful to keep in mind both *learning of individuals* and *learning of society*.

Learning is Mental Structural Change

According to a psychological approach, learning is understood as *mental structural change* that leads to change in real-world behaviour. In this view, learning would be only successful if it results in changes of the person's real actions. Let us undertake a "tour d'horizon", in which contexts we may find a similar viewpoint and how fixed or loose border conditions for such learning should be:

Here we examine any type of learning, especially life-long learning for adults (Strobl & Car, 2009, Lenz, 2005) and we draw conclusions from decades of our own teaching, learning and training experience in both roles, active and passive. Often, learning is most productive when taking the role of a trainer. We adopt a constructivist stance, under the philosophical auspices of John Dewey's *Pragmatism* (Berding, 2000, Haack, 2004, Grippe, 2002). In the resulting picture, in order to reach the mentioned structural mental change, the *core action is dialogue* and *exchange of views in a*

discourse, constituting Dewey's "education for responsible democracy".

As does democracy, education deeply involves ethics: it is based on the "principle of responsibility" (Jonas, 1984, Stähli, 1998, 2005, Werner, 2003). Here, preference is given to *teleologic* (target oriented) ethics as opposed to *deontologic* (duty oriented) ethics – stressing the result of any human action as preferred to theoretical and subjective conviction.

For facilitating such dialogue, a very helpful approach is: "learning through gaming" (Prensky, 2001, Ahamer, 2004). Symbolically, a gaming setting means to leave a "play" in the rigid mechanisms of traditional reproduction of content by allowing for trial and error in a modelled ("game") scenario. Coherent with the affiliation of the authors, such endeavour of responsibility-oriented teaching encompasses both the area of e-learning and (human) geography (Popke, 2003: 298, Cloke, 2002: 589). An "*ethics of encounter*" (Popke, 2003: 300, Cutchin, 2002: 660) is both facilitated by *e-learning tools* and *geo-referenced* in a multicultural sense. Supported by web-based tools and e-learning didactics (and especially by virtual globes: Strobl, 2007a, 2001, Strobl & Linder-Fally, 2007), we are led to say: "out of sight, but *in* mind".

Let us consider another perspective on learning: according to design literature, iterative oscillation occurs between the *problem* space and the *solution* space (Maher, 2003; Dorst & Cross, 2001: 434). Such loose type of oscillating interaction between the two "spaces", namely to act and to reflect, is also well characterized by the pedagogic concept of "*reflection-in-action*", a pedagogical and managerial principle combining sequences of contemplative and actionist aspects (Schön, 1983, 1986: 62, Lawless & Roth, 2001) that has been applied to learning individuals but also to learning organisations.

In an influential article that has prompted a series of responses and comments, Roth et al. (2001) instead propose the notion of "*Spielraum*"

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