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Understanding Adult Learning and Teaching: Some Thoughts Based on the Intellectual Contribution of Professor Peter Jarvis

Abstract: Peter Jarvis is one of the most prolific philosophers of human learning and education. The purpose of this paper is to present some of his most important contributions in understanding the nature of learning and consequently the practice of teaching adults. The paper focuses on the following three insights of Professor Jarvis: (a) learning as an existential phenomenon, (b) the key idea of disjuncture and (c) the significance of the relational dimension in the teaching profession.

Key words: human learning, meaning, disjuncture, adult teaching.

Introduction

To compose a paper for the intellectual work of Prof. Peter Jarvis on adult learning and education is by definition a difficult task. Prof. Jarvis is not simply a world-wide distinguished academic scholar with a huge number of published papers and books. He is above and beyond anything else a creative and prolific philosopher of human life. Consequently, to try to summarize his work in a rather short paper like this one is very complicated if not unfeasible. Peter Jarvis himself has recognized this “summarization” task as a *major problem* when he was asked by Routledge to edit a two-hundred pages book dedicated to his writings (Jarvis, 2012, p. 1).

Thus, when I was invited to write this paper I was little nervous not only because the task itself is demanding but also because I was about to write a paper for the work of my teacher, mentor and very good friend. I felt that I had to do something creative and personal. For that reason, I decided to approach his contribution non-traditionally, avoiding a pure academic analysis and using instead

examples from my own biography. Through some incidents from my life story I will refer to his work, and especially to the aspects of his work that I considered as vital in understanding adult learning and teaching. I do hope that my approach will manage to demonstrate adequately a picture of the invaluable intellectual work of this great British educationalist.

In the begging there was a quest for meaning ...

Allow me to start with a short personal story that signified my career: In the early 1990's I had just completed my 2-year obligatory military service and I was offered my first job as a part-time teacher of mathematics. The school that I got this first job was a very well known secondary boarding school that offered vocational agricultural education¹. My students were teenagers coming from rural areas all over Greece aiming at acquiring the necessary knowledge and skills to become modern farmers. I had a degree in mathematics and I was more than able to cope with the curriculum. Moreover, as a young teacher I was very popular among the students. But, I had the feeling that something was going wrong. After the first few weeks of classes, I started questioning my performance, since I realized that my communication inside the classroom was mainly with the students that already had good mathematical skills. It seemed to me that I was teaching only for the good students and I was not feeling very good about it. I discussed my feelings with friends and colleagues and one of them suggested that I should try to attend a graduate course in pedagogy in order to get acquainted with learning theories and teaching practices. There was no chance to quit my job and go back to university so I started looking for a part-time course and back then, none of the existing universities in Greece offered such a program. I started exploring alternative ideas like distance learning opportunities and I wrote letters to several European universities. I got positive replies from two institutions: the Open University, UK and the University of Surrey. However, I had missed the dates for the Open University and if I wanted to attend I had to wait for one academic year. That was too long. I was not feeling in harmony and I wanted to do something about it as soon as possible. On the contrary, at the University of Surrey, I was able to enroll anytime throughout the year. That was it! I immediately applied for the M.Sc. offered by the Department of Educational Studies of the University of Surrey, where Professor Peter Jarvis served as Head of the Department.

¹ The school is the American Farm School (www.afs.edu.gr) and it is one of most historical agricultural education schools in Greece

Many years later I realized that this fraction of my educational biography has many elements that relate to the approach developed by Prof. Peter Jarvis regarding the learning phenomenon. In his life-time quest for answers regarding the human learning process, Peter Jarvis has offered us valuable insights in several of his books (e.g. Jarvis, 1992; 1995; 1997; 2004; 2006; 2007; 2009; 2012). I do believe that one of his major contributions was that he deconstructed the artificial theoretical dipole of psychological and social learning by placing emphasis on the existential dimension of this lifelong human phenomenon:

Learning is always “being” and “becoming”: it is ontological and it occurs within the context of the life-world, although we must never forget that this actually occurs within the wider theoretical framework of evolved humanity and that these influences do play their part in our everyday life and learning. (Jarvis, 2009, p. 25)

One significant step towards the dissolution of the aforementioned dichotomy was the clarification of the core concept of meaning, a concept that its formation process is usually understood as a psychological feature and has supported the development of many learning theories that tried to describe learning in the adulthood (Jarvis, 2007; 2009). It is true that learning is related to the concept of meaning or in other words to our need to comprehend the experience of existing. The concept of meaning though clearly encompasses both cultural and metaphysical perspectives (Jarvis, 2012). In the later case the human quest for meaning is related to our effort to make sense of our existence while, in the former, meaning is a social construct that depends evidently to the social condition that an individual is experiencing and, to my opinion, it is affected by the ideologies that dominate the social culture where every individual evolves. We could apparently claim that searching for a metaphysical meaning is more of a personal issue while searching for socio-cultural meaning is a social issue. This distinction may support a dichotomy of learning into psychological and social. In both cases, however, what Jarvis has made crystal clear is that meaning is always related to the experiences of daily existing and this assertion, on the one hand, breaks up the dichotomy and, on the other hand, affects the way we understand and apply experiential learning. Having methodically examined cultural, personal and subjective meaning and their connection to the learning phenomenon, Jarvis states that meaning is:

... a social construct and even a personal one in the light of our understanding of the nature of society. Meaning is not just a metaphysical quest; it is a social and personal quest to understand the ex-

periences of everyday living. Experiential learning, therefore, must always be seen within the social context within which the learner is living. (Jarvis, 2009, p. 73)

We construct meaning as we evolve and as we grow up we frequently change our perception of society and we interpret social roles in different ways. For example, my understanding of fatherhood when I was a teenager, quarrelling about and ignoring the contribution of my father's role to my development was very different from now that I am a father and I am trying hard to assist my children's development. Back to my story, it is obvious to me that when I assumed my job as a teacher of mathematics and a member of the staff of a very well known educational institution, I started to seek for meaning within this new role of mine. I started to have a new set of job-related experiences and there was clearly an effort to make meaning out of them. Apparently, my meaning-making quest was related to the development of my professional identity.

... and then there was disjuncture...

Disjuncture! This is a brilliant word to describe the moment when a person realizes that it is not possible to give meaning to an experience. There are moments in our lives that a new situation appears and it seems that we do not have the necessary "tools" to cope with it. These moments may be happy moments like the birth of a child, or moving in to a new neighborhood or getting a new job. But they can also be moments of sadness like when we experience the loss of a significant person in our life or we lose our job or when we end a relationship. All these moments usually lead to the initiation of a learning process. For Jarvis the experience of disjuncture is a normal event in the social life of a person. At the same time, however, he clarifies that disjuncture is not a simple phenomenon:

- It can occur as a slight gap between our biography and our perception of the situation, to which we can respond by slight adjustments in our daily living – a gap we hardly notice since it occurs within the flow of time.
- It can also occur with larger gaps that demand considerable learning, even to the extent of studying courses and disciplines and embarking on self-directed projects.
- In the meeting of strangers, the disjuncture might not only occur in the discourse between them, but it might actually occur between them as persons and their cultures, and it takes time for the stranger to be received and a relationship, or harmony to be established.

- In addition, some disjunctural situations – often emotive in nature – just cause us to wonder at the beauty, pleasure and so forth that we are experiencing. In these situations it is sometimes impossible to incorporate our learning from them into our biography and our “taken-for-granted”. These are what we might call “magic moments” to which we look forward in hope of repeating them in some way or other but upon which we might often reflect.

(Jarvis, 2011, p. 25)

Returning to my story, before entering a real classroom, I was taking for granted that my school experiences as a student and my knowledge of algebra, geometry, statistics and all the other relative subjects were enough to make me a teacher. But I was wrong. My biographical inventory was not adequate to support me in this new meaning making social role. I was in disharmony with my working environment and thus I was experiencing a disjuncture. In my case, it was a disharmony that needed considerable learning and the decision to attend an educational program was significant because it provided me with a new set of life “tools”.

To my opinion, the personal (internal) or social (external) disharmony that is created by disjuncture offers a fine justification for the starting point of any learning process (formal, non-formal or informal is indifferent). The only other word that I have found in the literature of adult learning trying to explain the initiation of learning is the “disorienting dilemma” in the theory of transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000). Mezirow, more or less explained this experience in the same way stating that a disorienting dilemma occurs when the frame of reference of a person is not adequate to correspond to a life situation. There are two reasons, however, that make me prefer the term *disjuncture* or *disharmony* that are used by Jarvis. Firstly, several authors who examined the “disorienting dilemma” within the theory of transformative learning have argued that it carries a constricted meaning focusing on the cognitive dimension of learning and it is more oriented towards the psychology of the self while it does not always justify learning (see Taylor, 2000; Willis, 2012; Newman, 2014). Secondly, *dilemma* is a Greek word. In Greek it is clear that a dilemma is a condition that involves a choice between two options that are mutually exclusive. To my opinion when it comes to learning to have only two choices mutually exclusive is a rather narrow idea.

... and then learning was elucidated...

Going back to my story it seems that I was trying to make meaning within a process of professional identity development and I experienced a disjuncture. Then I started learning. My learning experience back then incorporated some very novel information that I had never met before. I was a mathematician and a new teacher who had never been introduced to any learning or teaching theories. And suddenly there it was: pedagogy of the oppressed, andragogy, adult development, distance learning, radical learning, transformative learning and other issues gave new meaning to my perception of education. That learning was proven to be very helpful many years later when I was hired by the Hellenic Open University to work as a tutor in their adult education program.

So what is learning? Is it possible to define it? These questions seem simple, but they are not. Sometimes, however, they generate simple answers. For example, I do believe that if we address these questions to teaching professionals, we will get the immediate response that learning is the result of an educational process. This is an answer which is obviously not wrong, and which for many years was indeed the expected answer (Jarvis, 2009). In my country (Greece) for example if we search the most reliable Greek dictionary, the Dictionary of Common Modern Greek, published by the Manolis Triantafyllidis Foundation, we will find that learning is laconically defined as *“the acquisition of knowledge”*. (p. 813) On the other hand, looking into a less formal source of information, the Greek version of Wikipedia, we see that learning is defined as the *“process in which the subject acquires knowledge, skills, attitudes and values through cognitive processes”* (see, <http://el.wikipedia.org/wiki/Μάθηση>). Both these definitions seem very limited as they both endorse only the cognitive dimension of the learning process. This dimension is mostly related to schooling of any level. But as Jarvis has showed us through his wide research on human learning this phenomenon is by far more complicated (Jarvis, 2006). Learning is related to the human condition. Throughout our lives we evolve, we change and we achieve or we do not achieve developmental goals. The ability to learn is a dimension of our own existence and the key explanation for our continued existence in our societies. Schools and educational institutions of any kind are places where significant learning occurs but this is just one learning situation that someone may encounter in his life. Jarvis considers learning as an existential phenomenon and throughout his effort to understand and describe it he is not only concerned with developing a working definition but he constantly tries to relate learning with the social context where it happens (Jarvis, 1985; 1987; 2007). Learning, according to Jarvis, is described as a complex phenomenon in which the human experience is transformed in

multiple ways and contributes to the continuous change of the person, or in his words:

Human learning is the combination of processes throughout a lifetime whereby the whole person – body (genetic, physical and biological) and mind (knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, meaning, beliefs and senses) – experiences natural and social situations, the content of which is then transformed cognitively, emotively or practically (or through any combination) and integrated into the individual person's biography resulting in a continually changing (or more experienced) person. (Jarvis, 2009, p.25)

Like all efforts to define learning, Jarvis's views have been subject to criticism (e.g. Le Cornu, 2005). But despite any objections to details, I do consider Jarvis's definition as very important because it states very evidently that learning is related to our human development as whole persons, our evolution as whole beings. Learning is part of living itself. My learning is me and I am my learning.

...and teaching was portrayed.

The last thing I would like to discuss is the issue of teaching. My experience as a graduate student at the University of Surrey, my exposure to theories of learning and teaching and my personal experience with wonderful teachers like Prof. Peter Jarvis and his close friend Dr. Colin Griffin changed my perception about the role of the teacher and more specifically about the role of the adult educator. Jarvis has a lot to tell us about the role of the adult educator also. I will not go deep into all his writings. However, in one of the books that has influenced me a lot he states:

...teachers should endeavour to create types of relationship with students that enables them to decide for themselves on what is in their own best interest in dialogue with the teachers, where it is appropriate. The concern lies in the dialogical relationship between teachers and the taught rather than the content of what it is taught. (Jarvis, 1997, p. 85)

The key point here and to my opinion the most important thing is that Jarvis is shifting the discussion from methods and techniques to the key issue of developing a relationship with the learner. In 2005, I visited the University of Surrey and with the technical assistance of my father, we interviewed Prof. Jarvis.

In my question about the qualifications of the adult educator Peter gave us an answer that for many years now has been a reference for the adult education community in Greece. He stated:

“I think that the first priority for a good educator is to be a good human being and recognize that we live by being servants and not masters...”

That interview (Koulaouzides, 2005) is for ten years now an essential part of the study material of the graduate program of adult education at the Hellenic Open University² and it was also provided as additional study material to a national programme of training adult educators some years ago. To my estimation, more than five thousand adult trainers in Greece have seen and have worked on this interview. I hope that a lot of them were also influenced by it.

Epilogue

In this short paper, I tried to outline some points from the extensive academic work of Professor Peter Jarvis that are to my understanding crucial in comprehending adult learning and teaching: (a) learning as an existential phenomenon, (b) the key idea of disjuncture, (c) the significance of the relational dimension in the teaching profession. I hope that the readers of the paper will find it resourceful and I do hope that Peter will like it. I have to admit that as I was writing it I was emotionally tensed. At the end of it I realized that for almost 20 years now I have the fortune to be related to one of the most important adult learning and teaching scholars of the world: Professor Peter Jarvis.

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² Prof. Peter Jarvis has visited Greece many times. In 2010, he was awarded the first Honorary Doctorate of the Hellenic Open University for his contribution in the field of adult education.

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Razumevanje učenja i poučavanja odraslih: nekoliko ideja zasnovanih na intelektualnom doprinosu Petera Jarvisa

Apstrakt: Peter Jarvis je jedan od najproduktivnijih filozofa procesa učenja i obrazovanja. Svrha ovog rada je da predstavi neke od njegovih najbitnijih doprinosa u razumevanju prirode učenja i samim tim i prakse u obrazovanju odraslih. Rad se fokusira na sledeće tri teze profesora Jarvisa: a) učenje kao egzistencijalni fenomen, b) ključna ideja disjunkcija (*disjuncture*), c) značaj dimenzije odnosa u nastavničkoj profesiji.

Ključne reči: učenje, značenje, disjunkcija, obrazovanje odraslih.