Learners and Learning in the History of Education

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This paper assesses the current state of our understanding of the history of learners and learning and examines the challenges and opportunities involved in furthering a social history literature in this area. The potential for developing a social history of learners and learning remains largely unrealised, but significant advances in theory and methodology have begun to generate new possibilities towards this end. Such a literature will require the further development of a general historical framework, engagement with theories of learning, and interaction with educational research and policy.

Introduction

As Alexander Pope famously observed, "A little learning is a dangerous thing: drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring: there shallow draughts intoxicate the brain, and drinking largely sobers us again" (Pope, 1961: lines 215-18). The current paper seeks to encourage us to drink more deeply of the Pierian spring in relation to the history of learners and learning. It assesses the current state of our understanding of this history and current prospects for furthering a social history research literature in this area. Despite some interesting and significant previous work, including J.F.C. Harrison's classic *Learning and Living* (1961), the potential for developing a social history of learning from the point of view of learners remains largely unrealised. Prevalent interests in the history of education over the past generation have lain mainly elsewhere, but some key theoretical and methodological advances have begun to generate new possibilities in this area. It is important, however, to address three further challenges for the development of a social history of learners and learning: the development of a historical framework and synthesis of new research, a fuller engagement with theories of learning as a social process, and a more dynamic interaction with educational research and policy.

The general idea of a social history of learning is not new. More than fifty years ago, for example, Richard Altick produced a social history of the mass reading public in nineteenth century England, seeking to document the rise of what he described as the 'self-made reader' during this period (Altick, 1957). J.F.C. Harrison also published the well known history of the English adult education movement, entitled *Learning and Living*, which was included in the book series 'Studies in Social History' edited by Harold Perkin (Harrison, 1961). Harrison attempted in this book to approach the history of adult learning "primarily in terms of social purpose rather than of institutional form", by examining the ideas and attitudes of those taking part in it in order to "uncover the dynamics of successive phases of the movement" (Harrison, 1961: xi). According to Harrison, his work was primarily "a social history of some aspects of popular thought and intellectual interests as expressed in that variety of institutions and learning situations which is known collectively as the adult education movement", with much of it devoted to an exposition of "contemporary aspects of social policy and social change" (Harrison, 1961: xii). He demonstrated the ambivalent role of adult learning as "alternatively a movement of protest and a means to promote social acceptance and harmony" (Harrison, 1961: xiii), while also highlighting the contribution of

education to the growth of democracy in England. Moreover, Harrison tried to combine in this endeavour the perspective of the social historian with the "sympathy and understanding" that came from daily involvement in the adult education movement (Harrison, 1961: xiv). The extent to which Harrison achieved these ambitious objectives may be gauged from the fact that in the 1990s it could be regarded as "still the most influential and widely read work in the field of adult education history" (Chase & Dyck, 1996: 1).

The conception of a social history of learners and learning that is rehearsed in the present paper is not simply an extension and further development of Harrison's approach, but aspires to be qualitatively different, in three ways in particular. First, it seeks to engage with the concept of 'learning' more fully and systematically than has been attempted in previous historical work. Learning is not simply about reading, nor is it gauged simply through an understanding of social purposes and institutions, and nor is it merely intellectual in nature. As a social process, it embodies a wide range of experiences through which the learner comes to understand himself or herself, and the world around. Second, this process is examined from the point of view of the learner and learners, rather than from those of policy makers and teachers as has been habitual. Third, an attempt is made to relate this history to current educational problems and policies, and to broader research trends in education and the social sciences. The general aim is to begin to shed light on the social nature and importance of learning since modern ideas about learning started to be developed in the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century.

The social process of learning

The concept of learning as a social process has developed markedly in recent discussions, drawing on the classic work of theorists such as Lev Vygotsky and Jerome Bruner (see for example Illeris, 2009). These new analyses have been highly suggestive in terms of offering possibilities for further development by historians, without in most cases developing the historical dimension in any detail.

In one useful contribution, for example, Jarvis and Parker have facilitated an holistic approach to the idea of human learning. They emphasise the ways in which human beings interact and exist among different social groups, and argue that this fundamental ability is dependent on a characteristically human form of learning. The learning process, in their view, takes place everywhere and every day of human life, not only when people are taught for a specific purpose (Jarvis & Parker, 2005). Peter Jarvis pursues this idea to propose that human learning needs to be understood in terms of the relationship between individuals and the wider society, and may be defined as "the combination of processes whereby the human person (knowledge, skills, attitudes, emotions, values, beliefs and the senses) enters a social situation and constructs an experience which is then transformed through cognitive, emotional and practical processes, and integrated into the person's biography" (Jarvis, 2005a: 2). The whole person is involved in this set of processes, according to Jarvis, since humans experience the world through their bodies (senses), through their minds (cognitively, attitudinally, ideologically and evaluatively), through their actions (practice and skill), and emotionally. Learning thus includes thought, action and feeling (Jarvis, 2005a). Moreover, he suggests, 'disjuncture' occurs when there is no harmony between the individual's experiences and his or her expectations of how to behave, and this can take place either when the individual changes or when the society around them changes. This enables Jarvis to sketch a general historical model based on different types of society: a primitive society in which structures change slowly while social positions change rapidly, a modern society in which structures change more rapidly and social positions change more slowly, and a late modern society in

which structures change very rapidly and individuals require extended formal education in order to change their social positions (Jarvis, 2005b).

Other recent theorists of human learning have also emphasised the range of experiences and the social relationships that are bound up with it. Knud Illeris points out that all learning involves both an internal psychological process and an external interaction between the learner and his or her social, cultural and material environment. These processes, he suggests, include a cognitive dimension of knowledge and skills, an emotional dimension of feelings and motivation, and a social dimension of communication and cooperation, all of which are embedded in a societally situated context. Illeris notes also that although most learning takes place through either assimilating a new element to an established pattern or scheme or accommodating it by breaking down parts of an existing scheme, sometimes transformative learning can occur resulting from rapid change or perhaps a crisis in the internal and external learning processes (Illeris, 2009). This latter idea seems akin to Jarvis's notion of disjuncture.

Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of situated learning also locates learning as a social process. They argue indeed that learning is not simply a means of coming to know about the social world but actually a way of being in the social world. They describe this kind of engagement in social practice as 'legitimate peripheral participation'. Through participation in a community of practice, the learner becomes a member of the group. They also point out the potential implications of their theory for understanding the history of learning. Communities of practice have histories and cycles of development, and can reproduce themselves and adapt to external change through their learning processes. Historicising the processes of learning in this way, they suggest, "gives the lie to ahistorical views of 'internalisation' as a universal process" (Lave & Wenger, 1991: 51). Their ideas might be applied to many historical forms and cultural traditions such as those of apprenticeship, for example. Etienne Wenger went on to emphasise the historical aspects of communities of practice even more explicitly, pointing out that they can be considered as 'social histories of learning' in which successive generations interact over time (Wenger, 1998).

The social process of learning may also be related to specific historical formations such as the family, the church, and formal educational institutions. The learner is generally in direct everyday contact from the moment of birth with the mother and father and perhaps also with siblings. In many societies the extended family has been a key influence for children and youths, while in modern industrialised societies the nuclear family has been more prominent. The learner engages with these social institutions, and often comes into conflict with them, in developing as a human being. Historically, too, the Church has been a vital institution embodying and transmitting the traditions, culture and values of the society as well as particular forms of knowledge, and learning has been bound up with these social processes. Formal educational institutions such as schools and universities have also provided a social and historical context for learning, increasingly so around the world in the last two centuries. Within these institutions, formations such as classrooms, playgrounds and examinations have created new communities with which learners must engage, as well as the teachers and lecturers who are employed to teach them.

If learning has been a social process throughout human history, it was in the eighteenth century that modern, self-conscious ideals and practices of learning became established as a product of the Enlightenment. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's book *Émile*, first published in 1762, provided an expression of this modernity that proved to be lasting even though controversial

and contested. Rousseau argued that the infant and child should be left largely to his own devices (he wrote specifically about boys) to learn from the environment rather than being forced in a particular direction by premature teaching. According to Rousseau:

> We are born sensitive and from our birth onwards we are affected in various ways by our environment. As soon as we become conscious of our sensations we tend to seek or shun the things that cause them, at first because they are pleasant or unpleasant, then because they suit us or not, and at last because of judgments formed by means of the ideas of happiness and goodness which reason gives us (Rousseau, 1974: 7).

Rousseau insisted that this natural learning process should not be stifled or undermined: "Fix your eyes on nature, follow the path traced by her. She keeps children at work, she hardens them by all kinds of difficulties, she soon teaches them the meaning of pain and grief" (Rousseau, 1974: 14). The child's tutor "must not give precepts, he must let the scholar find them out for himself" (Rousseau, 1974: 19). This would allow the child's mind, emotions and body to develop properly. Émile is an imaginary child who in Rousseau's work is given full latitude to learn from his environment until he is ready to be taught by his tutor: "Nature, not man, is his schoolmaster, and he learns all the quicker because he is not aware that he has any lesson to learn" (Rousseau, 1974: 84). The child should be protected from corrupting influences, and only when he is able to reason should he be allowed to take his place in society.

In Rousseau's ideal learning process, the learner is in harmony with his social environment, but this is threatened by corrupting influences and premature teaching. There are echoes of this outlook in the epic poem of William Wordsworth, *The Prelude,* or *Growth of a Poet's Mind,* produced in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Wordsworth understood learning as involving sensations and emotions in the full development of the human, rather than only the accumulation of knowledge in the mind or brain. He reflected that teachers had great power over the young, but that children should be allowed to learn and grow in their own way. Teachers were:

> …the keepers of our time,
> The guides and wardens of our faculties,
> Sages who in their prescience would control
> All accidents, and to the very road
> Which they have fashioned would confine us down,
> Like engines…
> Nevertheless, he asked:
> …when will their presumption learn,
> That in the unreasoning progress of the world,
> A wiser spirit is at work for us,
> A better eye than theirs, most prodigal
> Of blessings, and most studious of our good,
> Even in our most unfruitful hours?
> (Wordsworth, 1959, Book V: lines 353-363).

It was this "unreasoning progress of the world", in Wordsworth's view, that had enabled him to develop the imagination and creativity of a poet. The clash between the expectations imposed on him and his own learning led him to rebel as a student at the University of Cambridge, and he decided to leave to learn about post-Revolutionary Paris (Ellis, 1967: 16-22).

It may be, therefore, that we will find more detailed and systematic evidence of an awareness of the social process of learning, both for individuals and for groups, for the period since the eighteenth century than for the pre-Enlightenment period. At this stage, we need to find out much more in order to determine how far this is the case.

The learner's point of view

The learner's point of view has been conspicuous by its absence in most writings in the history of education. Earlier research in the history of education field tended to privilege the administration of education systems, and more recently policy making in education, from the viewpoints of the policy makers (McCulloch & Richardson, 2000). According to Armstrong, for example, "[t]he voices of those who have made policy through government committees and reports and of those professionals who have implemented and sometimes contested these policies tend to dominate" (Armstrong, 2003: 201). Gardner, in a Festschrift in honour of J.F.C. Harrison, also noted that "when we leave the well-illuminated world of policy and political personalities, our knowledge falls away", to such an extent that, as he continues, "[w]e know little of how the changing educational landscape was perceived and accommodated by those who were to be most affected by it – by children, by parents, and … by teachers" (Gardner, 1996: 237). Over the past twenty years, there has been increasing interest in the history of teachers and teaching (see for example McCulloch 2004a). By comparison, there has been little systematic research on the history of learners and learning, on the experiences and processes of learning from the learners' points of view (McCulloch 2005 provides examples of recent key research trends in Britain).

There are, however, a number of promising growth areas that should provide starting points for the development of histories of learning. One such is the history of literacy and reading, which has increasingly sought to illuminate the nature of readers and audiences and their interactions with texts (see for example Rose, 2001). As Jonathan Rose has observed:

> Twenty years ago the historiography of reading scarcely existed. Many historians at that time doubted that we could ever recover anything so private, so evanescent as the inner experiences of ordinary readers in the past. Where were such experiences recorded? What sources could we possibly use? (Rose, 2007: 596).

Yet, as Rose also points out, a number of significant works of this type have now been produced, deploying a range of interesting and unusual historical sources. Changes during the eighteenth century constituted what has been viewed as a 'reading revolution' (Sharpe 2000; Sharpe & Zwicker, 2003).

Another area of historical study that has attracted novel interest in the past two decades has related to interactions and experiences within the classroom. For so long a neglected site in the history of education, the classroom has now rightfully begun to come to the fore (see for example Grosvenor, Lawn & Rousmaniere, 1999). New methods and theories have been required to come to terms with this arena, including both oral and visual approaches to history as well as the use of a wider range of documentary sources than has tended to be evident in the past (see for example Gardner, 2003; McCulloch, 2004b; Burke, 2007; Middleton, 2008). They have also enabled historians to explore the historical experiences of marginalised groups in education. Grosvenor (2007) for example has drawn attention to the uses of the 'visual archive' in approaching this history, especially in relation to black and ethnic minority children, and others have also identified significant theoretical and methodological issues in addressing the educational experiences of the disabled (Oliphant, 2006; Altenbaugh, 2006;

Armstrong, 2007). All of these developments have afforded historians new opportunities to glimpse the learning experiences of ordinary people, both as individuals and in groups (see also McCulloch & Watts, 2003).

A further recent development that should assist the history of learners and learning has been the emergence of sensory history. This involves highlighting the five senses of smell, sound, touch, taste and sight in historical research. Such work is of major potential significance because it foregrounds the non-cognitive dimensions of sensation. Mark M. Smith has suggested that there is scope for a great deal of new historical research on the sensory worlds of children, and how they have understood the senses in the process of learning the social protocols and cultural expectations of their society (Smith, 2007: 120). Peter Hoffer points out that this process has applied historically to adults as well as to children as they "enter the sensate environment to conform to learned priorities of sensation" (Hoffer, 2003: 6). For example, according to Hoffer, the receptivity of the senses, or the ability to describe what we have sensed, can be expanded with experience, so establishing a "sensuous etiquette" in which the senses tell us where we belong in society and how we should behave in different circumstances and contexts (Hoffer, 2003: 20).

Furthermore, an emerging concern with biography and the life course has also begun to stimulate interest in the learning of individuals, both in their early years and over the longer term. Jane Martin, among others, has documented the importance of biographical study in relation to women's lives, women's movements and class politics, for example (Martin, 2003; 2007). Martin analyses what she describes as "the lived connections between personal and political worlds", arguing that "[t]o map this terrain is to examine the ways in which individuals display self-knowledge through the creation and presentation of stories about the self across a range of social and cultural practices – both public and private" (Martin, 2007: 521). Woodin (2005; 2007a) has also examined the ways in which informal learning experiences connect to wider social and educational formations, an analysis which involves rethinking the contested relationship between social class and personal experience (Woodin, 2007b). My own work on the life and educational career of Sir Cyril Norwood, one of the leading educational policy makers in England in the first half of the twentieth century, has similarly highlighted a range of key learning experiences in his childhood and later life which serve to connect the personal and the social (McCulloch, 2006; 2007).

Such theoretical and methodological advances should begin to make it possible not only to theorise about the historical nature of the social process of learning, but also to understand in more detail the historical processes of learning and the social engagement of learners in history. A few examples may be helpful here. Modern novels and autobiographies offer many possibilities in terms of tracing the development of learners in particular social and historical contexts. Novels provide scope for subjective and imaginative recreation of learning from the viewpoint of the learner. The first few lines of James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, first published in 1916, give an outstanding instance of this:

> Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road and this moocow that was coming down along the road met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo … . His father told him that story: his father looked at him through a glass: he had a hairy face. He was baby tuckoo… . When you wet the bed, first it is warm then it gets cold. His mother put on the oilsheet. That had the queer smell. His mother had a nicer smell than his father. She played on the piano the sailor's hornpipe for him to dance (Joyce, 1968: 7).

This is a powerful evocation of the sensations and images of early learning, developed further during the book as young Stephen Dedalus learns about the death of Parnell at his first Christmas dinner with the grownups, and in his years at school.

The autobiography of John Stuart Mill, produced in the 1850s, brought out perhaps even more graphically the potential tensions of the learning process in relation to the social environment, in this case that established for him by his father, James Mill. The father dominates the son's account of his own 'mental history'. Although Mill senior was busy writing his history of British India, John recalls:

> a considerable part of almost every day was employed in the instruction of his children: in the case of one of whom, myself, he exerted an amount of labour, care, and perseverance rarely, if ever, employed for a similar purpose, in endeavouring to give, according to his own conception, the highest order of intellectual education (Mill, 1971: 5).

Thus John began to learn Greek from the age of three, with arithmetic in the evenings, history and experimental science, and formal logic aged 12, with special attention given to elocution. This was very far from the advice of Rousseau: an experiment in intellectual hot-housing that produced impressive academic results.

In another sense John's learning did follow Rousseau's approach in avoiding potential distractions and corrupting influences, and John notes that his father was careful in keeping him away "from having any great amount of intercourse with other boys" (Mill, 1971: 22). The emphasis of John's learning was on a narrow intellectual training for the mind, much more fitted, as he himself acknowledged, "for training me to **know** than to **do"** (Mill, 1971: 23, original emphasis). He was also brought up without any religious beliefs and in a very disciplined and stern environment in which pleasure and tenderness were noticeably absent. The outcome of the experiment is striking. John became an outstanding success in taking forward the ideals of philosophical radicalism and utilitarianism from his father and Jeremy Bentham, a close family friend, but in his twenties suffered what he described as a "crisis in my mental history" (Mill, 1971: 80). This led him to react strongly against the intellectual education of his youth and to look to the "cultivation of the feelings" in music, poetry and other pursuits of which his father would have disapproved (Mill, 1971: 86. See also Mazlish (1975) who discusses this event and the relationship between the son and the father from the perspective of psychohistory).

A further point that needs to be brought out in the social history of learners and learning is the interaction between teaching and learning. Teachers are learners too in the sense that they draw selectively on ideas and messages that they have learned themselves in passing them on to the next generation. In the nineteenth century, Elizabeth Gaskell was well aware of this as she tried to show why Charlotte Bronte had become such an unusually uncompromising female author. She found at least part of the reason for this in Bronte's family background. Her father, the Reverend Patrick Bronte, had taken some of his ideas on the management of children from the theorists Rousseau and Day, and so aimed to make his children hardy and indifferent to the pleasures of eating and dress. He brought up his nine children on his own after his wife died, and after her elder sister Maria died of fever, Charlotte became the eldest sister in a motherless family (Gaskell, 1997).

For a slightly later generation in the nineteenth century, David Newsome has shown how education and religion were closely related to each other for many early Victorians "brought up in the atmosphere of pious habits and who had shared common experiences and enthusiasms

at school and at university" (Newsome, 1961: 25). For example, Martin Benson, a scholar of Winchester College in the 1870s, was an heir to the ideals of liberal education imbibed by his father, E.W. Benson, a future Archbishop of Canterbury, from James Prince Lee, the headmaster of King Edward's School in Birmingham.

Finally the case of the Waugh family demonstrates the generational aspects of learners and learning over a longer period. Arthur Waugh was abused as a child by his father Alexander (nicknamed 'the Brute' by their descendants) whose keenest pleasures had been shooting and fishing. According to Arthur's great-grandson, also called Alexander:

> Every night for a week he dragged Arthur out of bed and pushed him into the deep gloom of a downstairs cupboard where, shivering in his pyjamas and doubtless crying like a baby, he was ordered to kiss his father's gun-case (Waugh, 2004: 28).

The adult Arthur idolised his eldest son, Alex, leading to an "intense" relationship in which "Arthur assumed that the only two passions he had successfully shared with the Brute – cricket and amateur theatricals – should form the basis of his relationship with his own son" (Waugh, 2004: 51).

Challenges and opportunities

There are at least three key challenges which remain to be tackled in the further development of a social history of learners and learning. The first is the prospect of developing a historical framework based on these learning experiences that will have a general bearing on our understanding of the development of modern societies. The individual characteristics of these experiences are so striking and their variety and range so immense that establishing a common pattern may appear unlikely. And yet there do seem to be commonalities within families and for particular generations for example, that are then learned and passed on for many years, often in very different circumstances and in different countries. The social processes of this learning are surely at the heart of our society itself, as they are of our humanity.

Second, we need still to draw together the learning theories that have been developed over recent years with the historical experiences that have started to be sketched out here. We can begin to discern in outline how they may relate to particular cases, but is there a larger picture, a grander theory, that can be developed? It is well known that historians have often tended to avoid engaging systematically with theory (Burke, 2005), and yet over the last thirty years the history of education has become accustomed to dealing with social theories such as those generated by Marx, Foucault, Bourdieu and many others. A social history of education that actively engages with learning theory is as yet hardly even in its infancy.

And last, what are the potential implications for our understanding of educational and social research and policy? In terms of research, the British Economic and Social Research Council sponsors the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP), the largest social science research programme ever in Britain. Very little of the research which this has produced has been historical in character, and even less has explored the history of learners and learning. Perhaps the closest it has come to doing so, and a promising development in its own terms, is the TLRP project 'Learning lives: Learning, identity and agency in the life course'. This project, which ran from 2004 until 2008, focused on the interrelationships between learning, identity and agency in people's lives, and employed biographical, life history and longitudinal techniques to trace and analyse the meaning and significance of learning through the life course (see for example Tedder & Biesta, 2007). This should yield interesting and significant outcomes in relation to recent and contemporary society. Yet, a social history of learners and

learning should encompass several, perhaps many lifetimes, rather than just our own. It may be necessary to historicise the notion of biographical learning that is conveyed in this project, and to augment its findings through a historical approach. Such an initiative would be a further major step forward towards an understanding in this area of inquiry.

So far as government policy is concerned, there has been clear recognition over more than a decade of the significance of learners and learning. Over fifty years ago the Labour Party produced a highly significant report entitled *Learning to Live* (Labour Party, 1958) and there has been a cluster of recent government reports promoting learning with titles from *Learning to Compete* (DfEE, 1996), and *The Learning Age* (DfEE, 1998) to, most recently, *The Learning Revolution* (DIUS, 2009). In these most recent reports there is some acknowledgement of a tradition of adult learning in this country, and indeed this is developed in detail in an annex to the 2009 White Paper contributed by the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (DIUS, 2009: 48-49). Internationally, also, such reports have proliferated, including for instance the UNESCO report coordinated by Jacques Delors, *Learning: The Treasure Within* (UNESCO, 1996). There is some tendency in the British-based reports at least for the historical awareness of learning to be expressed as celebration and even nostalgia for the past in building towards current achievements. This is particularly evident in *The Learning Revolution*, despite the contemporary crisis of adult educational provision. It is most important that a social history of learners and learning, in developing a critical and theorised analysis of the past, also engages with and seeks to inform the policies of the present in a more rigorous manner than has become the norm.

Overall, the history of education would benefit greatly from further development of the major themes of learners and learning. As Pope might observe, it has suffered from the effects of 'a little learning', and needs now to drink more deeply from this Pierian spring. If it able to do so, the opportunities to provide a social history of learners and learning over the next generation of research are rich indeed.

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