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Learning to Learn – Teaching Learning I

So Many Questions

by Ilana Nevill

In his book “Wise Up – The Challenge of Lifelong Learning”, Guy Claxton writes: “Learning is what you do when you don’t know what you do. Learning to learn, or the development of learning power, is getting better at knowing when, how, and what to do when you don’t know what to do” (p. 11). The currently emerging science of learning thus confirms the foundation on which Moshe Feldenkrais developed his approach. He deliberately devised his Method as a counter-model to conventional education whose comprehension of learning is very different. “Many of the evils from which we suffer are rooted in our false understanding that human education is the training of a completed being to do this or that, as if we are making a computer perform a desired activity” (Moshe Feldenkrais, “On the Primacy of Hearing”, in: “Somatics”, autumn 1976, p. 21).

As a Feldenkrais teacher, I can ask myself many questions. For instance:

- *With what understanding of learning do I as a teacher encounter my predominantly adult students?*
- *When and where have I experienced the kind of “Learning to Learn” Guy Claxton has in mind?*
- *Can I remember a particularly happy learning experience, maybe as a small child?*
- *Was there perhaps a gifted school teacher who gave me a taste of self-directed learning not eager for success and external recognition?*
- *Did I learn in my Feldenkrais training how one can most effectively support the unfolding of a student’s capacity to learn? Who served as a model of a convincing ‘teacher’ – and when and where?*

Faced with the mega-problems which our world can no longer counter with purely technical solutions, Feldenkrais declared: “In spite of the apparent darkness of the human future, I believe we have not yet reached our Homo sapiens capacities for learning; it is still too early to condemn man on the strength of the small awareness he has acquired by chance and not by his outstanding ability to reduce great complexity to familiar simplicity – in other words, to learn. We have never yet really used our essential freedom of choice and we have barely learned to learn” (ibid, p. 21).

- *Is that not sufficient reason to practice patience – towards ourselves and others – and, more important still, to support one another in joint learning?*

Learning through Experience and Self-Directed Learning

Feldenkrais constantly reformulated what he meant by ‘Learning’ – for instance at the start of a public workshop in Toronto (1980): “We want to learn a kind of learning which helps us to know ourselves ... and find out how come if we are intelligent yet don’t do anything for the actual improvement of our life except be like everybody else...” (Awareness Through Movement workshop, Toronto, Canada, October 4-8, 1980 in: Feldenkrais Resources, p. 10). Moshe Feldenkrais made clear to his pupils by way of absolutely concrete self-experience that this primarily entails changing one’s self-image, which is ultimately only possible through neutralisation of false ambition and unnecessary effort. Nevertheless he also expected his successors to mentally grasp the inner logic of his Method: “So we have to understand the different kinds of learning before we can see the importance of yet another method created and used by me” (“The Elusive Obvious”, p. 12).

- *What helped me in my training to get to know myself better and to take charge of my own personal potential for learning and development?*
- *What concrete experience of myself suggested a change in my self-image, or even made that possible? Did I experience that as being largely positive?*
- *In what way did my training give me insight into “different forms of learning” and thus perhaps also into the Method’s inner logic?*
- *How can I translate such personal learning into good teaching practice?*

In his previously mentioned, highly informative book, English educational psychologist Guy Claxton discusses the most recent scientific findings which indirectly confirm the solidity of the foundations on which ‘good’ Feldenkrais practice is built (‘good’ in the sense of measuring up to its claims). Here are a couple of particularly relevant points.

1. As a many-sided, multi-levelled activity, ‘learning’ takes on ever more differentiated forms, building harmoniously on one another. Moshe Feldenkrais’s “organic” or “self-directed” learning is called “learning through experience” in Claxton’s book. It is described as being the very first and lifelong most utilised tool in our gradually expanding “tool-kit” for learning. This largely unconscious learning is responsible for the development of all that characterises a human being as an intelligent ‘animal man’. Through playful experimentation, attentive observation, imitation, and practice such learning contributes towards ongoing unfolding of our capacity to learn. The accompanying *creative* activity we begin to engage in from the moment we are born gets us well on the way towards becoming human beings capable of lifelong learning and responsibility. Thus each one of us has a chance of also becoming a truly *whole* human being (the “*humanus humanum*” Feldenkrais writes about in his book “Awareness through Movement”).

2. Learning can be learned. In favourable circumstances the outcome is natural curiosity in dealings with oneself and the world, leading to an ongoing increase in ‘resilience’, ‘resourcefulness’, and ‘reflectiveness’. The degree to which this process of gradual expansion and refinement of capacity for learning is either furthered or undermined within institutionalised education depends on the prevalent ideas about ‘learning’ and ‘teaching’ and the associated role-models of ‘pupils’ and ‘teachers’.
 3. In conventional teaching the mediation of knowledge and acquisition of practical competencies rarely go hand in hand; there usually is scarcely any time for playful practising, so learners often suffer from an acute sense of insecurity when confronted with the demands of actual practice. That can become a serious obstacle with regard to learning. It thus happens that, good intentions notwithstanding, many teachers do not further pupils’ real interest, intellectual openness, and trust in their own capacity to learn. Instead they promote infantile dependence on recognition by external authorities, tense and anxious striving for achievement and “wanting to do things correctly”, etc. Or, conversely, their pupils resort to a more or less blatant lack of interest – as a defence against feelings of inadequacy. Probably most important of all is Claxton’s categorical statement: “Teaching for learning-power is much more about the creation of a culture than about the design of a training programme” (“Wise Up”, p. 17).
- *What is involved in a learning culture where curriculum-planning and laying down specific learning objectives – in the form of assessable competences and testable knowledge – are of secondary importance?*

Open-ended Learning

Moshe Feldenkrais stressed time and again that formulation of clearly defined learning-objectives in no way accords with his Method’s inner logic. For instance: “On learning what to achieve before we have learned to learn, we can reach only the limit of our ignorance, which is often general. Such limits are intrinsically lower than those we can foresee after learning better” (Feldenkrais, “Learn to Learn”, 1975/1980, p. 8).

Ultimately Feldenkrais accepted only a single objective. To open up for people – especially those who had constantly been drilled to seek achievement and specific successes in learning - a new and more mature access to a way of learning that they took for granted in early childhood but lost later through conditioning in the family and state educational institutions. So in his teaching he concentrated exclusively on ways and means of making renewed “growth” possible for his students. This important concept entails very much more than mere continuation of interrupted processes of neurological differentiation and integration. The decisive contrast to early learning and growth lies in the fact that Feldenkrais teaching focuses on consciously experienced learning how to learn. And there, said Moshe Feldenkrais, only one thing counts: “Dealing with a process of self-direction” where “each particular movement *is* important only in as much

as it *illuminates* this process” (Feldenkrais, “The Elusive Obvious”, p. 90 *Italics indicate a change of tense from past to present*).

In connection with adaptation of an individual’s self-image to innate potential - both necessary and possible for anybody who wishes to become truly human - Feldenkrais saw only one reliable measure of genuine growth: “the kind of ability you have to take care of the external world within yourself --in other words, what you have learned” (Amherst, 24.6.1981, p.26). In his eyes, this world within ourselves is often unfortunately little more than “the rubbish in our brain, in our heart, in our wherever it is”. The task is to “get out of ourselves the kind of thing that we would be if we had an ideal life, an ideal society, an ideal heredity, and ideal everything” which doesn’t exist (Feldenkrais, Toronto, p. 10, 1980). Because such ‘muck-purging’ growth is painful “learning must be very gentle because there is enough trouble without introducing new trouble in the learning” (Amherst, 1.7.1981, p. 24).

- *What learning-environment and learning-conditions must we create so as to make such playfully easy learning possible for our students?*
- *How can we prevent traces of earlier conditioning in our own – perhaps not adequately and consciously ‘examined’ – self-image unintentionally impairing or even blocking our students’ learning?*
- *How in our teaching can we serve as a model, i.e. ourselves embody motivation of lifelong learning? More precisely: what must we perhaps change in our behaviour and use of language?*
- *How can we learn to keep asking (ourselves and our pupils) - as naturally as Myriam Pfeffer occasionally does at the start of her teaching: “Who learns more here? The student or the teacher?” (Interview in “The Feldenkrais Journal U.K.”, autumn 1993)*

“To be prepared against surprise is to be trained. To be prepared for surprise is to be educated. Education discovers an increasing richness in the past because it sees what is unfinished there. Training regards the past as finished and the future as to be finished. Education leads towards a continuing self-discovery; training leads towards a final self-definition. Training repeats a completed past in the future. Education continues an unfinished past into the future.

James P. Carse, FINITE AND INFINITE GAMES. A Vision of Life as Play and Possibility
Ballantine Books, 1986