

Book Reviews/Comptes Rendus

Peter Jarvis. *Adult Learning in the Social Context*. London: Croom Helm, 1987, 220 pp. Reviewed by Gordon Thompson*

Peter Jarvis has written extensively on the subject of adult education and has consistently argued the need for the development of a sociological perspective. This orientation is manifestly evident in this, his latest book.

The genesis of this book is a series of workshops which the author conducted in 1985 and 1986 with groups of adult educators in the United Kingdom and the United States which sought to develop a model of the human learning process. Commencing with the learning cycle model developed by David Kolb, the author had participants in the first workshop critique and modify the Kolb model. Each subsequent workshop (there were nine) took the product of the previous workshop and attempted to improve upon it. The format for each workshop involved the selection of an individual learning experience from each individual's past and individual reflection and analysis of the experience including what started the process, how they learned from the process, and what completed the process. Subsequently, workshop participants were paired and invited to compare and contrast their experiences and to attempt to build a simple learning model based upon their experiences. Following this process, the pairs were combined into groups of four and they repeated the process of analysis and construction of a learning model. The learning models created by these groups were examined and discussed by the entire workshop group. Finally, participants were introduced to the product of the previous workshop and invited to modify it in the light of their discussions. The final product of these workshops is much more complex than the original Kolb model. It might be described as a model of the learning process which has been introspectively derived and consensually validated.

The author allows that his learning model can be criticized on two accounts. The workshop participants were predominantly middle class adult educators or university students. In these and other respects they are not representative of the general population. Secondly, the model was constructed upon deliberate learning experiences and therefore precluded unintentional learning. The author admits to no further shortcomings in the model he presents although most readers are likely to be skeptical of the superficial quality of a learning model which is the product of the workshop process. Notwithstanding this concern, what follows the discussion of the workshops and their product is a thoughtful discussion of the process of learning.

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Throughout the book, the author uses the term “adult learning” although he states that this does not imply a psychological difference in the learning process of adults and children. Rather, it suggests a difference in the relationship between the teacher and adult learners as compared with the teacher and younger learners. He refers to the writings of Yonge who has proposed that as learners, children and adults are “accompanied” in different ways by their teachers.

Jarvis describes nine separate responses which may occur to a potential learning experience. He identifies these as: presumption, non-consideration, rejection, pre-conscious, practice, memorization, contemplation, reflective practice and experimental learning. The first three responses are described as non-learning responses, the next three as non-reflective learning, and the last three as reflective learning. This discussion establishes an important context in which to examine the process of learning. Not all potential learning situations result in learning outcomes. In addition, a potential learning situation may result in learning for one individual where no learning occurs for others. Finally, learning may occur in situations where reflection occurs or where no reflection has taken place. There are a number of themes which the author returns to throughout the book. These include the following:

- 1 Learning experiences may lead to conformity or innovation but the author argues that most institutionalized learning leads to conformity.
- 2 We are continually exposed to potential learning situations which may or may not lead to learning outcomes. The author proposes that most learning is of the non-reflective kind and therefore contributes to conformity.
- 3 Even when the learning experience is an individualistic one, it is still a fundamentally social experience. This is due to the fact that we are social beings and that we are the product of our social experiences. Accordingly, we perceive and define learning situations in terms of our personal experiences. This explains why potential learning experiences produce different outcomes for different people.
- 4 The behavioristic approach to learning is rejected by the author. He proposes that the social context may be perceived by a learner as requiring behavioral conformity which is not necessarily representative of what has been learned.
- 5 The basis of the learning process is the perception by the learner of a disjuncture between biography and experience. This view is evidently relevant in his discussion of non-learning responses and of reflective learning responses. The author does not adequately explain how it relates to his category of non-reflective learning responses however. He simply states that perceived disjuncture “... is a necessary precursor for learning, unless there is an authoritarian situation in which the learners have no choice but to respond or the learning is pre-conscious” (p. 140). This leaves the reader unsatisfied and unclear as to whether the perceived disjuncture is necessary, and if so, whether the learning outcomes are somehow reduced in its absence (even though learning has occurred!).

The author relates his discussion to the writings of Argyris, Schon, Knowles, and Freire as well as Mezirow, Botkin et al., and others. In general, he provides a useful, if brief, integration of their contributions to the learning process. Nonetheless, the book is disappointingly inadequate in its treatment of social learning theory. For example, although the author makes reference to the relationship between self-concept and readiness to tackle new learning situations with confidence, he makes no reference to the important work of Albert Bandura in this area.

A final criticism concerns the readability of the book. It is not clearly nor logically organized. The reader is not quite sure what the next section will deal with and the author frequently introduces an idea only to terminate the discussion with an indication that it will be re-introduced and discussed more fully at a later stage. In addition, the prose is frequently ponderous.

Notwithstanding these criticisms, the book is worth reading by those individuals interested in the field of adult education. While the book requires some effort on the reader's part it examines important themes in a thoughtful manner.