Learning practice: Discerning and conquering the subjective new

Athanasios Marvakis

“The contradictions are the hope”

(Bertolt Brecht GW 18, 139)

“Contradiction is the form of learning’s movement”

(Frigga Haug 2003, 212)

Abstract
This article consolidates and systematizes the fundamental questions any inquiry into learning needs to adopt, if it claims to address the topic from the perspective of action theory within critical psychology. Our starting points here are seemingly simple questions like: how does learning appear to us? When does it become a ‘problem’ – and for whom? Which contradictory societal functions of learning can we identify? These reflective recourses allow us to re/contextualize the very question, “what is learning?”. A second step reconstructs the historicity of learning – differentiating necessarily between the history of learning as a practice and the history of theorizing learning. Since both aspects – practice and theorizing – are themselves moments in a broader societal context, a next step refers to their contextualization in a learning regime. The societal contextualization forces us to question the conventional reduction of social meanings – as the genuine content of learning – to some allegedly neutral technicalities and, instead, to seek potential analytical moments of action/learning. Our reflections allow us to go beyond the restriction of conceiving of learning solely in the mode of schooling and to imagine an autonomy of learning that expands towards social movement learning such as in a specific case of ‘learning (in) solidarity’.
Keywords
societal function of learning, historicity of learning, learning regime, subjective semiosis, learning as participation in social practices, autonomy of learning, analytical moments of action/learning, social movement learning, pedagogy of dissent, schooling mode of learning, social learning barriers, life-long learning as life-sentence.

I. How Are We Approaching Learning?

It is easy to surmise that learning is omnipresent. Nowadays, not only is everyone learning, but ostensibly also everything: rats, dogs, and pigeons; organizations and systems; machines; regions and societies. The primary focus of the study of learning has traditionally been on children, learning is now also considered important when the learners are adults and seniors. Our natural potential for life-long learning is now broadly accepted, yet has also been transformed into a burden. If we want to comply with the new neo-liberal normality imposed on more and more of our lives, the updated version of learning seems to mean a generalization from opportunities for a few to a life sentence for all (Spilker 2013).

It is almost compulsory to start an academic dialog with a definition of the subject to be discussed. Conventionally, such a definition contributes a quick synopsis where the authors present their understanding of the subject matter, which neglects and, at the same time, obscures the, potentially problematic, character of the definition, itself. This common practice is misleading because the reader is left with a one-sided view of issues. The practice of offering a definition can constitute neglect and become a political ploy. Therefore, we should reject the very idea of using an overly simplistic definition of learning as our starting point. We must insist that this idea is misleading and favours hegemonic practices, supporting, as it does, various trends, theories and approaches that attempt to consolidate and impose particular perceptions (Laclau & Mouffe 1985). An authoritative approach is contingent on several omissions:

- All important (wo)men who have not had the luck to be included in the chosen definition are excluded.
- The social practices in which and through which learning takes place and emerges are also excluded.
- All the subjects (i.e., persons) called to learn, together with their needs, opinions, experiences, and concepts about learning, are absent.
To define learning comprehensively we might ask: What notion of knowledge is implicitly re/produced by the standard approach? What do we have to learn (or teach) according to the authoritative model?

A linear, mechanical conceptualization of knowing/knowledge and learning is based on a series of structural seclusions between the subjects who are involved in the production, distribution, and usage of knowledge: producer (researcher) -> transformer (professor) -> vehicle (student) -> user (pupil at school). This model implies a certain worldview of society, the subjects, their practices and relations, and their usage of knowledge in the social world. It supports and represents an approach we could call social engineering. From this perspective, knowledge is primarily formal and authoritative (if not authoritarian): it only includes what official and authoritative sources expect as outputs. Once ‘learned,’ such knowledge ostensibly only needs to be applied. If we accept this worldview about human beings, their practices, and relations in society, we can proceed according to the given model without facing any theoretical or moral dilemmas.

If we disagree with such a worldview, however, we must think about how to approach knowledge and learning without relying on a mechanical, technocratic view of society. The mechanical worldview reduces knowledge to formal and authoritative knowledge with the help of an inversion: the outcome is presented as having existed from the beginning as a logical starting point. A historical product is transformed into a general characteristic that functions as a historical starting point and logical premise. This is an effect of societal and historical organization that includes assumptions about the division of labor. In the context of schooling, with its isolation of students and seclusion of learning from the societal practices where it is produced and used, knowledge is not understood as the historical fact it is. Learning, therefore, is not perceived as a historical product or artifact of particular social, theoretical, political contexts and systems.

With this inversion of a historical product into an a-historical generality and starting point, one can reduce knowledge to what is accepted by political, social authorities (e.g., official textbooks). Against such a backdrop, our getting-to-know-the-world is easily transformed into a faith, a doxa, which we encounter reverentially together with dominant social practices, preferably reproduction and repetition. In a model of learning confined to the reproduction and distribution of knowledge, also the human being is being subordinated in his or her epistemological relation towards knowing/knowledge.

Instead of picking up or choosing some kind of authoritative definition of learning, we can transform potential definitions themselves into starting points for the study of learning. In societies where antagonistic interests exist (such as
ours), ‘learning’ - like all social meanings (gesellschaftliche Bedeutungen) - constitutes a conflictive and antagonistic field, characterized by various conflictive and antagonistic social positions.

Re/Contextualization of the question “what is learning”?

One way to answer the question “what is learning?” without offering an eclectic and authoritative definition is to contextualize the very question. The context becomes a logical prerequisite for understanding learning (and teaching). With such a perspective we might ask:

- Which questions and problems are assumed at the beginning? Which of society’s queries are to receive an answer with the help of knowledge and learning? Which of society’s needs are knowledge and learning called to satisfy? What is the social history of these questions and needs?
- What is considered a problem or an issue, when, why and for which subjects? When does learning become problematic, for whom and why? What is learning for us?
- Which different, and perhaps contradictory, social functions of learning can we identify?

How does learning ‘appear’ to us?

When we reflect on learning, we are confronted with several oddities (or even difficulties):

- We know learning has a dual existence: it is an unplanned, spontaneous, osmotic result that comes about through our ongoing activities (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1964), but it is also a particular kind of activity we must undertake, a particular labour we must carry out in order to learn (Rubinstein, 1946).
- Talking and thinking about these learning activities, we realize that different subject positions are taken with distinctive and necessary practices, which determine who does what in a specific moment.
- We are permanently confronted with an unavoidable dilemma: Is learning a good thing or is it bad? Is it positive or negative for us? Obviously, learning broadens our potential and our access to societal possibilities and resources. But learning is also experienced as a forced practice: we have to learn to reproduce ourselves socially. Thus, our learning experiences always contain both opportunities for learning and coercions into learning. We seem to oscillate between the freedom from learning and liberty to learn.
When does learning become a ‘problem’ – and for whom?

For most of us, in many situations of life, learning is not much of an issue or problem: we learn through everyday activities and through our practical experiences. Learning is directly bonded with overall, everyday praxis. It is, so to speak, practical learning, and it is practical also because it emerges from our practice. Hence, it is directly useful.

The ‘individual’ picture does not change if we ask the same question for the perspective of society. For thousands of years of human history, learning has not constituted a distinct problem for the vast majority of the population on our globe. During this history, an individual’s learning was situated and delimited in his or her everyday activities. It was through involvement in a particular situation that one person taught another. The teachers might have been grandfathers or grandmothers teaching grandchildren everyday skills, but anyone in the community could be a teacher. In this integrated process, the positions of teacher and student were distinctive logical positions, but there was a certain fluidity around who could or would hold one of these logical positions at any specific time.

Of course, delimiting learning to everyday practices necessitates a reduction of learning. The wealth or impoverishment of a person’s everyday practices affects the wealth or impoverishment of potential teaching and learning. When more and more people encounter increased demands and opportunities for learning in and through their everyday practices, learning becomes a delineated societal issue or problem in its own right that has to be addressed through particular social practices.

Contradictory societal functions of learning

From the perspective of society, learning as a particular social practice encompasses a fundamental contradiction (e.g., Holzkamp, 1993). On the one hand, learning contributes to the substantial expansion of people’s capacities and represents a potent force for the development of relationships with the world (including with oneself as part of the world). Learning, thus, constitutes a powerful lever for self-determination. Through these practices, an ever-increasing societal heritage is being transferred and distributed to following generations and other newcomers; the transfer includes conflicts around particular or proper content of this heritage.

On the other hand, due to the dominant social order in our societies, the conditions under which our learning has to be realized appear to us as something we have to want to do, as an impulse coming from outside, as enforcement, as
obligation, as a prerequisite for our social reproduction. It appears to us finally as a powerful tool for our heteronomy. The imposition here has to do with the necessity to re-produce the dominant social order, that is, to transfer the existing social relations and conditions to the next generation, including the battles about which aspects of the social order are to be transferred. We all operate within the confines of the existing social order; consequently, we also must learn to accept, adapt, or re-produce this order. We must ‘be trained’ in practices of ruling and domination, subordination, dissent, and resistance.

How long subjects have to encounter this contradiction, with both the opportunities of and the impositions on learning, depends on the organization of a specific society. This organization provides different opportunities and impositions for different subjects, thereby creating differentiated kinds of participation in the accumulated societal wealth. Consequently, the necessity to encounter and deal with this contradiction may in some situations, and for some subjects, last the duration of one’s life (e.g., life-long learning as opportunity and as imposition). On the other end of the spectrum, are all those subjects for whom the organization of our society does not provide nor foresee any participation at all, be it imposition or opportunity. These subjects are therefore released from this contradiction of learning; these subjects are – in a dual sense – free!

The contradiction itself is usually not easily visible, and, consequently, it is not easily understandable as a social contradiction. In actual social situations, the contradiction is mediated by social categories (e.g., gender). Another mediating mechanism consists of the templates for normality we follow, which include the demands, challenges, restrictions, prompts, and obstacles these templates offer. In such social situations, the contradiction is probably experienced as an individual dilemma. For instance, the individual subject may not want to learn something in order to be able to defend some other good perceived as opposing the learning that originally takes place. Consequently, learning that is realized in certain societal conditions cannot be conceived as a linear, cumulative process, but always entails and demands that the involved subjects engage with contradictions and negotiate compromises.

II. Historicity of Learning

History of learning

The constitution of a subject through his or her learning cannot be isolated from the historical constitution of humankind. In reflecting on human learning, we must take into consideration the varied and accumulated heritage on which
individual attempts at learning rely. One person’s learning is only a single event in a much larger process that, in turn, makes this individual’s learning possible. In a comprehensive understanding of human learning, with its potentialities and particularities, we can see processes of historical emergence and development. As such, human learning is a historical product as well as a historical process.

There are three distinct kinds of historicity that can be considered: The first historical step or layer refers to the natural history and phylogeny of learning. It concerns the long natural process of the emergence and differentiation of certain potentialities for individual learning. This history affects every individual organism because it belongs to a specific biological species with an inherited capacity for learning. We humans are endowed with our heritage because of our belonging to the biological species homo sapiens.¹

Such a genetic-historical perspective helps us overcome certain fundamental, and popular, dichotomies that trouble the field of psychology (e.g., nature vs. nurture) and to reformulate them in a completely different direction. From an evolutionary point of view, an abstract opposition between nature and nurture - or the innate and the learned - is obsolete. Learning itself is a natural, an innate capacity or, to put it differently, the capacity for individual learning emerges from the innate. Our learning is our natural heritage (Lorenz 1964).

As we said above, the capacity for learning is specific to a biological species. But this particularity does not determine the concrete realization of learning; it is merely a potentiality. With regard to the learning potentials of homo sapiens, we have to consider an additional step or layer of historical heritage that grounds our concrete learning.

In becoming a human being, eg. in appropriating the potentials and powers of our species, a second historical consideration concerns our reflections on the heritage we gain from the history and the historicity of our societies, of our belonging to a certain society with certain historical, geographical, cultural, political, and economic characteristics. Across a societal-historical layer of time the particular contents of learning, the means for our learning, and the subjects of learning are produced, developed, cultivated, and specified. And since societal characteristics are not static, but variable and developing, our learning must be an open-ended developing process; its constraints have to be conceived and theorized as relying on these societal characteristics.

In contrast to other species’ capacity for learning, it is a fundamental characteristic of human activity and learning not only to actively adapt to pre-existing conditions and to appropriate existing social meanings and relations, but also, potentially, to change them, to create new contents and relations. The notion

¹ *Comparative Ethology*, the respective sub-discipline within Biology was rewarded a Noble prize in 1971 for researching this particular history.
that societally produced learning is unchangeable or unambiguous is a theoretical stance in the discourse of learning, but also a political standpoint in the battle for learning and learning opportunities. For example, being on the payroll of a state apparatus which demands from its servants knowledge about how to govern and control subjects - but not about how to change social conditions and ruling relations – illustrates a type of learning that is desirable because it facilitates exploitability and governmentality (gouvernementalité; Foucault, 1991).

Theorizing learning in such a static and reduced manner is trapped in the dialectic between being paid for facilitating change, development and learning, but simultaneously being expected to avoid, to hinder too much of such learning, and with it the change and development of subjects, especially because they may empower people to develop their capacity to question and overcome their own incompetence and the dominant social order.

Scientists and researchers on learning perpetuate a social contradiction here: on the one hand, they help cultivate and develop subjectivity and subjects, so that they can be (also) exploited, while, on the other hand, they delimit [the process of] learning. The usual, dominant, and very ‘practical’ solution for this contradiction is to restrict the demands for development and change through learning to individuals, while the existing social order is kept untouchable and therefore legitimized as is.

A third historical consideration involves the emergence of learning and the learning history of the concrete individual during his or her life course. A person’s learning history is the place where the natural and societal heritage are finally actualized, realized, and transformed from something potential into something real. Through this kind of learning history, the capacities accumulated and differentiated in natural and societal history are transformed into a real social entity, a concrete person. The process of life also accumulates a double-edged heritage of learning that facilitates or hinders further learning. This third historical movement of learning is very important to consider if we want to avoid the approach to human action and learning we find in the virtual realities of certain methodological designs, which treat action and learning as separate slices of salami (Salamisierung des Handelns). Action and learning are not discrete phenomena, but rather specific moments in a personal learning trajectory, which, in turn, is a moment in an ongoing longer “stream of action” in which one participates and to which one contributes (Giddens, 1984).

History of learning theory

In every historical and philosophical epoch and region, we find interesting and relevant ideas and positions about learning. But until the establishment of the
social sciences at the beginning of the 20th century, these discourses were dominated by a variety of normative anthropologies about the good or bad of and in children and suitable prompts to deal with this. We have to ascertain at least one advantage of such normative anthropologies, especially since this approach was later abandoned in the switch to a social-scientific mode of theorizing learning. These anthropologies, and the resulting attempts at education, involved the child as a whole; they considered how a child develops, or should develop, as an undivided person. With the rise to dominance of the discourse of social science, the entity ‘child’ was subjected to an artificial, technocratic fragmentation. The focus of learning and the attempts at educating were then directed only at certain aspects and parts of our human hypostasis, for example, our performed behaviour and cognitive functions.

This mode of discourse actually was itself an ex post process, grounded in the massive expansion of socially organized learning and educative practices in certain regions of the world, which were now backed up and legitimized by learning theories. In this historical process, praxis (organized educative practices) preexisted, and were followed by (learning and teaching) theories suitable to conform to the particular organization of educative practices! In such a harmonic complicity between dominant educative arrangements and dominant learning theories during the 20th century, the individual was established as the untouchable primary unit of analysis, with a single individual as the start and end point of reference, who faced an individual teacher and individual evaluations. It is no surprise at all that such individuocentrism in educative praxis finally also confined learning theory to various individual or inter-personal endeavours.

It would be easy to show that the various dominant social-scientific learning theories throughout the 20th century have had strong affinities with, or even were built according to the historically dominant organisation of labour. The most famous example is the analogy between Taylorism and Behaviourism, but a close relationship could be shown also for the mainstream theories that followed historically. Basic characteristics of most learning theories relevant in the 20th century were already well articulated at the beginning of the century. A good example is L. S. Vygotsky, who died in the mid-1930s, but turned into a very popular social scientific figure only after the 1970s. Similarly, other learning theories achieved dominant status throughout the 20th century; primarily, this has not been an academic issue, imposed, for example, through theoretical competition and persuasion. Rather, the rise of learning theory to temporary prominence was and continues to be, mediated by changes in the organization of society, particularly by changes in the organisation of labour.

Just as the organization of labour and theories of learning are inter-related, individualistic and, later, mentalist conceptions of learning, together with their
lack of subjectivity and their in-humanity, were dominant throughout the 20th century and still are. These are not just bad or wrong theories to be improved by certain additions or alterations. Such a way of theorizing learning is simultaneously an epistemological and political standpoint within a given social order according to the concrete organization of labour and the positionings of the involved subjects (- including social scientists, whether intended or just factual)! Dominant learning theories uncritically take as their starting and ending point the existing practical arrangements in the central institution of organized learning – the school. This self-imposed (or uncritically accepted) confinement of learning theory to be subservient to schooling legitimizes the already existing arrangements and practices of schooling. Social scientists assume and accept particular societal demands in and for schooling and offer practical, manageable solutions to the social exclusion of certain groups of pupils (called ‘selection’) to which school contributes.

We can see from the above that theorizing human learning is not like sitting on a rock and watching the waves of life without active involvement. Theorizing learning is being part of these waves, which is participating in the stream of action. In this vein, critiques of traditional theories of learning not only deconstruct and replace thinking on the subject matter, but make detailed critiques of learning practices – self-reflective theoretical praxis included – and social consequences. True critique is not a blind reproduction of the dominant order of praxis, which, euphemistically, calls itself neutral. The different, distinct subject positions included in learning practices are often absent in traditional 20th century theorizing on learning. But this absence does not signify neutrality! The alleged neutrality in traditional theories relies explicitly on the perspective of the powerful in concrete societal circumstances, re/formulating societal demands as neutral tasks to be served, performed, and realized (e.g. as developmental tasks in modern and traditional developmental theories).

Consequently, the first task of a critical reflection on learning theory is to expose the different and distinctive subject positions and the implicit learning practices, given historical-societal organization and development. Critical theories of learning, therefore, reflect on the practices upon which learning relies, practices to which it refers, and which it facilitates - learning practices always imply an epistemological and political standpoint. Theories are part of the practical problems they aim to understand and resolve. There is no standpoint outside, or above, this stream of action.

A critical perspective considers theories and concepts as parts of social practices. Talking about learning (its problems, characteristics, needs, course, nature, etc.) thus contributes to (or participates in) a societal arena that goes beyond the limits of a particular social concept or category and touches upon all
members of society. The discourse about learning theories contributes to the 
constitution of such a social arena and also offers a chance to reflect and re-
theorise our views on society as a whole:

- What is normal (learning)?
- Who is supposed to learn?
- What needs to be changed in our society in order for this to happen?
- How?

III. (Talking about) Learning is Participating in a Learning Regime

In our attempts to be human, to appropriate, cultivate, develop, and expand the 
powers and potentialities that are grounded in our tripartite heritage, we are 
participating in re/producing and changing the capacities in them. The necessary 
dialectics herein is to conceive and encounter our learning in all its multiplicity 
and continuity: as a means, as a way, and as an outcome of our overall activities, 
practices, and actions. Learning practices are not only ‘unfolding’ the subject’s 
potentialities, but, simultaneously, they also develop these potentials and produce 
and create new potentials. Learning is a particular practice with which - in 
changing the world - we are (also) changing the active subject. Learning 
practices are those particular social practices that can also modify the functional 
basis of the psychical (Holzkamp 1983, p. 156f., p. 277f.). Learning thus 
tervenes on the subjective and the ‘objective’ presuppositions, the 
preconditions of these practices.

Learning is a subjectively grounded activity of the individual in his/her 
attempt to get to know the world and to participate and influence it. The 
‘knowing (the world)’ is being realized by subjects through participation in social 
practices. From this perspective, learning is a moment of the integrative social 
process of transformation/education. The ‘doing of learning’ is one aspect of a 
transformative relation: the ‘contents’ of this doing (training, transferring, and 
transforming) are not only ‘objects’, but also relations and subjects. Learning 
transforms also the epistemology (the politics) of the subjects towards the 
learning praxis, together with its learning contents and with the learning subjects 
themselves (ontology). An implicit restriction of the ‘doing of learning’ to the 
appropriation, internalization of some ‘authoritative knowledge’ allows subjects 
only the ‘training’ in a submissive, subordinating relation, or an ‘employee 
relation’, if not a ‘faithful’, religious (‘hailing’) relation towards learning and 
knowledge – whether learning refers to sacred writings or highly rational and

---

2 The natural history, the phylogeny of learning, the history and historicity of our 
societies, the learning history of the concrete subject (see above).
critical textbooks and independently of the intentions of the teaching or learning subjects!

We cannot reconstruct any social practices outside of social and societal interconnections and relations, therefore we also cannot conceive particular learning practices without adequate reference to such comprehensive processes and conditions in which they are embedded. Learning practices are concomitantly moments in a learning regime. This agrees with Anthony Gidden’s (1984) notion that action is an ongoing, steady stream of action and not some kind of processed meat ready to be sliced and analysed in piecemeal fashion. Consequently, we have to approach learning as a particular trajectory within the stream of action, which, itself, is situated within the wider stream of re/producing and changing our societies (and our lives within it). ‘I am learning’ signifies, implies my participation in, my contribution to, a learning regime from/in a particular and dynamic social position. My individual learning activities affect, modify, and transform the learning regime and my position in it! Thus, individual learning activities are transformative activities in different directions, with the involvement of different recipients.

‘My own learning practices’ are always moments in a learning regime, i.e. moments in ‘my’ participation in such a learning regime. On this basis, the practices of ‘my’ learning cannot be conceived as something linear, mechanical or cumulative, but are necessary moments in/of a dialectical conflict, that is, acts in a social battlefield. ‘I am learning’ presupposes that ‘I am encountering’, ‘I am dealing with’ the contradictions inherent in this battlefield and that the outcome of my learning can only be a compromise.³

Consequently, if I want to understand my learning practices, I also need an appropriate understanding of the learning regime (included in an adequate theory about society), its components and participants as well as its organization and development. Stated differently: the understanding of my own learning practices is embedded in a more comprehensive conception and understanding of a learning regime, which, in turn, is embedded in some understanding/theorizing of society. Talking – and researching - about learning as a mere individual ‘issue’ is thus always concomitantly a politically interesting abstraction of the complexity I have to deal with by/in my learning and the compromises I am usually making in/with my learning.

³ The lack, the missing reference to contradictions and compromises in learning arrangements, in the learning regime ‘appears’, or is articulated, in conventional, dominant learning theories only as inter-personal conflicts or as motivational problems of individual pupils (or individual teachers). In such conventional, dominant conceptualizations without contradictions, the teacher-subject is burdened to act as a behavioral manager and/or conflict manager (tamer, motivator of pupils).
Learning as/in participating means participation and contribution in a concrete, that is historical, social, technological, *learning regime*. In the context of such a regime, individuals subjectively identify issues for their own learning. By necessity, the learning regime intersects with – or is even included in – broader ‘*schooling regimes*’ or ‘*schooling complexes*’, as the more comprehensive context of organized transformative practices in our societies. The *schooling regime*, itself, is a concrete attempt at offering a practicable solution to the fundamental contradiction between *learning* and *power*. On the learning side, the issue at stake in this fundamental contradiction are the productivity and creativity of subjects as moments of our human hypostasis; how to re/organize societal relations, how to create new social forms of life and which ones, so that this productivity can be actualized, cultivated, and developed (Castoriadis 1997).\(^4\) The other side - the side of power - includes attempts at controlling subjects’ productivity, creativity, so as not to endanger the already existent social forms, the dominant social order. *Control* can refer to the channeling, suppression or even nullification of productive (subjective, social) potentials, based on the logic: ‘better destruction than r/evolution’.

Our learning is the outcome of our participation and contribution in a certain set of *social practices*, within given social structures and across numerous domains of social life. What we call a *learning regime* is the overall dynamic process that interweaves individual and social practices with social structures and values. Therefore, *learning* – as both a prerequisite and a product of such a regime – constitutes an unequally distributed social good.

The dominant (Fordist) *learning regime* in the 20\(^{th}\) century is part of the structuring of the life course into differentiated (though historically variable) ‘stages’ or ‘phases’, each one of which allocates qualitatively and quantitatively different resources and constraints. It proposes a *serial organization* of the life-course into biographical chapters with distinctive sequential practices: first learning/acquiring, then working/applying. The historical epoch in which we live is a transitional period that is usually characterized only ‘negatively’ as *post-Fordist*. Currently, a new – a neo-liberal - learning regime is emerging (imposed by the powerful) that questions exactly the very Fordist *seriality* that is expressed in the organizational principle: ‘first learning, then working’. Contrary to this ‘seriality’, today, an increasingly ‘parallel’ social organization of learning/working is being proposed/imposed. But the societal demands for life-long learning are being addressed and demanded without the necessary social back-up for/during the learning practices – as it was the case in the Fordist regime where working adults supported the learning youth (usually parents

\(^4\) „Schöpfung neuer Formen des gesellschaftlichen Lebens“ (Castoriadis 1997, 96 – about the young Marx)
supported their children). Thus, learning now exists, or is offered, less as a life-long opportunity, but appears much more as a burden on everyone as a life sentence. The new freedom of life-long learning manifests as a new coercion, as the life-long competition even between formerly non-competitive social groups (e.g. adults/parents vs. youth/children). In the new emerging learning regime, it seems that everyone must learn and work simultaneously and for all of his/her life – unless he/she is from an affluent background.

IV. Are Social Meanings Neutral Technicalities?

As mentioned before, human learning means participating in social practices as complex and contested entities; there are two methods we apply in/for this: incidental, “osmotic” (Bourdieu & Passeron 1964) learning (“Mitlernen”, Holzkamp 1993) and intended learning, as a particular form of action, as “learning labour” (Rubinstein 1946/2000). The concrete outcome of, and the prerequisites for, my doing learning are realized through the appropriation of social meanings (gesellschaftliche Bedeutungen). These social meanings are situated and distributed in a variety of societal produced tools - mental tools (e.g. concepts), social tools (e.g. persons, relations), ‘objective’ tools (e.g. external objects, things, artefacts) - and they guide, rather than determine, our actions. From such a perspective, learning means the participation in the action possibilities that are situated and distributed in these tools. The reference point for these tools, and therefore also for ‘my’ action, is the societal reality with its ambiguous, conflictual, and contradictory character, which necessarily finds its way and is articulated in the social meanings, too.

However, the conflictuality of our reality, and consequently of social meanings, does not seem to be recognized as necessary in organized educative practices nor in the dominant theorizing of learning. Rather, conflicts and contradictions have here been replaced by a neutral, technical ‘unambiguity’ (Eindeutigkeit) in the semantics of social meanings, probably in order to make understanding/learning easier. Social meanings seem to be constructed in analogy to operating guidelines for technical equipment, rather than to socially conflictual fields. This perspective only allows for learning as faithful appropriation, which follows the semantic differentiations of technical operating guidelines and leaves no room for conflictual ‘deviation’. But such ease of theoretitization likely is either a chimera of social scientists or a politically interested camouflage of powerful practices that make social meaning look ‘unambiguous’. This camouflage delegitimizes any ‘problems’ with, or resistance to, the easy subordination to authoritative social meanings, which, in
turn, are merely conceived as technical operating guidelines. However, are social meanings really just as ‘unambiguous’ and seemingly facile as the operating manual for my espresso machine?

The potential misunderstanding behind such a chimera or camouflage is, however, less grounded in cognitive shortcomings or errors, but results more from our own social practices (e.g. as educators or social scientists) and from our uncritical reflection of their seemingly unambiguous semantic offering to conceptualize and practice learning. The chimera or camouflage seems rational and logical to us due to a self-misunderstanding about a concession in our own praxis as educators and/or social scientists. It is our own compromise to accept our subordination under the ‘unambiguity’ of our own employer, who expects knowledge about subjects and the control of their behavior, rather than knowledge for these subjects! And this self-misunderstanding is a ‘useful’ tool for ourselves as educators and social scientists to stay far away (at least in our minds) from the conflictual, contradictory social battlefield … as long as our own social position in this battlefield is not, itself, being questioned. This self-misunderstanding emerges also because/if we, as educators or social scientists, take the dominant learning theories (formulated potentially by ourselves) as hard evidence for social reality. In these theories, learning is conceptualized without autonomy for the learning subjects, because these theories theorize learning practices only from the perspective of the ruling institutions and thus address only one half of learning – the ‘controllable’ half. It is this self-misunderstanding - of being lubricant for the power-machine - which pushes us into the very trap we (educators, social scientists) have set methodologically for the ‘objects’ of our theoretical/practical praxis. It is, thus, a classic example of a theoretical shortcoming as consequence of a pre-decided methodological shortcoming.

We have to be cautious not to confine social meanings to the kind of knowledge that can be retrieved in some school test, not to constrict the world we need to get-to-know into a very narrow social practice. The tools we use for learning, and in which social meanings are situated and distributed, are products of societal labor; as such they are necessarily ambiguous, conflictual, even contradictory. (To name just a few examples of such conflictual social meanings: knife, gender, alienation, equality, friendship, cell-phone, …). Situated and distributed do not refer just to a semantic space here; rather, the terms connote actual social battlefields (with their differentiations) and thus also particular standpoints that are articulated in specific perspectives on interpretations of such

---

5 This articulates also the ‘double edge’ of social sciences in our societies to simultaneously control and support subjects.
social meaning. An example of such conflictual social polyvalence appears in a short note from Marx’ *Paris Manuscript* about the social meaning of *alienation*:⁶

First it has to be noted that everything which appears in the worker as an *activity* of alienation, of estrangement, appears in the non-worker as a *state* of alienation, of estrangement.

Secondly, that the worker’s *real, practical behaviour*⁷ in production and to the product (as emotional state) appears in the non-worker - facing him - as a *theoretical* behaviour.

*Thirdly*, the non-worker does everything against the worker which the worker does against himself; but he does not do against himself what he does against the worker. (final paragraph of the 1st Fragment with title: “Estranged Labour”)

As young Marx points out, the social meaning of ‘alienation’ is widely considered to be a *state* or a *condition*, when, in actuality, this is only the perspective of the “non-worker”, i.e. of capital! Contrary to this dominant view, Marx suggests to approach ‘alienation’ as a process and as an activity, which is the perspective of the *worker*. Methodologically speaking, social meanings are not just terms that name different things; they also articulate particular social and epistemological standpoints, which include the ‘awareness’ of the subject about his/her particular position in society. From this starting point, the term *alienation* does not indicate a psychological (individual) phenomenon or mechanism; *alienation* is not a psychological concept at all (ie., a psychic state, condition, like ‘individual distress’, etc. …);⁸ rather, it is primarily to be understood as a relation(ship) and as a social practice. Alienation is a *social* phenomenon and has to be understood as such.

It is exactly this ambiguity, this conflictual or contradictory character of social meanings (like *alienation*) that opens up a plurality of conflicting possibilities for subjects’ learning. If social meanings could really be restricted to some unambiguous ‘technicalities’ ready to be memorized, there would not be any need for empirical research into what real subjects do in their social reality.

---

⁶ „Zunächst ist zu bemerken, daß alles, was bei dem Arbeiter als Tätigkeit der Entäußerung, der Entfremdung, bei dem Nichtarbeiter als Zustand der Entäußerung, der Entfremdung, erscheint. Zweitens, daß das wirkliche, praktische Verhalten des Arbeiters in der Produktion und zum Produkt (als Gemütszustand) bei dem ihm gegenüberstehenden Nichtarbeiter als theorethisches Verhalten erscheint. Drittens. Der Nichtarbeiter tut alles gegen den Arbeiter, was der Arbeiter gegen sich selbst tut, aber er tut nicht gegen sich selbst, was er gegen den Arbeiter tut“ (MEW EB, 522).

⁷ And not “attitude” - as in the “common” English translation!

⁸ As it is the dominant view of critical, Marxist social scientists during the 20th century.
Learning would be a mere technical process of inducing and performing. ‘Things’ would be much easier then, since they would be deducible from a thick description of social reality, readily waiting to be ‘instructed’ to the subjects. However, this scenario is far removed from our societal reality and our human potentialities! For us humans, learning is always the learning of and through contradictions; it is learning amidst socially contested meanings. The contradictions in our social reality are visible in our doing of learning, in our learning practices; they appear to us subjects not merely as ostensibly semantic gaps, waiting to be filled, like a glass of water, or a bank account.

Learning – as participation in the action possibilities situated and distributed in social meanings – thus cannot be conceived as reduced to some interiorization of a semantic variety in these meanings; rather, it requires that subjects encounter the conflicts, contradictions, battles, and standpoints included in them. The emergence of subjective sense is a productive and transformative process, which cannot be reduced to the internalization of external – supposedly neutral and technical - information! The emergence of subjective sense, itself, relies on a practice we could name, with Jens Brockmeier (1988), “subjective semiosis”. To encounter contradictions in my learning (practices) necessarily includes making compromises; potentially, it demands the removal or erosion of learning-sediments, real un-learning, but also creative and innovative solutions.

V. The Analytical Moments of Action/Learning

The confinement of learning (in educative practices and the dominant theorizing of learning) through the restriction of social meanings to technicalities about semantic differentiations is supported by a second reduction that is based on a self-misunderstanding. Our actions, as we understand them for ourselves, are comprised of different aspects or moments. For analytical purposes, these aspects can be approached separately, but psychologically they must be taken together as a distinctive, single action. The different logical components are the answers to different questions about the ‘What’, ‘Why’, and ‘How’ of a distinctive action, which include a final ‘check’ in this active process:

- The intentional (Holzkamp 1993), content-related aspects of action – the ‘what’ and ‘why’ of action, gives the direction of the action;
- The operative (Holzkamp 1993), procedural aspects of action – the ‘how’ of action – refer to the execution/performance of the action;
- The controlling aspects of the process of action.
But self-understanding for us is not self-understanding for the usual theorizing of learning! While theorizing learning without the actively learning subject, the conventional, dominant learning theories of the 20th century transfer or articulate implicitly the splitting of the ‘whole of action’ into different components (‘intentional’ and ‘operative’), but focus exclusively on the second component and prescind from the first one!

Since the end of the 19th century, such a differentiation, or splitting, of action was a fundamental and implicit moment of the Taylorist model for the reorganization of industrial labour, including all the power differentials between the participating subjects that was made possible by the social division of labour. In the years that followed, the Taylorist propositions were taken over and ‘transformed’/transported into learning/teaching devices by Behaviorists, together with the implied/facilitated ‘power shift’ between the different acting subjects via the social division of labor. Since then, this splitting of the ‘whole of action’ and the reductive focus on only one particular moment of action – the ‘How’ of action, the operative, procedural components – has been adopted (uncritically) by all dominant successor theories in the 20th century.9

The power shift made possible by the splitting of action helps educators and learning theoreticians get rid of certain practical and theoretical problems, but it burdens practitioners and theoreticians with several others; especially in the dominant educative setting of schooling. A classic example here is the issue of ‘motivation’ (posted from the ‘outside’ or better: from ‘above’), which, in this practical and theoretical context, articulates the ‘problem’ of how to ‘convince’ or force subjects to do what they – supposedly - should do, without discussing with them the ‘what’ and ‘why’ of this doing, without taking into account the subjectivity of either the learning subject or the teaching subject! This routine alienation hovers over the entire 20th century like a ghost, as a contradiction that governs all organized learning/teaching settings in our societies.

But again, the stubborn insistence of dominant theories of learning on only the ‘how-aspect’ of our learning/action is not just a theoretical reduction (or confinement) to be corrected through better formulation. Rather, it is grounded in several preexisting practical premises of dominant theorizing, where learning is conceived as only what manifests in very concrete educative settings, that is, in schooling. Another practical premise is – once more – the fact that social sciences (psychology) are serving power by answering only the questions posed by power, questions that demand ‘technical’ knowledge about how to govern, how to control subjects’ action. (This servility is considered and discussed as

---

9 Against this background, it is more than understandable that Klaus Holzkamp (1993) speaks about a successful “methodological Behaviorism,” especially within its successor theories, which supposedly were ‘evolutions’ against Behaviorism.
‘scientific neutrality’.) Here, social sciences are supposed to uncritically reproduce the confinements included in the societal demands made of the learning/teaching subject – as if human potentialities were nothing more than the performance or execution of such demands. Such biased theorizing is not just a particularly bad theory; in fact, it articulates real experiences of millions of us (teachers and learners), who have to act under the confines of the dominant social order. It is not a bad theory; actually, it is a theory limited in a very particular way; it is a theory that starts with an appropriate observation of how things are, how subjects are acting under very particular historical-societal circumstances, but then converts this correct observation into a construct of how things generally are, or should be!

The question that emerges here is this: since when is it the duty of theorizing only to dress in better, i.e. scientific, clothes all that appears to us in our experiences? Such an understanding would convert theory to an additional layer of clothes, fabricated of impressive, scientific words and placed upon the surface of my experience. Such an approach, such a theory cannot be judged merely as good or bad. Rather, it makes much more difficult all attempts of human beings at understanding their world, at learning and acting in their world with the help of theories. The praxis of learning becomes more difficult with this kind of theorizing learning - the learning individuals are now doubly burdened: if they want to access the essence of all that is happening around them and is experienced by them, they have to penetrate not only the layer of their experience, but also the layer above it, the layer of ‘scientific language’.

Therefore, critique cannot be reduced to a mere theoretical deconstruction (though extremely necessary as ‘immanent critique’); rather, it has to become a practical critique as well - a critique of the theoretical praxis of social scientists. Such a practical critique of theoretical praxis has to be applied in two directions. Firstly, towards how we social scientists are trying to formulate theories which contain allegedly neutral, scientific, technical knowledge about only the How of learning of other subjects, while accepting uncritically the restrictions of/in our own praxis – as wage-labored employees. Secondly, the critique has to be directed towards our praxis as social scientists, who - through our work and in order to avoid endangering our own social positions - are making it more difficult for other subjects to learn to get to know their world (and themselves in this world), but also to change it.
VI. The Autonomy of Learning - Beyond the Schooling Mode

The complicity between theorizing education/learning in formal educative practices and the dominant social order derives from the uncritical acceptance of educational theories to deliver *tech-knowledge* (learning and teaching theories) only on the *How*, on the procedures of learning, in order to maintain the educative process as it is, with its dual goal of teaching *and* excluding learners. In the end, this tech-knowledge is a mere lubricant for the power-saturated educational machine, with the individual as unit of analysis; it does not question the dominant arrangements of these educative practices (e.g. teaching as an interpersonal procedure *in* a classroom).

Through such (theoretical/practical) ‘devices’, the dialectic between praxis and theory is reduced to a simple sequence or string of succession: *first* practice, *then* theory – or vice versa. This ‘principle of simplification’ (with its popularity far beyond educational settings) relies on and promotes a technocratic self(mis)understanding of the social sciences as social engineers and neutral servants of the dominant status quo. As social engineers, we are supposedly neutral and – hopefully - efficient problem solvers.\(^{10}\) This restriction of action to its procedural aspects (the ‘How’) is a consequence *and* a precondition for the standpoint of a neutral and technocratic servant of power.

This very popular self(mis)understanding of our disciplines as neutral and technocratic is quite useful in ignoring that we are part of the problem we claim to address - not just part of its solution. However, if we do not want to serve such a ‘pedagogy of assimilation’ uncritically, if we want to break up with such complicity and want to contribute to a “pedagogy of dissent” (or resistance; C. T. Mohanty 2003), we have to rethink both sides: educative *practices* and theorizing *learning*. In short, we have to restore the dialectical unit of praxis/theory.

A quite obvious place to start our reflection and to reclaim the *autonomy of learning* would be to remind ourselves that every action is comprised not only of some procedural aspects (about the *how* to execute, to accomplish, to carry out the action), but also of moments that concern the *What* and the *Why* - the content and the intentions of the action. Reclaiming the autonomy of learning for the developing subject thus means reclaiming not only control over participation in the *process*, the *How of learning*, as it is emphasized, for example, by modern theories about self-regulated learning. The autonomy of learning also consists of

\(^{10}\) Beyond the obvious political/ethical critique for not giving subjects the opportunity to participate in determining the content of their learning, we also see this in arrangements where subjects are forced to learn under a confining regime, which hinders them to apply (meaning: to use and to develop) all of their human potentials by confining their action to only some aspects of it.
VII. Social Movement Learning

The self-misunderstanding that is articulated in the reduction of action/learning to some of its operative aspects, and in the acceptance of the internalization of a semantic variety as the core method for learning is more easily questioned if we take into consideration learning/transformational practices beyond the schooling mode. A social practice we can use here is activist praxis in social movements. To be more precise, we will have to talk about the learning dimensions in/of social movements (which could be named social activism learning). Here, the learning dimensions focus on people’s lives, the (social) struggles to improve and gain control over the conditions of their lives; this includes resistance against domination and ruling relations (Foley 1999).

Clearly, learning in such a conception is part of a collective changing of corresponding social conditions and relations - not as static (id)entities, but as dynamic relatedness. These changes are not (only) a particular educational scope or aim but are also an epistemological effect of the practice/learning in social movements. My learning helps me to change my positioning in the web of complex and contested social practices. My standpoint in these practices is being changed with the help of my learning/practice. My learning happens, is made possible by the collective changing of our relationship towards knowledge and social reality and thus towards our understanding of this knowledge and reality, with all the content, questions, and subjects involved.

In traditional settings, it is decided in advance and ‘somewhere else’ who is to teach and who is to learn – also what and why. Similarly, it is determined in advance who is to change and who is to facilitate or enforce the change and its direction. In contrast, in Social Movement Learning – as in all learning dimensions that conceptualize learning as participation in social practices – ‘things’ are simultaneously much easier and much more complicated. Learning as part and participation in activism is a particular dimension in/of these social practices, rather than the neutral application of educational techniques. The very process of learning includes all aspects/moments that are ostracized in dominant learning practice/theory (in the schooling mode of learning). In such a context, learning – as content and as process - is not something to be imposed upon

11 Other expressions could be: Activist Learning, Learning and Struggle, Emancipatory Learning, Radical Adult Education, Critical Social Learning (see e.g. R. Gouin 2009).
certain individuals and/or groups or enforced from ‘above’ or from ‘outside’. Learning is not a technical process of instruction with fixed subject positions.

The What is the (learning) problem? (or the ‘learning issue’), Why and for Who it is so problematic? is an integrative moment of the ongoing stream of action, of the genuine learning process and not some ‘technical’, operational detail or characteristic of this process. Identifying the ‘learning problematic’, the hindrances in/for my ongoing action which I - or we – want to overcome with our learning, is itself a decisive moment of this action – though “often not recognized as learning” (Foley 1999, 66).

If we account for the dominant learning conceptions, practices, and experiences of subjects (through the schooling mode, ‘academism’, ‘from above’), the task of a ‘subjective identification of the learning dimensions/aspects’ is clearly easier said than done. Moreover, it has to be conquered: learning subjects have to liberate space and legitimation for its articulation against the dominant consciousness and self-understanding!

Learning in such a comprehensive conception is not merely a clear, unambiguous technical instrument ready to be applied to overcome a hindrance in my action, to solve a problem. If we do not want to confine learning to its operative aspects, but rather want to include them as aspects of a learning problematic we must overcome through further action/learning, then the very perception, the sense and awareness of what is problematic in and for my action, becomes a constitutive moment of my learning process.

The difficulty of identifying and recognizing relevant learning dimensions in our action becomes even bigger, if we do not want to confine our learning to ad hoc or ‘practical’ issues in our ongoing stream of action. This is so less because of some increased complexity, but rather because of the contested, conflictual, or even contradictory social field that is delineated by questions about Who has to learn and Why – and Who does not!

Learning (as a particular action, a social practice) encompasses distinct practices of the learning subject, before and after this learning becomes a causal effect of the (un/successful) didactic practices of the educator. This perspective implies that learning is a social relation – with distinct, accountable subject positions – and not a fixed technical or mechanical procedure with causes and effects. Learning is thus not just a detour, a work-around (“Lernschleife”, Holzkamp, 1993), through which I can overcome an obstacle in my actual action. Furthermore, my learning may require the reconfiguration of my action as a whole; simultaneously it contributes to the reconfiguration of the stream of action and therefore of social practice. Learning does more than retro-act upon the ongoing action by facilitating its continuation (quasi as an applied technique, a neutral tool, which otherwise does not touch this action). Rather, learning re-
determines what the ‘whole of action’ actually is, and also who the learning subject(s) actually are or have to be. Thus, (activism) learning potentially re-constitutes the learning subject, him/herself. Learning in/of social movements produces different knowledge, needs and poses different questions, requires and makes possible different subjects and subjectivities, and seeks and has to find different solutions (Cox & Flesher Fominaya 2009).

**Learning (in) solidarity**

*Social Movement* learning is a privileged field for the reflection on those issues that are not allowed to exist in dominant educational practices/arrangements and thus cannot even become issues of their theorizing and intervention. As we have seen, in dominant educational practices there is no room for questions about the *What* and the *Why* of my doing/learning. It is thus impossible for these things to become questions for *my* learning – let alone for reflections about teaching these issues!

In the following section, the *claiming* and *restoring* of the autonomy of learning is discussed with exemplary reference to practices that support a refugee shelter in the center of Thessaloniki. This shelter was – at that time - one of the few structures that hosted refugee families in Greece and the only one in the city. It was run by an NGO and had received state support since 2000, when, in early 2010, the responsible Greek Ministry of Health stopped the funding and the administrators of the NGO, which was later proven to be corrupt, left. About 80 refugees, all families with young children, were in jeopardy of being left out in the street. In this situation, local groups resisted the closing of the shelter through a collaboration of the group *Anti-Racism Initiative*, with voluntary work and material support from hundreds of citizens and social organizations, and the mobilization and self-organization of the shelter’s residents. Not only was the management taken over, but new structural moments for the self-organization of the shelter (such as regular house-plenary meetings) were implemented - while continuing to demand accountability from the State! Amidst adversary policies, the shelter became a practical model of social solidarity – and thus also a thorn in several bureaucratic sides. Refugees and asylum seekers were not mere objects of ‘refugee administration’ (and ‘social policy’), but made their presence felt in this space, managing their own home, establishing links in the neighborhood and with other organizations, and participating actively in activities all over the city.

From the beginning, this singular self-organized refugee shelter has fought against all odds to stay open! There are many groups and persons with the particular ‘interest’ of waiting for solidarity to weaken and for the refugees’ many traumatic problems and experiences to produce situations and conflicts that
would enable local fascist groups to mobilize ostensibly ‘enraged neighbors’ against the shelter.

Based on the underpinnings of solidarity movements and the aim of a collective solidary socialization (‘solidar-kulturellen Vergesellschaftung’; W. Fritz Haug 1991), we could characterize these social practices methodologically as “real-experimental” initiatives (Real-Experiment, Haug 1991). Such activist initiatives consist necessarily and always of two moves: transformative interventions and (self-)education, i.e. self-transformation or learning.

Learning solidarity presupposes and enhances the doing (application, organization) of solidarity. The process of learning solidarity presupposes and enhances the content of solidarity; and vice versa. Participation in this real-experiment in solidarity-socialization influences all participants, albeit differently depending on their social position, their subjectivities, and their evident and latent needs. The few examples that follow are from the perspective of the ‘locals’: volunteers, including refugees who have lived in town for a longer time, who participated in the solidarity practices with their particular resources (language skills, crafts, etc.) and who refer to their own potential learning challenges (as we called them), i.e. the learning dimensions, from the perspective of their own participation in these social practices. The very starting point of this initiative made necessary a great deal of social practices with their implied learning challenges for the involved participants. It was not an activity, a ‘move’ that followed a cool and thorough means-ends analysis and came to the result that the endeavor was ‘manageable’ with the already existing ‘means’ of the group (knowledge, capacities, resources) - on the contrary! The very starting point of the initiative itself included a great deal of learning that could not yet be foreseen at that moment of beginning.

We can reconstruct from the correspondence between the supporting-group-participants that one of the very first big action/learning challenges after the decision to ‘keep the shelter open’ was the collective organization of the myriad of actions and necessities required - on the basis of existing resources (including knowledge and political positions). Typical questions in the correspondence are simple, yet complex:

- What are we doing now? Probably we should define groups. But which ones are the most important?
- How can we ‘demarcate’ self-organization in an institution like this shelter?

It is not possible here to list all action problems identified as learning problematics. Rather, to give an impression of the variety of the field, we will pick a few examples of subjective challenges from the (mostly electronic)
correspondence between the volunteers. It is important to stress that every one of these examples hides, engulfs in itself, a myriad of challenges and prompts for the involved subjects:

- Accompanying refugees to their necessary contacts with authorities (police, urban administration, ministries, lawyers)
- Giving interviews to television, radio broadcasts, newspapers and journals
- Attending the meetings of the municipality council to advocate for things needed for the shelter
- Demanding and mediating for the rights of refugees in the public services domain (e.g. hospitals)
- How to write letters to companies, factories, schools, authorities etc. asking for job opportunities for the refugees, material support for the shelter, enrollment in school for children, and so on.
- How to deal collectively with issues that are laden with shame guilt, such as treating lice or scabies
- How to re-connect electric power– or how to intervene with the Public Electric Company to avoid service disruptions because of unpaid bills

As broad as the learning challenges are, the same breadth exists for potential ‘learning outcomes’ for the volunteers, for example:

- New knowledge
- Subjective development (e.g. in gender issues) – herein also identity formation
- Relationship skills
- Civic learning (e.g. competent and confident acting in town hall meetings)
- Getting to know one’s own society and its inter-connectedness

In summary: The volunteers usually do not recognize and identify the ‘problematic’ aspects in/for their action as potential ‘learning dimensions’ in/for their solidarity action – actually, it is very difficult to ‘switch’ and to see them as ‘opportunities for learning’. Usually, the learning dimensions ‘appear’ to the subjects:

- as actual action hindrances,
- as questions without (immediate) answers,
- as conflicts, contradictions
- as questions about what is right/wrong,
- as questions about what is important, what is not,
- as questions about who our comrades and who our ‘enemies’ are
- what is needed (for/from me): knowledge, faculties, abilities
• what are the impediments or disruptions and why?

Consequently, questions like What is the (learning) problematic for me/us have multiple faces and facets; it requires a lot of effort to get a subjective awareness of the action problems as learning challenges and dimensions – potentially against one’s own experiences and one’s own self-understanding. As stated previously, learning demands potentially also the removal or erosion of existing ‘learning-sediments’; it necessitates real un-learning of dominant social learning barriers (G. Mergner 1999), but it also demands socially creative, innovative solutions.

We have to consider a variety of potential difficulties that make it hard for involved subjects to identify learning dimensions in their action problems. In conclusion, we offer three examples of such difficulties in identifying learning challenges:

• There is an ‘objective’ difficulty during stressful every-day activities to exert additional effort to identify ‘problematic issues’. This is even more difficult within a claim to proceed in a democratic way, which demands extra efforts in coordination and agreement.

• The dominant self-understanding about our own action as (technical, moral) ‘application’, rather than as ‘participation’ and also as ‘self-change’, adds to the difficulties of seeing potential learning challenges for us in our action.

• Learning is – probably because of the dominance of the schooling mode – also loaded with a smack of insufficiency, of an individual ‘deficit’ that requires ‘correction’. This aftertaste does not help ‘me’ as acting subject to identify learning challenges for my action; on the contrary, it burdens me with more work to overcome the obstacles in my self-understanding.

In reconstructing such difficulties, it is important to recognize the explanations one records through the analysis of ‘empirical material’ as an integrated whole, to think of them integratively. Doing so is a minimal step to avoid the acute danger of imposing some ‘diagnostic expertise’ (Gutachten) upon subjects – and thus of identifying (once more) an instance of individual ‘insufficiency’ and ‘deficit’ that needs to be corrected by an educator.

Acknowledgement
This paper attempts to bring together, to complement and put the theoretical arguments of my work on a ‘critical psychology of learning’ presented partially in various occasions during the last decade in a ‘comprehensive line’ (see Dafermos & Marvakis
I am very grateful to Eva Strohm and Charles Tolman for their more than generous help in making the English palatable.

References


Athanasios Marvakis is Professor in Clinical Social Psychology at the School of Primary Education at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki/Greece. His interests revolve around psychology and its relations with the various forms of social inequalities and social exclusion; youth as a social group; refugees and migrants in Greece; solidarity as theoretical and practical issue and tool in the social sciences. For the past years, he has been engaged in the critical psychology of learning, the ‘schooling-complex’, and the neoliberalization of the psychological regime. E-mail: marvakis@eled.auth.gr