

Book Review – Three Dimensions of Learning: Contemporary learning theory in the tension field between the cognitive, the emotional and the social

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***Book Review – Three Dimensions of Learning:
Contemporary learning theory in the tension field
between the cognitive, the emotional and the social***

Author: Knud Illeris (2003). *Three Dimensions of Learning: Contemporary learning theory in the tension field between the cognitive, the emotional and the social*. 272 pages. Paperback. Malabar, Florida: Krieger. ISBN: 87 7867 1213

Review by: Krista Poscente, University of Calgary, Canada.

Three Dimensions of Learning: Contemporary learning theory in the tension field between the cognitive, the emotional and the social by Knud Illeris intends to “present a generally accessible, coherent understanding of human learning...and attempts to cover the whole subject area in accordance with current knowledge in this field” (p. 21). With this ambitious intention, Illeris provides a comprehensive review of learning theory. Initially, Illeris examines each dimension of cognitive, emotional and social learning separately. Later, Illeris integrates the separate dimensions to explain the complex learning process as one whole.

Illeris intended this book to be a textbook covering the entire breadth of current learning theories. As such, the intended audience would primarily be academics concerned with education and learning. To shape Illeris’ theory of learning, he briefly summarizes viewpoints from many different scholars and theorists. Such brevity requires a certain amount of familiarity with learning theories and theorists. The *Three Dimensions of Learning* is not light reading material, but it is well worth the required concentration.

The structure of the book and the development of Illeris’ understanding of the learning process are clearly laid out in the first chapter. Every chapter ends with an excellent summary of the key points. These summaries simplify the complexity of the ideas Illeris illustrates in each chapter.

Chapter One begins with Illeris’ definition of learning. Illeris defines three different processes of learning: cognitive process, emotional process, and social process. These processes can be studied independently, but they occur simultaneously. Illeris clearly states that learning is a holistic human process, yet he neglects to recognize other possible dimensions of learning such as physical or spiritual.

The next two chapters cover the cognitive learning process or “how we learn something” (p. 63). Illeris begins with Piaget and thus rejects the behaviourist paradigm. Kolb’s model of experiential learning is an important component to Illeris’ definition of learning. There are two German words for the English word experience: *Erlebnis* (life experience) and *Erfahrung* (effected consciousness). The cognitive dimension of learning refers to *Erfahrung*, an event of understanding. Included in the cognitive domain are reflection, meta-learning and Mezirow’s

transformative learning. Elements of the cognitive process refer to an internal psychological process.

Chapters Four, Five and Six are about the emotional aspects of learning. Illeris uses the term emotional to describe psychodynamic or affective aspects of learning. The theories of Freud, Furth and Holzkamp-Osterkamp describe the motivational aspects of learning. Personality development and reflexivity are included in the emotional component of learning. With only motivation, personality and reflexivity, Illeris' emotional dimension is unnecessarily narrow. This dimension could be broadened with the inclusion of other emotions, such as Nel Nodding's 'happiness.' Chapter Six provides an excellent overview of mislearning, when the intended learning does not occur. This chapter deals with resistance, defence and consciousness.

Chapter Seven delves into the social components of learning of interaction, social learning and socialisation. Interestingly, Illeris builds the social constructivist perspective through the scholars from the Frankfurt School and Hanover School. Where cognitive and emotional learning is rooted in the individual's biological-genetic constitution, social learning is rooted in the historic-societal constitution. Vygotsky is prominent in Illeris' historic cultural discussion.

The remaining chapters of the book were the most interesting as Illeris integrated the three dimensions into one whole. He returns to experiential learning by adding *Erlebnis*. Illeris starts to situate the individual into the world and into education with the philosophical perspective of Dewey. From Dewey he describes and summarizes the Danish concept of experience and pedagogy.

In chapter Nine, Illeris relates the stages of learning relate to life stages integrating biological and psychological phases. Illeris discusses four different life stages: childhood, youth, adulthood, and mature adulthood. For the most part, I concurred with Illeris' learning stages. However, I questioned Illeris' delineation of old age. Illeris claims that mature adulthood could occur between the ages of 45-65. Women enter old age at menopause (p. 222), the earlier end of the age spectrum. This reserves the latter end of the spectrum for men and implies that women enter old age earlier. My unbiased observations reveal that mid-life women age much slower than their male contemporaries.

The next two chapters are about space and identity. Chapter Ten discusses the influence of spaces on learning results. The chapter describes space through communities of practice, informal learning, institutional learning and organizational learning. Chapter Eleven discusses identity and learning motivation through the four different life stages.

Chapter Twelve was my favourite chapter where Illeris summarizes all of the developed learning theory. Illeris offers the following comprehensive definition of the learning process:

“ . . . I see it (the process of learning) as an entity which unites a cognitive, an emotional and a social dimension into one whole. It combines a direct or mediated interaction between the individual and its material and social environment with an internal psychological process of acquisition. Thus, learning always includes both an individual and a social element, the latter always reflecting current societal conditions, so that the learning result has the character of an individual phenomenon which is always socially and societally marked.” (p. 227)

Illeris provides triangular illustrations placing the theorists on a continuum among the learning dimensions. Each dimension forms one point of the triangle. The first illustration represents

institutional learning and developmental psychology. Piaget is placed at the cognition vertex and Freud is placed on the emotion vertex. Kolb, Dewey, Mezirow, Bateson and others fall in between. The next triangular illustration represents activity theoretical contributions, with Bandura and Vygotsky at the cognition vertex and Bruner on the society vertex. The third triangular illustration represents societal and socially oriented positions. Marx represents the society vertex. A final triangular illustration combines all the diagrams and theorists into one. A star in the middle represents Wenger's communities of practice. This final illustration called "positions in the learning theoretical tension field" (p. 237) provides a clear concise categorization of the aforementioned theorists' dimensional inclination.

I appreciated Illeris' acknowledgement of the dominant male theoretical presence of his illustration and book. He partially explains this difference as a historic consequence of predominance of male researchers. However, he describes a gender dichotomy in the research field. "Female learning researchers tend to relate more directly to personal development, emotional conditions and learning practice, whereas more abstract and structural approaches, such as those primarily dealt with in this book, seem to be a predominantly male interest" (p. 237). Again, I am unconvinced of Illeris' gender differentiation. Were (are) not some males, like Dewey, concerned with practice in education?

In summary, *The Three Dimensions of Learning* is a well-written book that would be useful for any academic interested in learning theory. I appreciated finding an abridged summary of numerous diverse learning theories. Illeris' summaries of the similarities and differences between many learning theorists were insightful. As a graduate student struggling to compartmentalize the seemingly infinite theoretical learning perspectives, I will keep Illeris' illustration of the "positions in the learning theoretical tension field" close by. Illeris achieved his goal to provide a comprehensive and coherent understanding of learning theory.

