

## Towards a Better Understanding of Our Own Learning Lives

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This short background paper aims to stimulate thinking and support a small-scale research project aimed at exploring the nature of lifewide learning in the everyday experiences and practices of participants.

#### What might learning mean in the context of our own life experiences?

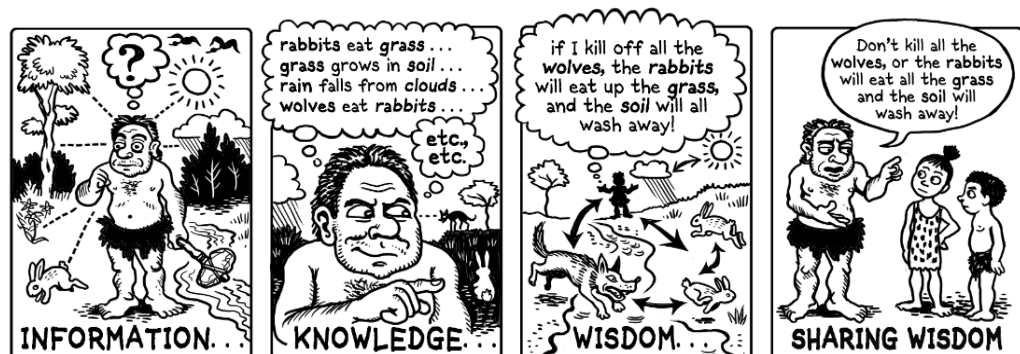
Our inquiry encourages participants to think about and make sense of their own experiences of learning in different parts of their life (the lifewide dimension) and the purpose of our social learning ecology is to try to gain new insights into what learning means when we adopt a lifewide concept of learning and achieving.

The Cambridge dictionary defines learning as an *activity or process* – for gaining knowledge or an understanding of something by studying it or by experience. It defines knowledge as understanding of or information about a subject that you get by experience or study. But while this type of definition seems to fit quite well the cognitive bias as to what counts as learning in education, it seems to be limited when we think of learning as a phenomenon that is embedded in our experiences of the wider world. At the very least we need to broaden our conception of what learning means, for example “the process of acquiring new understanding, knowledge, behaviours, skills, values, attitudes, and preferences [including our biases]” [1] feels like a more inclusive concept that can be drawn upon when we think about learning through our own experience and perhaps there are other things we might include?

Learning is often a matter of progression – often we are not learning from scratch but extending or modifying what we already know. Michael Eraut [2 p.2] neatly captures this in his typology of learning - *doing things better, doing things differently and doing different [or new] things*. Most of our learning is about adapting what we already know and can do to new and perhaps more challenging situations. Although people recognise that they have learned something through their experiences, they do not necessarily remember how, when, why or where. Our research project aims to develop this sort of consciousness.

We can learn a lot about the experience of learning from this wonderful sketch by the American cartoonist Tom Chalkley (Figure 1). It provides insights into what learning means in a way that is highly relevant to our professional inquiry.

**Figure 1**  
Insightful perspectives on learning (Tom Chalkley)



The first panel shows our ancestor hunter gatherer, *immersed in his physical environment and his everyday contexts*, perceiving the world that has meaning to him, accessing flows of information through all of his senses. His purpose – is to work out (learn) what all this information means in order to act in ways that are in the best interests of himself and his dependents – whether it is making a shelter, foraging or hunting for something to eat, or avoiding or protecting himself from a predator. He even has a tool in his hand which he has learnt to make in order to extend himself into his environment and do something with it. As a species, we are the living testament to the fact that his learning not only enabled him and his dependents to survive but to flourish.

The second panel illustrates how our hunter gatherer ancestor used his deductive reasoning power to process the information he receives to create new knowledge that has meaning and significance to him. Such knowledge has been gained through his past and present experiences of the world and once it has been created it can be retrieved and put to further use.

Our ancestor's processing abilities can do much more than create facts from the information he is accessing, he can combine inductive and abductive reasoning and his imagination to create new mental images of the way the world works. By connecting the facts he sees patterns that enable him to develop more holistic understandings of the way his complex world works. And this deeper understanding enables him to not only act but to imagine and project himself into his future to predict the consequences of certain actions.

The learning he gained in his present provides him with a foundation for further learning in future. Furthermore, he can share his learning with others (panel four) so they too can benefit. In this way the learning of an individual becomes social or cultural learning.

***Our social ecology for learning is intended to help us generate, as a group, new insights into the nature of our own learning in the different contexts of our lives.***

### **An ecological perspective on learning**

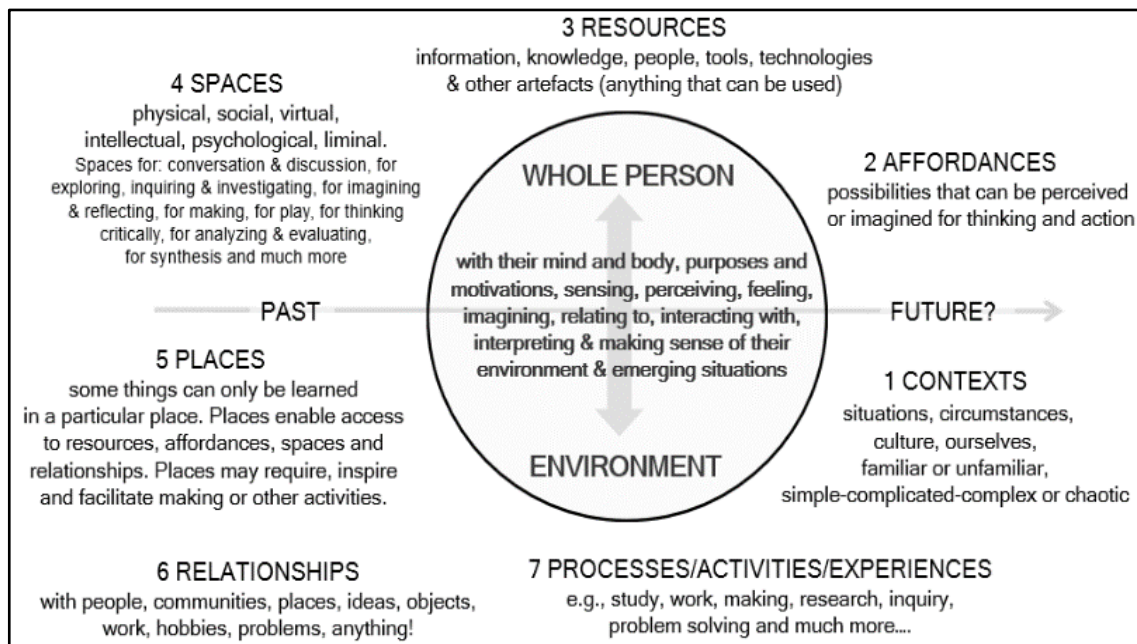
Another useful feature of this cartoon is that it reveals that learning is a situated and relational phenomenon. We are related to the environment and contexts in which we are learning through the spaces and places we inhabit, to the situations we encounter or create and to our reasons for being in these situations. We may have particular relationships with particular people or things in our environment and we may search for, find and use particular information or things to achieve something we or others value. We, our environment and our purposes are interdependent and once we start interacting with our environment our need or opportunity to learn simply emerges through our actions and interactions. As anthropologist Tom Ingold says, *'organism plus environment' should denote not a compound of two things, but one indivisible totality.* [3 p.16]. However, our ability to perceive an opportunity for learning as it emerges is related to our past experiences and learning and our awareness, but whether we act on such affordances is a matter of will - without will there can be no learning [4].

John Dewey believed that we learn through our experiences which are created when a person interacts with their environment: *"When we experience something, we act upon it, we do something with it; then we suffer or undergo the consequences. We do something to the thing and then it does something to us in return."* [5 p.46]. The 'something it does to us in return' is often the learning we gain through our experience of interaction. Action is structured as a continuous cycle of "doing" (actions directed at the environment for a purpose) and "undergoing" (taking in the reaction of the environment). Undergoing always precedes doing and, at the same time, is continued by it. For Dewey, *interaction* refers to the situational influence on one's experience. In other words, one's present experience is a function of the interaction between one's past experiences and the present

situation. But he also recognised that each experience a person has will influence his/her future life for better or for worse. In other words we can recognise *continuity* in our doings and experiences from the past, through our present and into our future – as we plan our next move or looking back after our future has happened.

Seeing learning as an interactional phenomenon in which learning emerges as people interact with their environments lends itself to the idea that learning is an ecological phenomenon. The ecological perspective on learning sees learning and practice that results in learning, as a consequence of individuals and groups of people relating to and interacting with their environment in purposeful/intentional ways. Figure 2 attempts to synthesise the elements contained in an ecology for learning (or of practice that requires learning) [6,7] and create a model that can be used to interpret a significant learning experience.

**Figure 2** Learning and practice ecology [6,7]. The labels (1–7) explain the key dimensions of the ecology.



The model embraces all three themes in the ecological world view of life - wholeness, relationships and continual formation. It relates a whole thinking, feeling, acting, caring person to their environments. It includes the person's needs, interests, desires and what they are trying to achieve in the particular contexts and situations in which they are acting. Learning and achievement emerge through meaningful interaction. This model of learning is as relevant to our ancient ancestor as it is to us today.

Another expression of wholeness and relatedness is the way that ecologies for learning and practice have both temporal and spatial dimensions. They enable whole people to connect and integrate different spaces, resources, tools, situations, relationships, activities, and themselves in ways that they find meaningful and effect various transformations (personal, material, and virtual). They also enable people to connect and integrate their past, present, and future, and connect thoughts and actions experienced in a moment and organise them into more significant experiences of thinking and action. They are the means by which people weave their moments into the fabric of a whole meaningful life. The components of an ecology for learning, summarised in the diagram, are woven

together by the maker in a part deliberate, part opportunistic act of trying to achieve something and learning in the process. Learning emerges through this act of weaving and making sense of what it emerges.

***Our professional inquiry into the nature of our learning lives has the potential to provide empirical self-reported evidence for the ecological perspective on learning.***

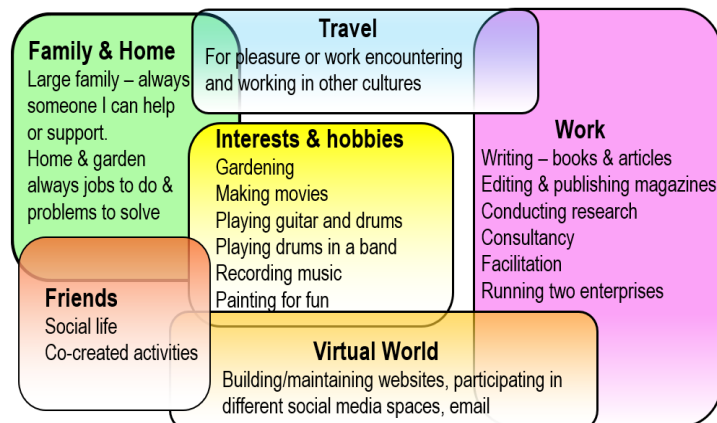
**A lifewide perspective on learning**

Looking back to the life of our ancestral hunter gatherer, perhaps the most important change human’s have made relates to the diversity of environments we are able to inhabit. While our ancient ancestor probably spent the whole of his life living in a relatively small and consistent environment, we have the ability, resources and technologies to move between and inhabit many different environments, and to even create our own environments.

The lifewide perspective of learning recognises that most people, no matter what their age or circumstances, simultaneously inhabit a number of different spaces and places - like work or education, being a member of a family and a community, managing a home, caring for others, engaging in sport and other interests, and looking after their own physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing (Figure 3). We might view these different collections of contexts, situations and activities, people, relationships, physical-social-virtual environment, challenges & opportunities distinct but often overlapping *domain* (work and home being a good ex ample of overlapping and interfering).

Within our domains we may create environments for ourselves in order to be more and creative – for example an office, a kitchen, a garden or garden shed, a garage.

**Figure 3** My experiential domains. The provide the overarching contexts and environments for my lifewide learning and achievements



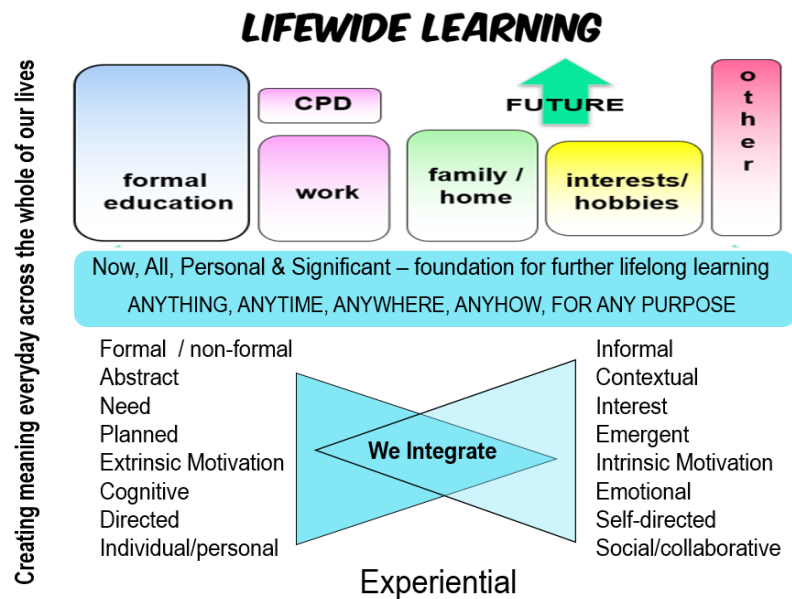
Each of my domains provide me with a different context for my everyday learning. I relate to and interact with different people, engage in different activities, use different tools and technologies, imagine different ideas, pursue different goals and try to accomplish different things. It is in the lifewide dimension of my life that I dream, imagine and create. For example I enjoy playing the guitar and drums: I have created a rehearsal room with recording equipment and I play with other musicians and a sound engineer to play and record music. This is a particular context for my learning and it illustrates how we make use of different spaces in our life to promote our own wellbeing.

It is in the lifewide dimension of our life that we learn what it is to be human in the contexts of our own lives by discover and fulfil our purposes and what we value and care about. It’s in this dimension that we embody our beliefs and values in what we do and are able to reflect on and learn from our experiences. It’s in this dimension of our life that we learn to cope with uncertainty and develop resilience in the face of adversity. That this is the case is illustrated well by the way billions of people across the world have had to profoundly adapt their lives and millions have suffered irreplaceable loss as loved ones have died during the covid 19 pandemic.

It is in the lifewide dimension of our life that we are able to be the person we want to be and become the better versions of ourselves by engaging with new experiences, relationships and challenges in the different domains of our life. Who we are as a person is the integration of all our experiences and all that we have learnt from these experiences in the different domains of my life. The lifewide perspective enables us to see our own life and the lives of others in their entirety. In an ecological sense it's another expression of wholeness and relatedness.

Most importantly, the lifewide perspective contains within it the most comprehensive concept of learning and practice, effectively embracing all possible notions of learning and knowing (Figure 4). Through a lifewide concept of learning the binary ways of viewing learning disappear because a person's learning is integrated and used by them across the whole of their life. Furthermore, the lifewide perspective draws attention to the experiential nature of learning in the world outside the mainly cognitive forms of learning that are emphasised in formal education.

**Figure 4** Representation of the lifewide perspective of learning [8,9]



**What's the point of our modest study?**

All this might seem so obvious that it is not worth saying. But the world, especially the educational world (and perhaps the world of work too!), tends not to think of people as whole people with rich learning lives that embrace every part of their life and to date, there has been little research into this concept of learning. Eduard Lindeman (a close friend of John Dewey) proclaimed in 1926 that 'the whole of life is learning therefore education can have no ending' [9]. Our modest study gives personal expression and meaning to this vision in 2021. In effect, we are both living and testing his vision.

***Many of the participants in this social learning ecology are educators interested in developing new educational practices. Our hope is that they will find ways of utilising the knowledge developed through this process to develop their own educational practice and act as agents for change in their educational environments.***

*Why am I participating in this inquiry?* is a question that every participant should answer for themselves. For me it begins with the celebration of my own learning and being more aware of myself interacting with my world (in the manner so neatly captured in Tom Chalkley's cartoon). I am deeply curious about the ecological nature of my being and participating in this inquiry with others who care about these ideas will help me further my understanding. Also, like all explorers, I am genuinely curious as to what will emerge from the inquiry. Even as I write this I have just had a new and exciting thought which I would not have had without being involved in this.

***Our inquiry will help develop new self-knowledge by encouraging participants to examine their own learning lives through the lens of the lifewide and ecological perspective.***

Through our inquiry we want to raise awareness of the lifewide dimension of learning, not just amongst participants but in the wider world. The results of this inquiry will inform Lifewide Education's collaboration with the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning aimed at raising awareness of the lifewide dimension of lifelong learning and education and enable us to develop further the arguments in our WHITE PAPER "Enriching and Vivifying the Concept of Lifelong Learning through Lifewide Learning and Ecologies for Learning & Practice" [10].

### **Some questions to keep in mind when reflecting on a learning experience**

- MEANING: What does learning mean to me in the context of my own life experiences?
- MEANING: Does learning mean the same thing in different contexts and in different parts of my life?
- MEANING: Am I learning something entirely new or developing/adapting something I already know and can do?
- CONTINUITY: How did my past experiences influence what I did to learn in my present?
- CONTINUITY: How does what I have learnt shape my plans for future learning?
- CONTEXTS: What was the context for learning?
- DOMAINS: What are the domains in my life in which I learn and use my learning to achieve?
- ENVIRONMENT: How did my environments and the people and things in it influence my learning?
- ENVIRONMENT: How does place or space influence my learning? Some things can only be learnt in a particular place/space.
- ENVIRONMENT: What resources did I utilise when I was learning?
- RELATIONSHIPS: What relationships helped/enabled me to learn?
- OPPORTUNITY: How/when did I recognise the opportunity to learn and decide to act upon it?
- PROCESS: What sort of activities did I engage in, in order to learn?
- PROCESS: What mediated/facilitated my interactions with my environment?
- MYSELF: What motivated me to try to learn?
- MYSELF: What has changed as a result of learning?
- BEYOND MYSELF: How has or will my learning benefit others?

### **WHAT OTHER QUESTIONS MIGHT WE ASK?**

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