

LEARNING and TEACHING
IN THE PRACTICE
OF SOCIAL WORK

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Conscious Intelligence and Learning *

LEARNING TO DEAL WITH NEW EXPERIENCE INVOLVES PAYING attention to it. Until Freud's discovery of the unconscious, the phrase "putting your mind on it" meant, without question, using the conscious intelligence. Long before Freud, however, it was known that the conscious mind functions most actively at first, when one is learning a new co-ordination, for instance, like driving a car; then, after considerable practice, these learned responses are, to a large extent, carried out automatically by the nervous system, through the spinal cord. In nontechnical language, "I know it so well that I don't have to think about it. It has become a part of me."

Learning an art, which is knowledge applied to doing something in which the whole person participates, cannot be carried on solely as an intellectual process, no matter how clearly and attractively subject matter is presented with the aim of insuring that the conscious attention of the learner shall not flag. As progressive educators have pointed out, unless there is opportunity to practice its use, there is invariably a gap between knowing a thing and being able to do something with it. Even with practice, however, there are puzzling discrepancies between what teachers and

* For a general reference on learning see 48 in the Bibliography.

learners expect and what actually happens. "Why can I not do as well as I know how to do?" is a challenging question. "Why do I seem to do worse when I pay attention than when I don't think about it?" is another. An understanding of the biological factors as well as an appreciation of the operation of both conscious and unconscious forces in learning may throw some light on these matters.

Biologically speaking, as we have seen, learning is a part of life-adjustment. Old as the race is the impulse to meet new experience with the urgent question, "What will it do to me?" Survival is more important than any more sophisticated questions about what one can do with the new thing. Furthermore, biology has some guidance for us in our wondering about the relationship of conscious and unconscious forces in learning. Throughout the animal kingdom, conscious attention has a particular role in terms of survival. It comes in whenever automatic responses to familiar stimuli are not sufficient, when there is something new to be mastered (or escaped from) lest it master the living creature.

Conscious intelligence in man, much more highly developed though it is, does not fall outside the biological dynamic of all living things. It is a late acquisition, speaking in terms of evolution, but it is for survival, and survival in more complex conditions than automatic responses could take care of. Man lived, when ancient animals perished, by being able to change his habitat and his habits. There is an economy in the use of this enlarged intelligence which man has which explains why it operates most actively for *new* experiences, and why, as these become accustomed ways, control of them is turned over to the biologically older and less energy-consuming automatic system.

It is hard to describe what we mean by the conscious mind, conscious intelligence, conscious awareness. We can hardly avoid using some figure of speech such as "levels" of consciousness, as if our minds were a house with several floors and a basement. Knowing that it is not spatial but energy relationships that are involved, we seek other figures, such as "something is in the focus or the spotlight of attention." We do know that there is a "fringe" or "margin" of consciousness, more dimly illumined by awareness but from which we can recover some impressions. For instance, a man walking along a country road, absorbed and unmindful of his surroundings, suddenly remembers a place he has not thought of for years, and people and scenes come back to him with the greatest vividness. He cannot account for this by any association with what he was thinking, or by anything he has seen along the way. Turning his attention to it now, he is aware of the odor of a certain variety of clover which he has seldom found except in the remembered place, and he then observes that some is growing where he has just passed. It seems logical to conclude that his senses conveyed some impression to his brain, even though his conscious attention was focused elsewhere, and that the reactivated impressions of past experiences influenced his thinking so that he was forced to attend to them to allay his curiosity as to why they came into consciousness. The concept of a "fringe" as well as a "focus" of consciousness is of the utmost importance in teaching.

Returning to the question of the role played by the focus of conscious attention in learning to practice an art, we find the biological answer that it is a "trouble fixer" for the more automatic, familiar responses when these are in-

adequate. If they fail, or the situation presented is too new to be met with confidence with learned responses, then conscious intelligence is brought to bear. The amount and kind of newness is significant. No situation is *all* new. Even at birth, which is the most overwhelmingly new experience we can imagine, the baby is warmly wrapped to reproduce, as closely as possible, conditions *in utero*. Every later experience contains some of the familiar, if only the already learned control of bodily movements and acquired responses to accustomed stimuli. A person is, then, constantly using the spotlight of his attention where it is most needed for adjustment to what is new, and withdrawing it from areas in which customary responses to stimuli are sufficient—until some new counterresponse from the environment startles him into attention again.

Let us take the example of a person who has learned to drive a motor car. Gradually, the sharp focusing of attention upon every detail of the process recedes, and the necessary co-ordinations of mind and body go on almost automatically. The person is absorbed in planning some work at the office, when suddenly a car comes out of a side road. In the fringe of consciousness something has been alert so that the motorist sees the other car, though he could not have told where his gaze was an instant before. Immediately he is all attention to the necessary changes in his driving. When all danger of a collision is past, his attention is again released to carry on his planning.

How do we account for the fact that conscious attention often seems to hinder rather than help a process which is being learned? Such a complaint is not made when the activity is overwhelmingly new, and no automatic function-

ing is thought of as possible. It comes, rather, when there has been acquired a certain facility which seems to be lost when attention is directed to the process. It is as if the learner said to himself, "Why can't I do this without thinking as I do other things I know how to do?" The answer is, of course, that the automatic responses are not yet adequate. The person wants to stop with a partial mastery that satisfies him but not the demands of the situation. The new which is still unassimilated troubles him when he focuses attention upon the activity and forces him to go through further effort he would like to avoid, yet this stage is really an advance over the superficial competence he thought he had.

Another form of complaint is, "I seem so awkward. Why can't I forget myself and then I could do this smoothly?" Again the clue comes from biology, though it seems strange at first that in time of danger (the new is sensed as dangerous until it is proved otherwise) the attention should be focused on the self instead of on the situation. "What will it do to me?" is a thought which seems more paralyzing than helpful if sudden adjustments have to be made. The biological reply is that the primary reaction, flight or fighting if attacked, is touched off automatically and instantly if the danger is very great. The instances in which there is time to choose a response allow time also to ask, "Will this hurt me?" and to make sure that the self is taken care of in the best way before energy is spent on other considerations.

In the teaching and learning of a profession like social work, which involves meeting many experiences which are new, there are distinguished five stages of the use of con-

conscious attention, related to the safety of the person as well as to the goal of mastery of the experience. One should not expect to see a learner pass through these stages in well-marked order,* for no one can take one new experience at a time and see it through. Such a person is constantly using old learnings to master new details, and he can never have done with the need to go back to early stages with each new portion of the whole experience which threatens his security. Progress from one stage to another, however (in a process which is as well understood as is the practice of an art), should be discernible in general, despite many regressions in detail. A knowledge of what these stages are is indispensable to one who is guiding a learning process in any of the arts, for without some such directive, regressions may seem willful, or evidence of hopeless incapacity; stimulation of conscious awareness may be given at precisely the times when it throws the learner back into self-conscious inability to relate himself normally to the situation. If a teacher can be guided by *what is happening to the learner*, rather than by what he himself wants to accomplish by means of the learner, he will be in a position really to teach what he has to give. We shall return to this theme with many illustrations in later sections.† For the present, let us

* Throughout this whole discussion, and in references in later chapters to these stages of the use of conscious attention (or intelligence), it should be borne in mind that these stages are, for the reason just given, never well marked and absolute. Like the passage from childhood to adolescence and from youth to adulthood, there are no distinct boundaries, and reversions are frequent. Yet, in general, in dealing with a certain kind of behavior in a person it makes a difference whether he is a child, an adolescent, or an adult. The plea throughout our discussion is to be clear enough about development not to treat children (in this experience of social work) like adults or adults like children.

† See chart, page ix, for aid in following this discussion through the application of it in later chapters.

look at the stages of use of conscious intelligence as learning progresses.

I. The stage of acute consciousness of self

It may seem like a contradiction in terms to call this a stage of learning. It feels to the victim as if he had no intelligence, to say nothing of using it. Yet, as we have seen, it is a step in advance of being limited to what automatic response can do, and the distress is a signal that danger to the person may be present and energies must be mobilized.* One could wish that attention need not be fixed on the self in so paralyzing a manner, but to forget to preserve one's life would be a biological tragedy. Practically, the period of inability to act is comparatively short, and energies are rallied which call out responses in which the person has some security.

Stage fright is a classic example. People who report the agony of going back almost to zero in their tongue-tied emptiness of resource say that what pulls them out of it is the beginning to use some well-acquired co-ordination like walking. Sometimes they open their mouths fully expecting that nothing will come, but their success in saying something frees them to go on. It may be a fear greater than the fear of the sea of faces that energizes them for self-preservation ("I *must not* fail and disgrace myself."), or anger at their own helplessness gives them strength.

In an emergency people do what is most characteristic of them. Some keep as still as possible; some talk volubly, or make "wise-cracks"; some become aggressive lest anyone know how scared they are. (These seem to be psychic sub-

stitutes for flight.) A teacher can recognize varying symptoms of insecurity for what they are. It is not necessary to label the person as being such and such a sort if the teacher remembers that everyone reverts to *some* earlier pattern when he is sufficiently threatened by a new situation. Above all, it is desirable that the teacher be not in turn threatened by this behavior to the point of punishing the learner for the teacher's insecurity. The role of the teacher in this stage of learning is security-giving, helping the learner to find the solid ground of personal adequacy he already has on which to plant his feet while he struggles with the new experience.

II. The stage of sink-or-swim adaptation

How does anyone ever get out of the first stage of acute self-consciousness? He receives enough energy from his physiological adaptation to a fearsome situation, and from his initiation of some activity in which he is relatively secure, to take at least partial note of his surroundings. This may be only with the margin of his consciousness while the focus of it is still upon himself, and on the biological problem of whether to save his life best by advance or retreat. As the eye of the motorist sees a signal from the environment to get into emergency action, even though his attention has been occupied elsewhere, so the learner, bewildered though he may be, catches hold of something in the situation to which he can respond. He gets an inkling of what people want of him, even though his preoccupation with himself makes him partially insensitive. If he hits upon a response which others react to favorably, he is encouraged to go on. Like a poor swimmer falling into the water, he may have

little sense of where the wharf is or how to get there, but he may succeed in keeping afloat at least, till he knows where he is and can save himself or be rescued.

This second stage of barely keeping up with what the situation demands from moment to moment may last a long time, and is apt to be a period of dependence upon approval or disapproval from people who are seemingly at home in the situation. It is a deceptive period for those who guide the experience, particularly if one of the ways of responding to guidance is the acquisition of a vocabulary which makes the learner sound as if he had mastered the whole science and art of the new activity, when his performance reveals that just the contrary is true. It is hard to be patient with a person who talks so well and does so poorly. Again, the teacher's own automatic responses get in the way. It is hard to remember that skills which are now so much a part of oneself that there is no need to think of them were once as hard to practice as the student finds them now. It is essential to remember, however, that at this stage the learner *cannot* understand the meaning of what he is doing as he will later. One may attempt to make him more conscious of what he is about than his present adjustment to the experience will let him be, but these attempts only increase his confusion and throw him back to a still greater sense of an overwhelming newness which he fears he can never master. Skilled teaching, at this stage, carries on the function of increasing security through mobilizing the knowledge and skills the learner already has, and encouraging him to trust and use his "spontaneous" responses. The term may be misleading, for it does not represent accidental, "out-of-the-blue" activity, but the use the student makes of what has

already become a part of him. These co-ordinations of energy which are characteristic of the person may not be the best adapted to the art which is being learned, but their correction can come about after they have been expressed and when the person is more ready to give them up than he can be at this stage when he needs everything which is his own. Criticism applied before the teacher knows what the person's patterns of behavior are, and how much they need to be modified to suit the new situation, can only do harm. During this stage the best skill of the teacher is required to free the learner from his fears and the rigidities acquired in his childhood reactions to a not-always-wise discipline. This is not done by a pseudo-psychotherapeutic method, but by using the daily business of class discussion or field practice to create an atmosphere of relaxed yet stimulating activity.* Once the learner can be himself in the new situation, he can be helped to change as much as he will have to change to adapt to what the situation will demand of him, or to seek some other field of work.

If this stage of learning seems to be a predominantly protected one, while the learner is finding himself and beginning to trust the authority of the experienced person who will later help him to be self-critical, it is also a period when there should be some stimulation. We have all seen beginners too easily satisfied with their first superficial adjustments to want to go on with the pain of struggling with difficulties. The relationship to the teacher can be made stimulating, as well as protective, if it gives some picture of what fine accomplishment is, along with reassurance that one is not expected to reach it immediately.

* See pages 160-61.

III. The stage of understanding the situation without power to control one's own activity in it

Again, progress from one stage (the second) to another (the third) is a concomitant of release of energy from pre-occupation with the self to freedom to study the situation as it is. The suddenness with which comprehension seems to come is a matter of surprise to learners and teachers alike. Whether it is the art of swimming, or piano playing or social work, the learner says something like this: "All at once it came to me. I thought I knew before what it was all about, but now I know I have been in a fog all this time," or "It was all words to me, and now it has come alive." Although we may explain these sudden illuminations as the end of a long period of adjustment to new concepts and skills, a period in which the unconscious reorganization plays an important part, there is much about this phenomenon that invariably seems miraculous.

In practice, the learner has a severe hazard to overcome very soon. He thinks he has mastered the art, and he finds the practice of what he understands so well still lagging behind. Why? Conscious intelligence is now able to deal with the new situation, but conscious intelligence is never enough. The learner has been using more or less automatic responses all during the period when he did not understand what he was doing, and he must use them still until the new ways of working which are consciously being mastered have become a part of himself. He has as yet no base of stabilized responses built up for this situation, on which he can rely while learning constantly new details. He understands what should be done, but is very uneven in his ability to do it.

Here the teacher can easily be destructive. It seems absurd that one who admits now that he understands should perform most of the time on so low a level. If months have elapsed in reaching this stage, it looks as if the supervisor had failed when a learner does so poorly. It is hard to avoid thinking: "He can do better if he wants to. He did better last week." One is tempted to use criticism more in retaliation for the supervisor's frustration than for its teaching value. If the supervisor understands, however, the psychological inevitability of this stage, and can give reassurance that everyone goes through this experience, there is now an opportunity to enlist the intelligence of the learner as never before, and criticism can now be at its optimum helpfulness. The learner can now, with help, think out for himself, after his spontaneous responses have apparently failed him, why they are inadequate, and how his intellectual appreciation of what the situation demands can be turned to use in later trials of his skill. One can help a learner to say, without loss of courage: "I made a mess of that, didn't I? But now I understand where I didn't quite get hold, and I'm anxious to see if I can't better that point next time." Partial successes can be emphasized to overcome the tendency of all beginners to regard every small slip as evidence of total incapacity. The third stage may last a long time, perhaps for years, before a worker can be said to be living most of his time in Stage IV, if indeed he ever reaches it. Our whole field of social work is only partially able, even now, to claim a clear understanding of what it is we are doing, to say nothing of being able to do as well as we know. It is not to be expected, then, that students will reach, in any period of training and early practice, a mastery which

not many of the most skilled people in the field have yet reached. We see enough, however, to map out for our further progress the following two stages, and a supervisor needs to know the road ahead, even though it is still to be experienced in its full achievement.

IV. The stage of relative mastery, in which one can both understand and control one's own activity in the art which is learned

Now what was new in the experience has really become a part of the person. He does not have to think of himself, out of fear of what the experience will do to him. He knows he can deal with it and why, because he understands what it is, and what its demands will be. He has related its new skills to his old acquired skills and to his natural emotional responses to situations. Conscious intelligence and unconscious responses are working together in an integrated wholeness of functioning. So much of the activity as is routine is taken care of with minimum expenditure of energy, leaving conscious attention to the study of new aspects of the activity as they arise in contact with the environment. The person can think of himself now in a new way—objectively. He can see himself working as he might see another person in the situation working. He can criticize and change his approach as the situation demands something different. He has become professional in that he can apply knowledge to the solving of practical problems, using himself as instrument, with all his acquired skills and his emotional responses disciplined and integrated to the professional purpose.

When this stage is reached is there any need of a teacher or supervisor? One who has come thus far may be expected to be his own supervisor to a large extent. Yet this period has its peculiar dangers, as does every other. For the comparative few who reach this level of competence, the temptation is great to feel "finished." Without the stimulus of much competition, and in a position of leadership, it is easy to forget that situations never repeat themselves, and there is always something new to be mastered. It is easy to become smug, and use in a stereotyped way skills which were mastered with so sensitive an awareness. The tragedy of this is not only in the arteriosclerosis of the person's own work, but in the need he has to protect himself against the growth of younger people. They see new things constantly, and challenge the comfort of accustomed ways. The leader does not want to go back to the early stages of learning, as he must if he is to be in touch with the new aspects of a changing situation, and, unconsciously or consciously, he has need to force learners not to disturb him with their growth. As one executive said: "We have spent years learning how to run this agency, and do you think we can let a new worker upset all that, trying experiments we have long ago discarded?"

Professional people and artists find that they need stimulation to learn always. Usually it has to come from their colleagues in informal consultation, with the seeking of experts to advise in special problems. A research interest is essential if one is not to go stale. Contact with studies in related fields and observing the practice of other arts are fine antidotes for a narrowing interest. It is only compara-

tive mastery that can be attained in any field, and what is mastery today is apprenticeship tomorrow.

V. The stage of learning to teach what one has mastered

There is a prevailing idea that what one knows he can *ipso facto* teach. That idea comes from a subject-centered concept of education. When education is oriented to *the person who is to learn plus the situation to be mastered*, there is something more to teaching than proving to the learner that one knows the subject. Can we think of progression from Stage IV to Stage V in the same terms as earlier transitions, that is, in terms of release of energy from one focus of attention to freedom to take on another? Although Part V will discuss this in more detail, we note here that we can expect a similar release of energy, which is now freed from preoccupation with subject matter, to an ability to understand the difficulties of the person who is learning. The teacher is now free enough to be able to see how each learner works best, what motivations favor learning and what ones need to be outgrown by a particular individual, what phases of the subject are obscure and what are clear already and can be used for building up security, at what point help is needed and when it is in the way.

There will be times when the teacher is himself in Stage II and does not know what he is doing to help but hopes students will learn somehow. There are discouraging periods after he has been thrilled by the idea that he knows how to teach when he cannot do as well as he knows and berates himself for the stupid, destructive things he has

done (Stage III). These stages are repeated, not once but many times, as ever-new problems present themselves. The teacher needs as much as any student the guidance of a supervisor of his teaching who can give him the encouragement of a relationship to someone who sees the whole process in larger perspective. Until he reaches the stage of comparative mastery of teaching (IV), or that of teaching other teachers of social work (V), the teacher may feel the deprivation of some of the satisfactions of his own practice of his art. It is to be hoped that no teacher of social work is required to give up all practice so completely that teaching becomes the dried husk of the past. A teacher is at his best when he is learning best, in close touch with his material and with each successive student whose learning constitutes an ever-new challenge. He can then glory in the successes of others as once he gloried in his own.

The preceding account of the stages of use of conscious intelligence in learning forms only the background for the work with individual learners which the teacher carries on in class groups or in supervision of field practice. There is probably no way in which persons show their distinctively individual characteristics more than in their reactions to a learning situation. Some withdraw and can be taught only in a pursuit of themselves which is both fear-relieving and enticing. Some are challenged by difficulties and others repelled. Some are filled with curiosity and others ask only to be left alone with what is familiar. The differences are not simple, as these examples may suggest, but extremely complex, involving the whole personality. We shall study in Part III and Part IV the ways in which a teacher or supervisor tries to reach an *educational diagnosis* which will be a

guide to understanding how students learn best and how they may be helped. It is not only that the teacher brings his intelligence to supplement that of the learners, but it is necessary to release theirs to its most complete use, through understanding of their individual differences and of the motivations which are most effective with them.

There is another aspect of learning which a teacher should not lose sight of—the influence of the culture⁸ in which people live upon their capacity to learn and the kinds of learning they can assimilate. The writer has found, for example, a distinct difference in the way students from the South approach learning social work, as compared with those from the North and East or the Middle Western states. All of these regional differences merge, more or less, in the competitive, urban culture which surrounds most of the centers for field training of schools of social work, but some students have to make more adjustment than others in order to achieve the qualities which this culture seems to demand and almost automatically to select. To study learners to see what they bring to the learning experience and how they change in it, as a group as well as individually in contact with the social forces playing upon them, calls for all the conscious intelligence we have as teachers and supervisors of field practice.