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Arcane Diversity: Is it More Important than the Superficially Obvious?

Patrick Bradbery
Arcane Diversity: Is it More Important than the Superficially Obvious?

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Abstract: When the word diversity is mentioned in contemporary discourse, it evokes concepts like age, race, gender, religious expression, marital status and sexual preferences. While these are undoubtedly important markers of diversity, they are but the more or less obvious indicators that can lead to unproductive stereotyping. Hidden below the surface is a vast ocean of diversity that is harder to detect and consequently often ignored. Just a few examples of this diversity include: access to resources; knowledge; skills; physical health; emotional health; mental health; learning; development; personality; wealth; motives; intents; belief systems; and intelligence. This paper explores just a small part of that ocean in an attempt to bring to the surface one of the vital dimensions of understanding and responding to diversity. That part is that of learning and development. The paper is based on a transcendental phenomenological study of learning and development carried out by the author as a part of his doctoral studies. The conclusion drawn is that facing the endemic challenge of diversity of outcomes, which defies the best intentions of individuals and nations, will benefit from acknowledging, detecting and responding to diversity in learning and development and similar arcane characteristics of the community.

Keywords: Hidden Diversity, Learning and Development, Transcendental Phenomenology, Stereotyping

Introduction

DIVERSITY IS AN important area of academic and professional discourse. A quick search of the abstracts in the EBSCO Data Source Premier database using the key work “diversity” unearthed no less than 30,784 articles. As would be expected there was a range of aspects of diversity covered in those articles. That range reflects the popular press attention often focused on such issues such as racial and/or ethnic differences, religious differences, gender differences and less frequently differences in sexual preferences. Such attention to these aspects of diversity is not to be devalued. The history of humanity is mottled with the many instances of such diversity fostering unwelcome discrimination and consequent disadvantage accruing to minority groups.

With the possible exception of sexual preferences, these sources of diversity are visible and obvious to even the most casual observer. As a consequence, they receive considerable attention in academic discourse as well as in social justice activities carried out in numerous arenas. The degree to which such discourse and activities are successful in overcoming the disadvantages visited upon minority groups is arguable, but any success that can be identified can, at least in part, be attributed to such attention.

Meanwhile, hidden below the surface, there is a vast ocean of diversity that is harder to detect and consequently often ignored. Because it cannot be detected as easily as the aforementioned, this kind of diversity continues to be the source of unwarranted and unfair discrimination. It includes such diverse factors as access to resources; knowledge; skills; physical health; emotional health; mental health; learning; development; personality; wealth; motives; intents; belief systems; and intelligence.

This paper explores just a small part of that arcane collection. It explores the hidden diversity in the arena of learning and development. This exploration is based on a transcendental phenomenological study of learning and development carried out by the author as a part of his doctoral studies. The conclusion drawn is that facing the endemic challenge of diversity of outcomes, which continues to defy the best intentions of individuals and nations, will benefit from acknowledging, detecting and responding to diversity in learning and development and similar arcane characteristics of the community.

“Visible” Diversity

Over the second half of the Twentieth Century and into the Twenty-first, there has been a growing focus on the impact of diversity on the economic and social well-being of human collectives. Arguably this was initiated by the feminist movement of the 1960s, with its roots firmly planted in the suffragettes who campaigned for and won the right to vote for women at the beginning of the Twentieth Century. As a consequence of this and similar movements throughout the world, attention has been drawn to the disadvantage suffered by members of identifiable groups.

These identifiable groups obviously included women as a class, but also included those who belong
to an identifiable and so-called minority group. The markers for such identification include factors which are more or less visible to the casual observer. These include: race and/or ethnic origin, where physical appearance is used as the identifier; adherents of particular religious practices, where performance of those practices and wearing symbolic representations of those practices is used as the identifier; age, again based on physical appearance; and sexual preferences, where the identifiers are less obvious, other than when the members choose to demonstrate those preferences. An obvious manifestation of the last one is the so-called Gay Mardi Gras held in Sydney each year.

The consequence of the attention drawn to diversity occasioned by the research into it, the social justice campaigning and the consequent policy changes brought about over a long period of time has been in many cases a slow, but nevertheless measurable, improvement in the privileges available to the members of such disadvantaged groups. One notable exception to this improvement can be noted in the Indigenous people of Australia. Despite the attention evoked by the identification of the systemic and systematic disadvantage experienced by these people, there has been little change in their relative disadvantage over the last thirty years. This is so despite a variety of policy approaches and the allocation of a significant quantity of resources directed to the issue (Hunter, 2007; McCallum and Eades, 2001).

This outcome raises the question of whether there is a need to examine less obvious aspects of diversity if true progress is to be achieved. There is no question, for example, that some members of the Australian Indigenous population have benefited significantly from the changes in policy and redirection of resources. There are now prominent Indigenous academics and Indigenous millionaires who demonstrate that there is not an inherent disadvantage in their racial background. Similarly, there are numerous examples of non-Indigenous Australians who share the abject disadvantages of the majority of the Indigenous population.

These exceptions to the general rule raise the question of whether there is a need to look beyond the obvious markers of diversity if there is to be a significant across-the-board improvement in the life experiences of the majority of Indigenous Australians. Are there other aspects of diversity that can be tapped more successfully? If so, what are they? (Bradbery, 2008).

Having raised these questions, it is intended that this paper explore a particular area of diversity that receives little attention, but could hold the key to significant improvements in outcomes. That area is learning and development. Given that one of the resilient markers of disadvantage for Indigenous Australians is their educational attainments, this is an obvious aspect worthy of exploration. Further, it is an area that is not well understood. Popular discourse regarding learning and development too often equates learning with gathering data and developing skills. In the following section, the dimensions of diversity in the arena of learning and development will be explored.

### Diversity in Learning and Development

There has been an immense amount of literature written on learning and learning theories (e.g. Argote, 1993; Argyris, 1992; Argyris and Schön, 1978; Bandura, 1977; Bateson, 1972; Beck, 1994; Bloom, 1956; Dewey, 1964; Gagné, 1975; Gardner, 1983; Giorgi, 1999; Honey and Mumford, 1982; Knowles, 1980; Kolb et al, 1971; Leahey and Harris, 1985; Maslow, 1968; 1971; Piaget 1950; Rogers, 1983; Senge, 1990; Skinner, 1976; Snell and James, 1994; Vygotsky, 1978). Learning is endemic to human existence. Thus, understanding learning has been recognised for a long time as a basic problem of human life.

This recognition has evoked a number of schools of thought about the nature of learning. It is generally recognised that there are four fundamental views of learning in contemporary discourse. These are the behavioural; the cognitive; the humanist; and the social learning schools of thought (McFadzean, 2001a). However, the diversity does not end there. There is conjecture on ways of learning, which in turn extends into learning styles, on levels of learning which extends into developmental theory, and on the nature of knowledge, including multiple intelligences. Knowledge is often identified as an outcome of learning, although many argue that learning is incomplete until manifested in action of some kind. Contemporary individual learning theories also extend to consideration of the neurological processes that occur during learning events. Each of these aspects of individual learning is explored below in more detail.

### The Four Schools of Thought

One early view of learning was *copy theory*: when I sense an object, my mind forms a copy of it, which is then stored in memory. Thus, learning is the process of experiencing the world and building up a copy of the world in the mind. The fatal flaw with this view is the unreliability of perception. The complexity of the perceptual process makes probable that the mental world is not a reliable copy of the outside world.

Two broad traditions, developed in ancient Greece and still continuing today, have attempted to deal
with this flaw. Rationalism renounces copy theory altogether and says that real learning has little to do with simply experiencing world as a passive observer. The other tradition, empiricism, relies on some form of copy theory, flawed though it may be, as the only plausible account of learning (Leahey and Harris, 1985).

These two broad traditions have developed into four contemporary views of learning: behavioural; cognitive; humanist; and social learning theories. The fundamental distinctions among these schools of thought are described below.

**Behavioural Learning Theories**

Contemporary theories of learning build mainly on the rationalist view of learning, but there is an important exception. This exception consists of the behavioural learning or operant conditioning theories of Skinner (1976) and his fellow behaviourists, firmly based on empiricism. Behaviourists believe that learning occurs when there is a change in an observable behaviour. This behaviour change occurs when a connection is made between two events: the stimulus; and the response. Behaviour can be changed when this link is manipulated, and so learning takes place. Operant conditioning is based on the idea that a person’s behaviour is directed by its (expected) consequences. Skinner claimed that behaviour is a deliberate act that is influenced by reinforcement. Positive reinforcement is used to develop “good” behaviour, and punishment can be used to reduce “bad” behaviour.

Bandura (1977) extended the basic theory of behavioural learning, when he suggested that learning can occur as a result of vicarious conditioning. This theory involves the observed behaviour of others and the consequences of that behaviour. If the consequences are seen as desirable, then the behaviour will be copied. If undesirable, then the behaviour is avoided by the observer. Although cognitive activity may be implied by behavioural learning theories, it is certainly not essential to them.

**Cognitive Learning Theories**

The cognitive theories of learning, by way of contrast, are based on the belief that learning is an internal purposive process concerned with thinking, perception, organisation and insight (McFadzean, 2001a). Whereas behavioural learning theory requires little, if any, thinking to be involved in the process, cognitive theories propose that people learn by engaging memories and integrating them with incoming perceptions. Insightful learning occurs when past experiences or existing knowledge is adapted to a novel experience. Cognitive learning occurs when problems are analysed or broken down into constituent elements.

These elements can then be restructured into new relationships, thus creating new ideas, new insights. This encourages learners to view the situation from different perspectives. This type of learning can be enhanced if a number of people come together to share their knowledge with one another – team learning. However, this extension of cognitive learning is more commonly known as a form of social learning.

**Humanist Learning Theories**

The humanist theories of learning are concerned with experiences and feelings, which lead to individual fulfilment and personal growth. Probably the best known humanist proponent is Maslow (1968; 1971). According to Maslow, in order to achieve self-actualisation, lower level needs such as safety, belonging and esteem need to be at least partially fulfilled. Maslow perceived the aim of education to be the assistance of learners to achieve self-actualisation, thus implicitly linking learning to development.

Another advocate of humanism, Rogers (1983) claimed that learning should be significant, meaningful and experiential. It should involve thoughts and feelings, as well as action. Thus, humanist learning is also known as experiential learning, and it has five important characteristics:

1. It involves the whole person, emotions and cognitions.
2. It is self-initiated, with a sense of discovery coming from within.
3. It is pervasive and makes a difference to the attitudes, behaviour and possibly personality of the learner.
4. It is evaluated by the learner, who knows whether their needs have been met.
5. The essence of the learning has meaning for the learner.

**Social Learning Theories**

Social learning theories build on both cognitive and humanist learning theories with the claim that learning is a social activity that happens in relationship. Bateson (1972) claimed that in the absence of (an)other, there was no meaning to be apprehended. Meaning comes about only in the recognition of difference and/or similarity.

Social learning theory builds on Bateson’s theory that meaning is derived only through relationships. Learning takes place only in the relationship between learner and the object of learning. However, social learning theory has mainly been constructed on the foundation of Vygotsky’s (1978) socio-cultural theory. He maintained that all cognitive learning occurs
at the social level before it becomes learning at the individual level.

In this framework, learning is a continual process of transforming existing knowledge into new knowledge through personal-social interaction. However, what is learned and how it is learned are matters of individual interpretation of experience.

**Ways of Learning**

Bawden and Zuber-Skerrit (2002) suggested that there are three main ways of learning. The first is to be informed about something by an “authority” whom we trust, and with or from whom we can validate our learning. This may be a parent, teacher, author, peer etc. This form of learning is called propositional learning or learning in order to know about something.

A second form of learning occurs when we are instructed in how to do something by an “authority”. In this case, we validate our learning by doing it ourselves. This kind of learning is called practical learning, or learning in order to do something.

Finally, they suggested we can learn by making sense ourselves of something that is happening around us or directly to us. Often the only way we can validate this learning is by accepting it to be true for ourselves (intuition). This is called experiential learning or learning in order to be someone.

They pointed out that all three types of learning involve both “finding out” and “taking action”. They also claimed that propositional and practical learning are often encouraged in learning contexts, but rarely are strategies formulated for encouraging experiential learning. While this is problematic in itself, it becomes more so when considered in the context of learning styles.

**Learning Styles**

The consideration of different ways of learning, which Bawden and Zuber-Skerritt (2002) applied to different outcomes of the learning process, also leads to the idea that different people favour different styles of learning. Kolb’s (1984) Learning Style Inventory is arguably the most widely known of these theories.

Although Kolb’s LSI and Honey and Mumford’s (1982) similar theory of learning styles are an indication of the essence of learning styles, which is that different learners prefer to learn in different ways, they are by no means unique. Cassidy (2004) identified twenty-three learning style models, including those of Kolb and Honey and Mumford. Desmedt and Valcke (2004) identified twenty-eight learning style authors, as well as twenty-three cognitive style authors, as the most cited in their respective fields.

These collective works indicate the importance of individual differences in not just relative intelligences as suggested by Gardner (1983) and examined below, but also for things such as instructional preference, social interaction, information processing and cognitive personality (Curry, 1987) and personality, cognitive differences and learning preferences (Rayner and Riding, 1997).

**The Nature of Knowledge and Multiple Intelligences**

At its most fundamental, the cognitive learning process is regarded as one that accepts “data” from the learner’s environment, and transforms that data into a form of “knowledge”. Just what is meant by the term “knowledge” is in itself an area worthy of investigation.

The examination of the concept of knowledge raises a further question of the meaning of terms, which parallels a similar confusion in respect of the learning process itself. Terms like data, information and knowledge are often used interchangeably. Amitay et al (2005) made an implicit distinction between information and knowledge and it is common to find a similar distinction made between data and information. It would be useful to have some further clarity in relation to this issue of knowledge terminology. If “knowledge” is an outcome of learning, what is “knowledge”?

Bierly et al (2000) addressed this issue using the common framework of data, information and knowledge as distinct concepts, and added a fourth one that they called wisdom. Using Bloom’s (1956) taxonomy of educational objectives as a reference point, they proposed four levels of learning (Table 1), which align roughly with Bloom’s hierarchy, albeit by combining some levels of the taxonomy.
Table 1: Distinctions between Data, Information, Knowledge and Wisdom

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Learning Process</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Data</td>
<td>Raw facts</td>
<td>Accumulating truths</td>
<td>Memorisation (data bank)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information</td>
<td>Meaningful, useful data</td>
<td>Giving form and functionality</td>
<td>Comprehension (information bank)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>Clear understanding of informa-</td>
<td>Analysis and synthesis</td>
<td>Understanding (knowledge bank)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wisdom</td>
<td>Using knowledge to establish</td>
<td>Discerning judgements and</td>
<td>Better living/success (wisdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and achieve goals</td>
<td>taking appropriate action</td>
<td>bank)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Bierly et al., 2000: 598

These distinctions made by Bierly et al provide a useful means of discriminating not just different levels of “knowledge” but also the associated “learning” process as well as the outcome of each process in the form of a “bank” that can be drawn upon as input for the next higher process. They also provide support for the levels of learning concepts of Bateson (1972) and Argyris and Schön (1978).

Allee (1997) addressed the same issue and proposed another three forms of “knowledge”. Two of these she interposed between knowledge and wisdom, in the guise of meaning and philosophy, and the other, union, beyond wisdom. In effect, she has redefined the Bloom taxonomy in its original form, and added union, to create what she called a “knowledge archetype”.

Allee claimed that the different modes of knowledge form a continuum of increasing complexity and integration (a developmental perspective). This implies that there are different learning, information processing and other dynamics for each one as suggested by Bierly et al (2000). The conversion of data into information is quite different from the conversion of information into knowledge, and so on.

Allee proposed that her knowledge archetype can be extended to incorporate different kinds of learning and performance foci for each mode of knowledge. These are summarised in Table 2. Interestingly, she makes a distinction between double-loop learning and generative learning, which are often treated as synonyms by others. Allee claimed that:

[i]n order to be a high-performing learning organisation, work processes must incorporate conscious and deliberate attention to every aspect of knowledge. Unlike linear models that impose a particular order of activity, this framework helps illuminate the natural learning patterns that underlie work processes, human behaviour, and organisational systems (Allee, 1997: 70).
Table 2: Learning and Performance Framework Reference Chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge</th>
<th>Learning</th>
<th>Action Type</th>
<th>Performance Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Data</td>
<td>Instinctual (Sensing)</td>
<td>Data</td>
<td>Feedback (Gathering information)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information</td>
<td>Single-loop (Action without reflection)</td>
<td>Procedures</td>
<td>Efficiency (Doing something the most efficient way)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>Double-loop (Self-conscious reflection)</td>
<td>Functional (Doing it the best way)</td>
<td>Effectiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning</td>
<td>Communal (understanding context, relationships, and trends)</td>
<td>Managing (Understanding what promotes and impedes effectiveness)</td>
<td>Productivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philosophy</td>
<td>Deutero (Self-organising)</td>
<td>Integrating</td>
<td>Optimisation (Seeing where an activity fits in the whole picture)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wisdom</td>
<td>Generative (Value driven)</td>
<td>Renewing</td>
<td>Integrity (Finding or reconnecting with one’s purpose)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Union</td>
<td>Synergistic (Connection)</td>
<td>Union</td>
<td>Sustainability (Understanding values in greater context)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Allee, 1997: 67-8

Gardner’s (1983) theory of multiple intelligences further complicates comprehension of knowledge as well as the learning process per se. In his lengthy research on brain functions and the learning process, he came to the conclusion that there were seven distinct variations of the learning process each using a different part of the brain, thus supporting Vygotsky (1978). Noting that each individual seems to have a distinct mixture of tendencies to use these different learning processes, he labelled each one of these tendencies as an intelligence. This raises the question of whether each of these intelligences deals with a different form of knowledge and hence a distinct learning process.

Gardner later proposed that his original list of seven intelligences: linguistic; logical-mathematical; musical; bodily-kinesthetic; spatial; interpersonal; and intrapersonal, may need to be extended. Gardner suggested two further intelligences that meet the eight criteria he used to assess the original seven. These were naturalist intelligence and existential intelligence, with an understanding that the latter may incorporate a form of spiritual intelligence (Gardner, 1999). Thus, the nature of knowledge, and hence the nature of learning, may well vary depending on the intelligence to which it relates.

On the basis of his theory of multiple intelligences, Gardner suggested that much of the speculation and research that has focused on learning has been concerned with but one of the human intelligences, that is the logical-mathematical. In particular, he identified Piaget’s (1950) research as focused exclusively with the logical-mathematical intelligence. If Gardner is correct, then the contemporary comprehension of the learning process is but the “tip of the iceberg”. Thus, there is no reason to be surprised that the learning organisation has been such a difficult concept to grasp.

Hence, it seems that generating, capturing, storing, sharing and using knowledge is not at all a simple process. The essential meaning of the concept of knowledge is such that it traverses depths that go beyond the scientific search for (scientific) truth. “Humans seem condemned to meaning, condemned to find value, depth, care, concern, worth, significance to their everyday existence” (Wilber, 1998: xi).

In the Allee (1997) knowledge archetypes there is the hint of a developmental theory of learning, which adds further complexity to the diversity equation. It is important to understand how cognitive development affects learning.

Developmental Learning

Arguably, the most important enhancement to humanist learning theory came from the work of Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget. Piaget (1950) shared Werner’s (1957) general organismic, inner-directed view of human development. He proposed that cognitive development unfolds in much the same way a logical argument unfolds, step by step in a logically necessary sequence of stages and sub-stages. He drew a sharp and significant distinction between empirical knowledge (learning) and logico-mathematical knowledge (development) (Table 3). In doing
so, Piaget seems to have confused process and outcome.

Bateson extended the staged development theory of Piaget beyond the development of children to incorporate stages beyond Piaget’s formal operations. The significance of Bateson’s approach to learning lies in the clarity of the categories he proposed. Bateson (1972: 283) defined learning as an action that denotes change, with change itself denoting, in turn, processes which are also subject to change. Included in this view is the idea that all learning is stochastic because it involves trial and error.

### Table 3: Processes and Units of Learning and Development in Piaget’s Theory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Change</th>
<th>Learning</th>
<th>Development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Field</td>
<td>Figurativity</td>
<td>Operativity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of Knowledge</td>
<td>Empirical</td>
<td>Logico-mathematical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source</td>
<td>Objects</td>
<td>Actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of Abstraction</td>
<td>Empirical</td>
<td>Reflective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioural Basis</td>
<td>Perception</td>
<td>Schemes (Abstracted actions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentalisation Process</td>
<td>Internalisation</td>
<td>Interiorisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental Units</td>
<td>Schemas (Representations, Concepts)</td>
<td>Operations (Mental actions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process of Change</td>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>Assimilation Accommodation Equilibration</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Leahey and Harris, 1985: 361

Arising from this, Bateson proposed the following four categories of learning:

- **Zero Learning**: all acts that are not subject to correction.
- **Learning One**: revision of choice within a given set of alternatives.
- **Learning Two**: revision of the set from which the choice is to be made.
- **Learning Three**: revision of a set of sets.

Argyris and Schön (1978) redefined Bateson’s Learning One as single-loop learning, and Learning Two as double-loop learning. Implied in these categories of learning is a developmental process. Until the appropriate developmental changes occur in the individual, they are incapable of incorporating the higher levels of learning into their repertoire.

In the light of developmental theories of learning (e.g. Bateson, 1972; Maslow, 1968; Piaget, 1950) it seems prudent to add at least one other way of learning to those proposed by Bawden and Zuber-Skerritt (2002). That is, we can learn in order to make a radical change in our world view, as a result of being unable to make sense of what is happening around us or to us using our familiar world view. This is learning to become someone (development, third-order or triple-loop learning).

According to Bateson (1972) and Berman (1981) second-order (double-loop) learning is learning about the context one learns within. Triple-loop (or third-order) learning is learning about the contexts of the contexts. Berman (1981: 346) also claimed that third-order learning is “an experience in which a person suddenly realises the arbitrary nature of his or her own paradigm”. According to Bierly et al (2000: 598) “[Bateson and Berman] view third-order learning as moving toward a holistic worldview of ultimate truth”. McWhinney (1992: 8) has a different view of third-order learning, claiming that it occurs when the learner uses “multiple realities to reframe one’s own and others’ experience in alternative frameworks”.

Strategies for this kind of learning are even rarer than strategies for experiential learning. They are found in the work of Torbert and his associates (Fisher and Torbert, 1995; Torbert, 1989; 1991), and implied in the work of Palmer (1998) and Peck (1987).

The fundamental cognitive-developmental assumption is that basic mental structure is the result of interactions between certain organismic structuring tendencies and the structure of the outside world, rather than reflecting either one directly. This interaction leads to cognitive stages, which represent the transformations of simple early cognitive structures as these are applied to (or assimilate) the external world, and as they are accommodated to, or restructured by, the external world in the course of being applied to it.

### Responding to the Diversity

The discussion above attests to the degree of diversity that manifests in the arena of learning and development. Yet when the mainstream approaches
to education are examined they do not reflect this diversity. There is a “one size fits all” approach that ignores or devalues intelligences other than logico-mathematical, which too often embraces only the behavioural school of thought, gives no credence to differences in learning style and focuses primarily on learning about and learning to do. All of these mainstream approaches to learning and development challenge the traditional cultures of Indigenous Australians in a multitude of ways. Of particular significance in this context are the developmental aspects of learning.

The core of the cognitive-developmental position is the doctrine of cognitive stages. Piaget (1950) suggested the following general characteristics of stages:

1. Stages imply distinct or qualitative differences in modes of thinking or of solving the same problem.
2. These different modes of thought form an invariant sequence, order, or succession in individual development. While cultural factors may speed up, slow down, or stop development, they do not change its sequence.
3. Each of these different and sequential modes of thought forms a structured whole. A given stage-response on a task does not just represent a specific response determined by knowledge and familiarity with that task or tasks similar to it. Rather it represents an underlying thought-organisation.
4. Cognitive stages are hierarchical integrations. Stages form an order of increasingly differentiated and integrated structures to fulfil a common function. The general adaptational functions of cognitive structures are always the same. Accordingly, higher stages displace, or rather, re-integrate the structures found at lower stages.

Kegan suggested that the developmental process is one of evolution. For the human, evolving is equated to the evolution of systems of meaning. Our meanings, according to Kegan, “are not so much something we have, as something we are” (1980: 374). Our meaning systems shape our experience and to a large extent give rise to our behaviour. Except during our transition to a new stage, a given system of meaning organises our thinking, feeling and acting. In order to change, we need to be aware of that system of meaning and accept it for what it is. Only then are we free to develop to a new level of awareness.

The paradoxical nature of change is significant in the Gestalt framework. One cannot change until one accepts what exists, who one is and how one functions. Acceptance only occurs with awareness (Hazen, 1994: 74, italics in original).

Herein lays a significant guide to dealing with diversity, not only in the Indigenous population but also in the wider population experiencing social disadvantage. The issue of identity looms large. One of the most important aspects of disadvantaged people is their lack of clarity regarding who they are. In the case of Indigenous Australians, the last two hundred and twenty years has provided continual challenges to their sense of identity. Thus they are constrained from developing as learners, other than in exceptional cases. This is further exacerbated by the devaluing of the intelligences that have been the primary ones in their cultures e.g. spatial, musical and interpersonal.

The deep structure of our meaning-making systems involves the distinction between self and other, or between subject and object. Development involves a process of redifferentiating and reintegrating the relationships. “The internal experience of developmental change can be distressing. Because it involves the loss of how I am composed, it can also be accompanied by a lack of composure” (Kegan, 1980: 374, italics in original).

It therefore follows that there will be a degree of inertia regarding developmental change. A reluctance to engage with the distress of transformation can lead to “arrested development”, identified earlier as a barrier to learning. Thus, even though the appearance of adulthood is physically manifested, it may not be the case that ideological, psychological or spiritual adulthood has been attained. It is only when this arrested development is recognised that it can be addressed.

Conclusion

Over the last half of the Twentieth Century, significant progress has been made in recognising and addressing many aspects of diversity that can and do lead to social and economic disadvantage. However, the diversity addressed has been more or less visible to the casual observer. Hidden below the surface have been equally important aspects of diversity that contribute to disadvantage.

One of the most important of these hidden aspects of diversity lies in the arena of learning and development. Within this arena there is diversity in ways of learning, which in turn extends into learning styles, on the nature of knowledge, including multiple intelligences, and on levels of learning which extends into developmental theory.

An examination of the impact of this diversity in the context of non-recognition goes some way towards a better understanding of the failure of many attempts to better the lot of Indigenous Australians,
as well as other disadvantaged groups. In particular the constraint upon cognitive development imposed by a lack of clear and valued identity contributes to a lack of significant learning outcomes. This, in turn, constrains social and economic development.

Facing the endemic challenge of diversity of outcomes, which continues to defy the best intentions of individuals and nations, will benefit from acknowledging, detecting and responding to diversity in learning and development and similar arcane characteristics of the community.

References


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