

# On the Definition of Learning

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University Press of Southern Denmark 2016

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University Press of Southern Denmark  
ISBN: 978-87-7674-876-0

Typesetting and cover design by  
Donald Jensen, UniSats  
Printed by Tarm Bogtryk a-s  
Printed in Denmark 2016

Printed with support from  
the Danish Council for Independent Research (Culture and Communication)

University Press of Southern Denmark  
Campusvej 55  
DK-5230 Odense M

[www.universitypress.dk](http://www.universitypress.dk)

Distribution in the United States and Canada:  
International Specialized Book Services  
[www.isbs.com](http://www.isbs.com)

Distribution in the United Kingdom and Ireland:  
Gazelle Book Services  
[www.gazellebookservices.co.uk](http://www.gazellebookservices.co.uk)

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# The normative aspect of learning

*Merete Wiberg*

## Introduction

Human intention in terms of aiming and searching for standards of living, it will be argued, is an important element of learning processes and gives direction to personal learning. Learning is a complex phenomenon involving processes of change and adaptation. This chapter will address and discuss the normative aspect of learning as an inherent part of the processes of inquiry and problem solving which, according to John Dewey, characterize learning. Defining and trying to solve a problem by conducting processes of inquiry entails ongoing judgment of what might be valuable aims of and means for defining and solving the problem. The ongoing inquiry and dealing with ideas of how and why certain elements, such as means and aims in the process, are valuable constitute the dynamics of normativity. The *Bildung* tradition should be recognized for the insight that development of personal as well as societal values is an important aspect of learning and teaching (Humboldt [1797]1960). Learning is, seen from the perspective of the *Bildung* tradition, a personal formational process during which an individual realizes its own role as a particular person as well as a person connected with a universal level. When looking at human learning as change and development of a person's knowledge, understanding and competences, it should follow that learning must constitute what a person considers valuable. What, why and how we learn are important aspects of personal formation and influences and develops the spectrum and content of values in the personal horizon of meaning.

Gaining insights, knowledge and competences is important because what we learn eventually serves as a pathway and instrument to realizing what we believe is good and valuable. Therefore, education is important. From the personal perspective, what we assume to be 'good' and worthwhile directs our desire and will to learn, but because the person who is about to learn is not sure what is good or worthwhile, the individual needs to examine this as part of the learning process.

When teachers emphasize judgment and critical thinking, it is typically because they view investigation and inquiry of what is worthwhile learning important in the process of learning itself. Learning consist to a large extent of exercising, practicing and adapting to situations and conditions, but what drives these efforts must be ideas that both transcend and are part of these processes, such as the idea of perfection, enjoyment, happiness, desire to participate or the idea of creating a better life for oneself and others.

Moral learning is part of this approach to learning because dealing with what, from a personal perspective, is worthwhile learning influences moral thinking and conduct. Many circumstances, such as family background, educational policy and what Hans-Georg Gadamer (Gadamer 1986) described as 'horizons' influence what we consider worthwhile. The important point is that values not only influence learning processes but that dealing with values is part of processes of learning themselves.

The chapter contributes to a discussion of whether learning is or should be an instrument for promoting certain societal values or should rather be seen as an act where developing and dealing with standards and values is important in terms of formation of the student. Actual focus on learning outcomes in educational institutions across the world seems to further the view that learning is an instrument for achieving certain outcomes determined before the actual process of learning, and therefore the emerging and not foreseen aspects of learning, such as the development of personal values in the process, seem to be valued less than effective learning. It seems to sometimes be forgotten that effectiveness in itself is a value that will be at work in processes of learning.

The chapter will proceed with a discussion of how the dynamic aspect of normativity in learning is to be understood, by focusing on Dewey's concept of inquiry which, from a pragmatic point of view, is seen as the key concept in relation to understanding the phenomenon of learning, and subsequently understanding how values as operational ideas are at work in acts of inquiry. It will be concluded that the dynamic aspect of normativity in learning is to be found in the act of inquiry, where the individual learns to come to terms with the world and become an individual between particularity and universality.

The first section addresses the concept of normativity.

## Normativity and standards of learning

Normativity in the context of learning will in this chapter be defined as the way a person evaluates their own understanding and sets implicit or explicit standards for their aims of learning with respect to the role of learning as improving, changing or sustaining their way of living. Standards might explicitly be set by an individual, a group of individuals or society or they might be set as a matter of course. Values alone do not guide our desire to learn something, but they are inherent in the process of learning because, it will be argued, dealing with various standards and values is part of how learning takes place when seen as a process of inquiry. This might happen in the form of a challenge of standards of how to perform within a certain discipline or in the form of adopting the standards already given. If learning takes place in an educational institution, values and criteria within a disciplinary area would implicitly or explicitly be part of teaching and learning. Therefore, it should be emphasized that processes of learning not only result in outcomes of something decided beforehand but are also permeated with values which the students either conform to or are critical towards. The students are to deal with ideas of criteria and standards within a disciplinary field, and learning might be characterized by being a struggle where the individual strives to cope with what is considered valuable. Looking at learning from the perspective of the individual learner, the normative aspect of learning is to be found in the interplay between individual and world, when the individual in an inquiring process tries to come to terms with the world. The Hegelian concepts of particularity and universality, which will be addressed later, will help us to understand the interplay between individual and world.

The aim, when focusing on normativity and learning, is not to prescribe how learning should be facilitated. The idea is rather to address individuals' desire and motivation to learn and their understanding and evaluation of what is worthwhile learning. The view on values in this chapter is inspired by Dewey's concept of ideas as operational tools (Dewey [1929]1990). Values are seen as a certain kind of ideas which, along with other ideas, are operational in acts of inquiry. Values address what is considered valuable and worthwhile, such as questions of what a certain competence or ability contributes to personal and societal development. For example, a young person who has decided to study journalism will during the studies train certain skills, techniques and

competences, while at the same time, as part of the learning process, dealing with standards and norms of the discipline and therefore going through a process of personal development because their repertoire and understanding of values are developed. According to Christopher Winch, who deals with professional knowledge from a philosophical perspective, the way a skill is exercised tells something about the person and not the technique itself (Winch 2012, p. 64). Winch's perspective will be addressed later in the chapter, but it might be added that dealing with disciplinary standards and values will inevitably constitute the way the skill in question is exercised.

The spectrum of human learning covers basic aspects of life, such as learning to walk, as well as more existential aspects of life, such as personal development. Human learning includes more than adjustment to an environment. 'More' might be understood in terms of human searching and striving for meaningfulness, which includes valuation of what is good or bad to strive for. Seen in a learning perspective, it includes valuation of what is worthwhile learning. "For education is not just, as is often said, for life. It is the search for a quality of living" (Peters 1974, p. 416). We might say that an important aim of education is to develop 'seer of values' to use an expression from the German philosopher Nicolai Hartmann: "*Ethical man is in everything the opposite of the precipitate and apathetic man. He is the seer of values, he is sapiens in the original sense of the word: the "taster". He it is who has a faculty for the fulness of life's values, that "moral faculty."*" (Hartmann[1932] 2007, p. 45)

Being 'normative' means to set and describe standards for what is considered valuable. Underlying these standards are an ongoing search for and valuation of what is good and bad standards for how to lead a life. Learning is a means of change, development and improvement of human life, and therefore the concept of learning must address how standards for change and improvement are inherent and developed in processes of learning when an individual tries to cope with the world. Normativity concerns the concept of learning when it comes to motivation, because motivation to learn can be seen as closely related to an individual's interests and valuation of what is worthwhile learning, for example when they wish and intend to learn a skill or a discipline, either because they find it important and meaningful for their own



life or maybe because they find it important for society. When asking a person why they want to learn something, for example to play an instrument, the answer might be that learning to play this instrument is valuable because it will contribute to joy and beauty in life. Other answers might be that somebody told the person to learn something the person does not see the point in learning. This is often the case in schools and something that troubles teachers and politicians. What is considered valuable and meaningful stems from the perspective of both individual and community, because the community sets standards for what is valuable to learn and constantly requires individuals to meet the standards.

In the education system, it is seen as a problem if students do not show interest in learning and therefore do not engage themselves in the processes of learning they are intended to. In order to solve this societal problem, various methods, some of them characterized as evidence based, are developed by researchers and other professionals to motivate and bring about learning; however, the problem is that these methods usually focus on change of behaviour, rather than seeing learning as a process where a person tries to come to terms with the world. Whether students pay or do not pay interest in the intended learning, we need to understand what influences intentions of learning and how intentions of learning are related to a search for individual meaningfulness and social standards of living. In order to discuss the concept of learning with respect to individuality and normativity, Dewey's concept of inquiry and Hegel's dialectical philosophy will be applied to address the individual's inquiring process of coming to terms with the world. In the next section the concept of inquiry will be addressed.

### The concept of inquiry

The concept of inquiry in relation to learning applied in this chapter is developed by John Dewey, who understood the act of inquiry as an important aspect of the transformative process that occurs in learning. Dewey defined the concept of inquiry in the following way: "Inquiry is the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole" (Dewey 1991, p. 108). Jim Garrison argues in the chapter

“The “Permanent Deposit” and Hegelian Thoughts in Dewey’s Theory of Inquiry” (Garrison 2006) that learning and the concept of inquiry are closely connected in Dewey’s philosophy, and furthermore that Dewey was strongly inspired by Hegel in how he understood the inquiring process. In order to discuss the interplay between individual and world, and the role of inquiry in the process of learning, approaches to Dewey’s use of G.W. Hegel’s dialectical philosophy will be included (Good 2006, Shook & Good 2010; Garrison 2006). Dewey was simultaneously inspired by and critical towards some aspects of Hegel’s dialectical method, especially the idea of absolutism (Garrison 2006). Many Dewey researchers agree that Hegel’s way of switching between identifying conflicts in what appears to be coherent wholes and overcoming the conflicts by developing new concepts (Hegel [1807]1977) is to be found in a reconstructed version in Dewey’s philosophy. An ongoing shift between indeterminate and determinate situations can be seen in the processes of development that Hegel described in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. James A. Good, who has done research on the influence of Hegel’s philosophy on Dewey’s, describes Hegel’s theory of knowledge as a theory of learning or discovery, and he emphasizes how Hegel – like Dewey – struggled to overcome the gap between the subject as the knower and the object as what is known.

Because he [Hegel M.W.] rejected Cartesian dualism and developed a functionalist psychology, Hegel’s theory of knowledge is more accurately described as a theory of learning or discovery (...) Hegel emphasized that there is no unbridgeable opposition between the knower and the known, and truth is the way the world is for subjects (...). This characterization of learning was based upon a novel conception of the self and its relationship to the world (Good 2006, p. 24).

The Hegelian conceptualization of the relationship between the self and the world is also clear in Dewey’s work *Knowing and the Known*, where Dewey and Bentley developed a transactional theory in order to conceptualize the relation between the knower and the known as an entangled relation (Dewey and Bentley [1949] 1989). The development of ‘consciousness’ in *Phenomenology of Spirit* is characterized by shifts between indeterminate and determinate situations. The mechanism or logic of change<sup>1</sup> is that consciousness builds up what appears to be a

meaningful explanation of how reality is to be understood, but again and again it collapses due to flaws in understanding (see also Dewey [1897]2010).

Human learning might, inspired by Hegel, be understood as a 'struggle' that helps individuals come to terms with being social beings: the struggle which, in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, is the story of how 'consciousness' develops through stages of different shapes of consciousness, and during the process learns to understand the relationship between self and the world in terms of a mediation process between an individual and a social (Allgemeine) level. An example of the Hegelian dynamics of normativity in a process of learning is given in the section "The law of the heart and the frenzy of self-conceit" (Hegel 1977: p. 221-228) ("Das Gesetz des Herzens und der Wahnsinn des Eigendünkels") (Hegel 1973, p. 275-283). The consciousness believes that its own understanding of what it is to be good, in terms of following the law of the heart, conforms to the understanding of all other individuals.<sup>2</sup> The problem, Hegel points out, is that the consciousness's understanding of goodness is only for itself and not for the other: "The consciousness which sets up the law of its heart therefore meets with resistance from others, because it contradicts the equally *individual* laws of their hearts" (Hegel 1977, p. 227). The struggle here, which might be seen as a process of learning, is for the consciousness to come to terms with the conflict between its understanding of its own goodness and other individuals' different understandings. In order to move on in life, the individual at this stage must challenge its own understanding and definition of goodness and explore the meaning of the phenomenon of goodness. In order to move on from this situation, which is confusing because of the resistance the individual meets from other individuals, it must transform its understanding of the concept and develop its concept of goodness into something else. This may lead to conforming or non-conforming to the understanding of other individuals.

During the process that Hegel unfolded in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, processes of development, which we here understand as processes of learning, might be seen as a description of how the personal striving of learning – or perhaps resistance to learning – is challenged when it meets other individuals and other understandings and how mediation between a particular individual and a universal level, represented by

other individuals, takes place. The normative aspect in this process must, from the perspective of the individual, be seen as the ongoing change of understanding, evaluation and valuation of what it is facing.

Dewey's conceptualizing of development as the move from an uncertain situation to certain situations, and the idea of understanding problem solving as moving from an uncertain situation to a kind of wholeness, very clearly illustrates the inspiration from Hegel (Dewey [1938] 1991). According to Jim Garrison, Dewey reconstructed the Hegelian dialectics and transformed it into a naturalized theory of inquiry. Garrison stresses that Dewey, like Hegel, thought that knowledge proceeds from the vague individual to the more determinate individual, not from either the concrete to the abstract or from the particular to the generalized (Garrison 2006 p. 6). The role of concepts and ideas is to be tools in creating connections between particulars and to move towards a more determined situation characterized by wholeness (Dewey [1938] 1991, p. 108). Dewey's understanding of ideas is interesting and relevant when trying to conceptualize how and why dealing with values is essential in processes of learning. The next section addresses Dewey's concept of ideas as working and operational.

### Ideas and values

Ideas are, according to Dewey, operational and are working in knowing (and thinking) acts of inquiry and therefore in processes of learning (Dewey [1938] 1991; Dewey [1929] 1990). The understanding of ideas as working and operational is as follows: "First, the active and productive character of ideas, of thought, is manifest (...) Ideas are anticipatory plans and designs which take effect in concrete reconstructions of antecedent conditions of existence" (Dewey [1929] 1990, p. 133). This is very useful when dealing with how values and valuation plays a role in the process of learning, because values are without doubt a certain kind of ideas. Following Dewey's view on ideas, values must be a kind of ideas that address what we as human beings consider valuable and worthwhile to strive for, and in this sense they work operationally when learning takes place; also, ideas are essential for reconstruction of valuation. The role and status of ideas has been discussed throughout

the history of philosophy, for example in the Medieval Problem of Universals, but whether values are real in terms of having a certain ontological status or are a result of human negotiations, their role in an act of inquiry is always operational. An important insight from Dewey is that conceptual dualisms between the material and the ideal are very problematic. Dewey's anti-dualistic claim has the consequence that ideas are not ideals in the sense that they can be isolated from material and human action. Ideas are – and here Dewey probably follows Aristotle and Hegel – always embodied and situational and therefore active and working. Furthermore, they are active in forming human action with respect to the process as well as the result of the act. Ideas are mediating tools between particularity and universality because they simultaneously transcend and work in a particular situation, for example a situation where learning is taking place. Ideas work as standards and ideals for what a student is to achieve, and therefore ideas are operational in mediating between the individual student and the community of a disciplinary area in which the student to some extent aspires to participate.

### Mediation between subject and object – particularity and universality

One of the problems that occurs when trying to get a conceptual grip of the normative aspect of learning is how to understand the interplay between what in philosophy is conceptualized as subject and object. If learning is understood as an act that in some way establishes a relation between a subject and an object, the analytical point of view must be the interplay between an acting subject and 'an object' that is characterized by being shared by other individuals and therefore belongs to the social sphere or common world. The object might be material (physical) or symbolic (spiritual) or both, which is the case if the object is another human being. The 'subject' is, in modern philosophy, usually understood as consciousness, I, individual or self, while the object is understood as 'something' the subject relates to, for example through perception, intention (intentionality), use, etc. If a sharp distinction between subject and object is drawn – as for example in some cognitive theories of learning that focus on learning as something that takes place *in* the subject, where the metaphor for 'in' is the 'mind' as a kind of place

for either storing knowledge or performing network activities (Bereiter 2002) – it will lead to a dualistic position. Trying to avoid a sharp distinction between subject and object, on the other hand, will lead to a non-dualistic position. There are problematic aspects to both positions: a dualistic position has a tendency to isolate parts of an individual, for example the mind or intellect, while a non-dualistic position falls short of answering how to differentiate between a subjective and an objective, intersubjective level.

Dewey's philosophy, including his philosophy of learning, has an inherent focus on how to avoid dualisms; Hegelian philosophy was an inspiration, although he transformed the Hegelian dialectics. To understand what it means to be a person in relation to anything other than oneself is an issue that has been dealt with in the *Bildung* tradition, which deals with the interplay between individual and sociality while trying to conceptualize how an individual process of becoming is at the same time a process of coming to terms with oneself as a social being. Gadamer referred to Hegel's understanding of *Bildung* as the ability of an individual to move beyond particularity and understand themselves as part of the universal: "Whoever abandons himself to his particularity is ungebildet (...) – e.g., if someone gives way to blind anger without measure or sense of proportion" (Gadamer 2013, p. 11).<sup>3</sup> The individual stands midway between particularity and universality due to being both particular and universal (Good 2008, p. 29).

Gadamer's concept of 'horizon' (Gadamer 1986 p. 307) and the concept of 'historical horizon' (Gadamer 1986, p. 308) indicate the interplay between subject and world and between particularity and universality, while including a historical perspective:

All self-knowledge arises from what is historically pregiven, what with Hegel we call "substance" because it underlies all subjective intentions and actions, and hence both prescribes and limits every possibility for understanding any tradition whatsoever in its historical alterity (Gadamer 2013, p. 313).

From a learning perspective it is important to add that Gadamer did not understand horizons as closed, or the idea of an individual to move beyond a horizon as impossible. Horizons are, according to Gadamer, "something into which we move and that moves with us. Horizons

change for a person who is moving” (Gadamer 2013, p. 315). The concept of ‘horizon’ is useful for understanding the dynamics of the normative dimension of learning. If we understand ourselves metaphorically as situated in a landscape, the horizon(s) we are embedded in must inevitably influence our movements, while at the same time being changed by our movements. From a learning perspective there are several affinities with Dewey’s view of learning as undergoing and trying at the same time (Dewey [1916] 1985, chapter 11). The learning individual is ‘caught’ in a certain context, because it is a living organism in historical time, while at the same time having the ability to think and reflect and therefore to take action and change and transcend the environment. A criterion for learning is, according to Dewey, when the combination of undergoing consequences and change caused by action is loaded with significance: “When an activity is continued into the undergoing of consequences, when the change made by action is reflected back into a change made in us, the mere flux is loaded with significance. We learn something” (Dewey [1916] 1985, p. 146). The central insight here is the understanding of learning as loaded with significance. To be aware of significance, which is Dewey’s criterion for learning, is to be aware of the values inherent in the situation – for example whether the consequence of an action is valuable or not, or whether the elements of the action were suited for attaining the result wanted. It is important to remember that the unit of analysis i.e. situation consists of both the person (subject) who intends and acts and the social and material world (object).

### Mastery of skills and standards of learning

If learning is loaded with meaning, and processes of learning include a dynamic aspect of normativity, learning must have consequences for the development of character. Christopher Winch focuses on this aspect and discusses, from a Wittgenstein inspired perspective, how human activity, such as mastery of a skill, should be seen as normatively constituted, due to being part of a culture with evaluative practices and norms of conduct (Winch 2012, chapter 5). Winch’s concept of culture might, from a Gadamer perspective, be seen as horizon of meaning. Winch stresses the normative dimension from the perspective of the subject when he discusses the connection between the ability to exercise a skill in a certain way and the character of the person who

exercises that skill (Winch 2012, p. 62-64). Exercising a skill does not, according to Winch, in itself constitute personal character. It is the way the skill is exercised that tells something about the person, rather than the technique itself (Winch 2012 p. 64). An important point, according to Winch, is “that a skill is a personal attribute and a technique a way of doing things that can be described or enacted within the exercise of skill” (Winch 2012, p. 59-60).

According to this understanding, differentiation of the subject or the particular individual is to be found in the way a skill is exercised and in the way the individual understands its own role while exercising the skill. In a learning perspective, the ability to exercise a certain skill might be seen as a result of a process of learning. Skill as a personal attribute can be understood with respect to individual standards of how to exercise the skill, while at the same time it should not be forgotten that individual standards are influenced by social and disciplinary standards. An important dimension of standards is that they transcend the here and now: “Standards, as it were, take a ‘stand’ in relation to the flux of experience, operating by bringing an element of definition and permanence which enables a transcendence of the here and now. They bring meaning through constancy” (Bonnett 1986, p. 115). Setting standards is what takes place in the interplay between individual and world, and it is an important element of the normative aspect of learning, bringing about a temporary permanence in terms of underlying values in processes of learning.

Part of a process of becoming a person is to learn to perform a set of skills in a certain way (compare Winch 2012). If normativity is understood as human striving towards what is considered worthwhile and meaningful in a certain context or culture, the aspect of normativity in learning might be seen as the personal striving and search towards what is worthwhile to learn, from the perspective of the individual or a group of individuals. The concept of standard is useful in the argumentation because setting a standard includes a process of inquiry in order to ‘fix’ a standard, at least for the time being. Standards must be seen from the perspective of the individual as well as the social context. Therefore, setting standards and searching for standards in an inquiring process might contribute to identifying what takes place in the mediating process between individual and world.



## Conclusion: The dynamics of normativity in learning and coming to terms with the world

What is so special about the concept of learning is that it addresses concrete processes in situations. This is what makes the field of learning different from the *Bildung* tradition, where focus is on stating overall aims for education beyond concrete situations of learning. If striving for worthwhileness is to be understood in a learning perspective, there must be a focus on how normative processes take place in concrete situations, such as the classroom or the kindergarten.

Theories of learning are primarily analytical and descriptive with regard to how and why the phenomenon of learning is to be understood; however, following the line of this chapter, theories of learning must include and be aware of the normative aspect of learning, if the interplay between human intentions to learn and a world with standards of evaluation and norms is to be understood. The 'struggle' of the individual trying to learn and understand its own role and position in the world might be seen as processes of coming to terms with understanding other individuals, including understanding what other individuals understand as worthwhile (which includes the search for truth or development of the best possible ways to do or deal with things). This means that human learning might be seen as interplay between conflict and conciliation, or between a particular and a universal stance: me and what appears as the other.

It has been argued that normativity is important for understanding the phenomenon of learning and the normative aspect of learning found in the interplay between individual and world. In order to deepen the understanding of the interplay between individual and world, it was discussed as a subject/object relation and, inspired by Hegel, it was argued that the individual stands midway between particularity and universality, being both particular and universal. If the reasoning concerning the concept of learning is based on this premise, the process of learning must be understood as both particular and universal. An important argument for this statement is a dialectic position that stresses differentiation between subject and object and therefore offers an alternative to dualistic and non-dualistic positions of learning. The contribution to teaching and learning practices is helping to clarify how normative processes of learning, in terms of individual understanding and evaluation, are part of the learning process itself. In order to

understand motivation as more than just inner psychological processes, learning is conceptualized in terms of how valuable learning, from the perspective of the individual, is constituted when struggling to come to terms with the world.

## Notes

- 1 Logic in the philosophy of Hegel (and Dewey) is to be understood as a practical logic, or a logic of life (Good 2006, p. 27)
- 2 According to Charles Taylor, this section in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* refers to the understanding of natural goodness in the Enlightenment, such as it might be understood by Rousseau (Taylor 1977, p. 165).
- 3 Like Dewey, Gadamer disputed Hegel's idea of absolute Spirit. This will not be discussed in this chapter, where Hegel's philosophy of development will be seen in a pragmatic perspective as an ongoing, never-ending process – a process of learning.

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