

Accidentally learning to play the violin

Or what use is my autobiography in researching lifelong learning?

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Preamble

In 1994, I began accidentally to learn to play the violin. I had never wanted to but it happened. I am still at it although I leave it to others to say how good or bad I am. As a child I had no musical education or instruction and, until the accident with the violin, was convinced that I was utterly incapable of learning to play anything. Since I have never earned anything from my playing and have rarely done it other than for my benefit, could I say that learning the violin was instrumental?

The aim of this paper is to use my own learning trajectory to discuss the value of such 'accidental' turns in understanding lifelong learning and how they can impact on the attitudes of people towards themselves as learners.

I also consider whether 'accidental' learning can be considered education and whether we should even attempt such a discussion.

Introduction

As an adolescent I blamed my parents and their not sending me to music lessons for my complete musical ineptitude. I was jealous of those who could belt out riffs on the guitar, when I had tried and failed to even tune such a machine. Later, as a teacher in secondary schools over many years, I felt more than a twinge of envy towards those many pupils who were able to produce something akin to music, and sometimes genuine virtuoso performances, while I had only ever mastered the kazoo – and even that I played poorly. All this changed when, in early 1994, in response to my younger daughter's vain attempts to tune her violin – that she had been learning for a couple of months – I visited a music store in the centre of Glasgow, Scotland, where I knew the floor manager of the orchestral section to be a very accomplished fiddle player. In response to my request, Eddie, the manager, dispatched me to the

rock music section to buy an electronic tuner for the guitar. 'For the guitar?' I asked. 'Just go', said Eddie.

I bought the appliance and Eddie showed me how to use it. I went home, tuned my daughter's violin, looked at her music which had numbers on it to show which string to press, while the fingerboard of the violin had coloured dots marking the first position in what I later learned to be the key of G-major, and decided to try the thing out. It may have sounded like a creaky door, but to me it was symphonic. I was launched. Two weeks later, my daughter asked me to get my own violin so that she could practise with hers. Two years later I was playing first violin in a major amateur fiddle orchestra.¹ I still practise when I can and have expanded to include a few other, mainly string, instruments.

My experience with the violin was pivotal in my perception of myself as a learner. I had previously considered myself to be a lifelong learner, but this was more in terms of refining skills I already possessed or, more frequently, in being open to new influences in my academic work. I had also become very adept in not only making excuses for not undertaking new learning activities, but also extremely good at believing them. Indeed I would take this point a stage further and suggest, on the basis of discussions and interviews over the years with hundreds of younger and older learners, that the principle difference between them as learners is that older learners have a bigger and better developed range of excuses for not learning and are better at believing them.

Educators with experience of both older and younger learners may like to consider here their own attitudes towards excuses given by learners for work not being done, and more importantly the different attitudes they manifest towards the older and younger learners who are making the excuses. Perhaps because we view adults and their learning differently from younger people and their learning, we are, I would suggest, more likely to accept the excuse of the adult who claims simply to have been 'too busy' than we are to accept, say, an adolescent saying the same. Yet, what evidence do we have for adults actually being more busy than adolescents? This is not to say that there are not busy adults or indolent adolescents, but rather to underline the anticipation that adults are, per se, busy and more importantly that their excuses are valid since they emanate from an adult.²

The making of excuses to one's self and others – and the believing of them by self and others – arguably presents one of the biggest challenges for any so-called learning society – to get potential learners over the hurdle so eloquently put by Homer Simpson when his daughter Lisa was starting to learn the saxophone:

Don't try, Lisa. Trying is the first step to failure.

Learning and accidental learning

It is tautological that we learn all the time. As Malcolm Tight puts it, 'Learning, like breathing, is something everyone does all of the time' (Tight 1996: 21). It is an inevitable part of life that humans learn continuously unless some major physical or psychological trauma interrupts the process. Even when we are asleep, we learn.

Indeed, it is increasingly believed that some aspects of learning can even take place in the womb. Babies learn to associate certain rhythmic sounds with a calm, soothing environment and, once born, will respond positively to such sounds being played to them. From cradle to grave, we are acquiring knowledge, skills and attitudes. We pick up incidental bits of information. We are influenced in manners sometimes subtle, sometimes evident. From this it becomes clear that the concept of lifelong learning must concern itself with something more than simply learning throughout life. Otherwise it is a mere tautology and is hence beyond elaboration. Instead it must concern itself with purposeful learning, be this formal, non-formal or informal. We might want to term this 'education', but then there is the other problem of deciding when learning constitutes education and when it does not.

A problem with accidental learning is that the purpose may not match what is actually learnt. As we shall see, this is often the very essence of scientific discovery.

Accidental learning can be seen as a conjuncture of circumstances which contrive to have us learn something that we would probably not have set out to learn. For the sake of the present discussion, let us distinguish between it and incidental learning, since in the latter we are acquiring bits and bobs of information which may or may not be retained. Incidental learning is certainly accidental in the sense that it is unintended (Rogers 2003), but this is a very weak version of the concept. What I have in mind is a stronger version more akin to the Damascene experience which involves a fundamental and abrupt shift in paradigm, leading the learner to reassess or even reject outright previously held assumptions and/or convictions.

It is this fundamental shift in belief which makes accidental learning entail something more than the random acquisition of information, as we might have in Rogers' view of incidental learning, and which renders it worthy of discussion in its own right.

So, for present purposes, let us define accidental learning as the acquisition not just of information but also of knowledge, which brings about a long-term change of some sort in the learner and in his/her perceptions. The distinction between information and knowledge is important since, taking knowledge to be fundamentally information which is filtered, organised and interpreted according to the learner's own norms, preferences and experience, only knowledge can bring about change, however small or large. It is closely related to informal learning, except that the latter implies an intention to learn as it exists when you try to 'improve your knowledge about anything or teach yourself a skill without taking part in a course' (Beinhart and Smith 1998 in Edwards *et al.* 2002: 532). Knowledge, on the other hand, is a product not just of the information received but also of the backdrop and experiences against which it is set. In other words, it is a product, at least in part, of the learner's autobiography.

Only when the pipe burst did I learn how to fix it

Nailing down a floorboard is a simple task. Listening while doing it is essential. I nailed, I listened, I heard the quiet whistling sound from below. My heart sank, I became tachycardic, I began to hyperventilate as I realised what I had done ... I had put the nail straight through a central heating pipe. Prior to this incident, I had no idea

how to even temporarily fix a burst pipe. The necessity of stopping several hundred litres of water pouring into my living room made me ascend a very steep learning curve very rapidly.

In short, a combination of circumstances and a resolution to avoid in future all such occurrences made me not only learn how to fix burst pipes but, in order to do this, to also learn the basics of plumbing. In other words, having set out to do one thing (fix a floorboard), I ended up learning something else (some plumbing).

Non-attainment of the set goal is an important aspect of accidental learning and one which is frequently not only overlooked but actively disparaged in the literature. For Lawson, for example, the only learning of any real worth (and which consequently might be termed 'education') is that which results from 'a planned, intentional preparation, [as] an aid to coping, a way of short-circuiting personal experience by drawing upon the accumulated experience of others' (Lawson 1982: 47–48).

And yet, accidental learning is frequently the very stuff of scientific discovery. Contrary to popular belief, the discoverer in science does not always do so by methodical plodding, setting goals and attaining them, i.e. by what Lawson would term education. Instead she or he proceeds by intuitive leaps³ and by failing to attain goals. A case of the first is Einstein, much admired by certain logical positivists, and of the second, Michelson and Morley (1887). These latter set out to find the speed of the medium through which light was thought to travel (the [lumiferous] ether) and ended up by making the crucial discovery that the ether does not exist.⁴ In neither case would Lawson admit that 'education' had taken place. So we might learn from our mistakes but, for Lawson, they can never educate us! This, in turn, makes me wonder the extent to which Lawson eschews use of the accidentally discovered antibiotic penicillin. Perhaps he makes an exception as regards fighting infection.

However, as Lawson (1975) himself says, to call an activity or process 'educational' is typically to vest it with considerable status, and this is a point which, as I have argued elsewhere (Matheson 1995), has major ramifications for adult learning in all its forms.

Accidental learning and learner self-image

The literature on mature students is replete with accounts of how entering higher education generally affects positively the self-image of the learners concerned. The same has been demonstrated in numerous focus groups conducted by my habitual co-writer Catherine Matheson with students on Access courses when she has been researching attitudes towards higher education. Again and again, students bring up self-actualisation as a motivation for undertaking a degree. These students have variously had a long-standing, burning desire to enter higher education or have had a sort of minor epiphany which caused them to change their educational path. What they tend to omit is the notion of accidentally stumbling upon a piece of learning which altered their attitudes.

One might ask here whether respondents consciously exclude accidents of learning or whether they have learned that such events are not somehow worthy of mention. Edwards *et al.* (2002: 527) argue that 'it is through self and social questioning that

people are able to engage with and (en)counter – be affected by but also affect – contemporary uncertainties’. I wish to take this a stage further and to suggest that by self-questioning one can become more aware of oneself, developing an understanding of one’s learning and other trajectories and be aware of the influences which have been important. It is perhaps most critical for those of us who wear the mantle of educators, of adults or otherwise, since unless we know ourselves fully as learners we are certainly encumbered when it comes to understanding the learning needs of others. We might compare this with the common requirement of psychotherapists and psychoanalysts to undergo psychotherapy and psychoanalysis. Just as therapists and analysts have to know themselves in terms of their own discipline, then does it not make sense that the educator must know him/herself fully as a learner, that she or he know fully his or her own learning needs and how they came about?

As Edwards *et al.* (2002: 534) put it, ‘reflexive lifelong learning is not an inevitable part of growing up, or maturity’. It is arguably a skill which needs to be learned, like any other skill, but, I would argue, it is one which is essential if one is going to develop a learning society which is not dominated by credentialism and qualification. It is only through reflection that one can come to realise something of the range of skills and knowledge that one possesses and the impact these have.

Accidental learning, however overlooked or disparaged, serves to open unexpected horizons, whether these be musical, pipe-related, academic or scientific. The sudden realisation that *you can do it* – at least in a primitive fashion – can sweep away years of denial of possibilities. It can alter attitudes at a stroke. To continue to overlook it in research into lifelong learning ignores a venue in which, I would insist, we frequently do a substantial part of the learning we retain.

Like Richard Rorty’s (1990) notion of ‘higher education [being] a matter of trying to awaken the individual’s imagination so that she will be able to re-create herself’ (Kvernbekk 2001: 341), accidental learning can cause, as in my case, immediate and lasting re-creation of at least part of the self and how we perceive it.

Accidental learning as education

The Anglophone literature on philosophy of education has spilled an enormous amount of ink on attempting to define education. The usual result, as in Winch and Gingell (1999), is to equate learning with school, or on a good day with formal education. Terms like *upbringing* and *Erziehung* abound. As for Winch and Gingell (1999), they eventually duck the issue by terming education an essentially contested concept. Others, such as Evans *et al.* (1999: 107), propose that education ‘has come to suggest that enlightened persons do something to the underdeveloped or incompetent’ and consequently favour using the more neutral term *learning*. Their stance is disputable and ignores self-directed learning which fits all the criteria usually ascribed to education. It also ignores the flexible relationship between learner and educator, which Freire’s (1967) theories of education advocate, whereby the educator and learner swap roles and the one learns from the other. Lifelong learning often fairs quite badly in these philosophical debates and seldom manages to make any real advance. All too

often, it is all things to all people (Matheson and Matheson 1996) and is what Knapper and Cropley (1985: 20) term 'a utopian idea – an elastic concept which means whatever the person using the term wants it to mean'.

Accidental learning fails to fit any but the most liberal of definitions ascribed to education. It certainly does not follow Peters' notion that 'education implies that something worthwhile is being or has been intentionally transmitted in a morally acceptable manner' (Peters 1966: 25). Accidental learning may be worthwhile – assuming that an event that changes one's perspective has worth – but by definition it lacks intentionality. It does not involve transmission – except perhaps from hammer to thumb, and this is usually not intentional – and in the absence of transmission the demanded moral acceptability does not even come into consideration.

Indeed, the only 'definition' of education that accidental learning can come close to fitting is Cropley's (1979: 10) notion that 'education ... focuses on the experiences which influence learning', and this notion is so vague as to say nothing at all. But, at the end of the day, does it matter at all whether we include this form of learning under the banner of education?

Accidental learning implies learning from one's mistakes, being aware of learning opportunities whenever they arise and paying heed to them. It involves paradoxically learning how to fail constructively and learning how to try again. In this respect, it is clear that while the focus remains on formalised learning according to a transmission model, we merely teach people to be spectators in a sport organised according to someone else's rules. At best, they may learn something of participation but nothing of ingenuity as this involves thinking outside the box constructed around the learning experience.⁵ I am not advocating purely experiential learning as this would imply ignoring the lessons of others. As Saugstad (2002: 379) puts it:

Practical knowledge is learned by practice [but] it differs from purely experience-based knowledge, because practical knowledge also presupposes insight into general principles, in as much as this knowledge consists of the ability to apply general knowledge to particular situations.

What I am advocating is acknowledging and promoting the roles that error, luck and combination of circumstance play in our development as learners and in the general advancement of knowledge. Until we do this, any notion of lifelong learning and a learning society is forever condemned to be based on a deficit model all too easily prey to government whim and economic fancy.

The use of [my] autobiography in researching lifelong learning

The act of research is, virtually by definition, reflexive, especially in the qualitative paradigms. All that I hear from respondents in my research is interpreted according to my internal filters. It is read according to my experience. I may pretend that I am objective and produce various sorts of 'proof' to this effect. In short, I might delude myself that I am in some respect scientific.

I began by recounting how I accidentally began to learn the violin and mentioned the impact this had on me as a learner. In constructing my educational autobiography, I could add details of my career from its beginnings as a teacher of maths and then physics, through teaching French language and culture in an area of multiple deprivation to teaching and researching in higher education. These details would form a fairly typical trajectory for an academic of my ilk. I could pepper the tale with details of my life outside of my career trajectory and build a more complete, though probably quite dull, picture. There again, I could throw in the accidentals such as the mention by my son, then aged six, in his school diary which read 'my dad plays in the kitchen'. I had never considered cooking and baking for the family as play, but my son did not see it as work. The same lad would bring piles of books to the table – where his mum and I were working – and announce that he was going to do some work. His interpretation of the meanings of work and play set me thinking and made me question the dichotomy we create between them. In turn I questioned other apparent and alleged dichotomies and this turned out to be very important in various aspects of the work I did first for an MEd and PhD and later in various articles and chapters.

Any autobiography is a glimpse if not into the soul of the writer, then at least into those parts of the soul she or he would like to be seen. Mine could be constructed as a series of deliberate steps or as a series of accidents or a bit of both. It is interesting therefore that, for example, Edwards and Miller (2000) in their autobiographically based article notably give no mention to accidents of learning at all, never mind any that they see as pivotal, and yet these must surely have occurred, at least as far as Edwards is concerned. It is he who ran 'a record store and [set up] a recording label' (Edwards and Miller 2000: 133). It would be enlightening to know what made him change direction from this path. The restlessness that he and Miller ascribe to themselves (a trait one often finds in those who gravitate into adult education) gives some rationale for the move but really only poses more questions than it answers.

If we are serious about researching lifelong learning then we must take cognisance of the accidentals that shape our lives and the lives of our respondents. The tendency persists to treat learners' autobiographies as consisting only of those things they were taught in some semblance of a formal setting. We allow to slip past us events which are often pivotal in forming attitudes. We forget events such as my grandfather – a coal merchant in the Gorbals in Glasgow – taking me at the age of four to join the local library and the abiding desire that left in me to be surrounded by books. We forget such events at our peril and to a great loss in our understanding of what makes people the learners they are.

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Notes

- 1 Although this was quite an accomplishment on my part, it has to be put into perspective. The firsts 'have the tune' and so this is where the conductor put the newcomers and it is there that they rubbed shoulders with players of every calibre, from the professional concert players downwards, even to the old fellow who always played the same tune, regardless of what the orchestra was meant to be playing.
- 2 I recall on one occasion asking an adolescent where his homework was and getting as a reply: 'I'm sorry, sir. I wasn't able to do it since I had to sit up all night with my dad.' The dad, I learned, was a heroin addict and the boy (who was very big and strong) would sit up with his stoned father until the latter fell asleep. The son would then carry him to bed and lay him in the recovery position. This could take all night. How many adults could beat that for an excuse? And how many adults would believe this for an excuse?
- 3 The idea of setting a hypothesis might be more commonly termed 'guessing'. However, it is not blind guessing but rather informed guessing based on careful consideration of all available information.
- 4 Michelson's first experiment took place in 1881 in Berlin and was later refined by himself and Edward Morley. Try as they might, they never found a speed for the ether and hence were forced to conclude that it did not exist. Michelson did, however, design an apparatus which, with refinements over the years, has become one of the classic means of determining the speed of light.
- 5 And this serves very much to underline Crowther's (2004) contention that learning should be for living, not for *a* living. Life is not a spectator sport, but we can learn that the rules are set and not to be amended.

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