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Lived experience as a unit of analysis: towards a second-person approach for learning research

ABSTRACT

In order to track individual learning processes in ecological situations, we develop research in the theoretical perspective of enactivism. As it emphasizes autonomous coupling, we adopt *individual experience* as a fundamental unit of analysis, defined as an ongoing process which is lived “from within”. In this paper we present methodological procedures fitted with this unit of analysis. Hence we look at the potential, for learning research, of a second-person approach in which accounts of lived experience are relationally constituted.

By creating supportive conditions for the evocation of experience, methods such as explicitation interviews and video self-confrontation overcome the weaknesses of spontaneous reports; in situ video records and written traces complete these verbal data. For analyzing these corpuses, we firstly achieve a comprehensive analysis which strives to keep close from the agent perspective, and secondly a comparative analysis which focuses on categories relative to the research question.

Our approach allows investigating the widespread and yet disregarded silent activity of learners. During lectures, it appears to be shaped by complex imbrications of different actions (e.g. listening, taking notes, etc.) regarding different dynamical perturbations (e.g. talks, slides, notes, etc); “backtracking” (retroactively thinking to what was previously expressed) is frequent. We could also study the partial consensuses that teacher and learners reach through a progressive overlapping of only certain knowledge elements they experience. Therefore, choosing lived experience as unit of analysis allows investigating some aspects of the collective level of learning situations by working “outwards”, from individual experience to collective activity.

EXTENDED SUMMARY

Aims

To study learning processes at an individual level, we consider primarily *lived experience* as the fundamental unit to analyze. We endorse the theoretical perspective of enactivism (Maturana & Varela, 1980; Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1992) in which lived experience is delineated as an ongoing process of coupling which is lived “from within”. Heir from the phenomenological tradition, it emphasizes what “*a singular subject is subjected to at any given time and place, that to which she/he has access in the first person*” (Depraz, Varela, & Vermersch, 2003).

Thus defined, lived experience bears two important features. First, it is a *concrete* process unfolding in time through singular material and social situations. Second, it is *pre-reflective*: although

permanently “lived through” it is not immediately accessible to reflective consciousness but can be recalled and accurately evoked under certain conditions.

In this paper we present methodological procedures fitted with this unit of analysis, and look at the potential, for learning research, of a *second-person approach* (Depraz, 2012) in which accounts of lived experience are relationally constituted.

Methodology

When speaking about what we live through, we tend habitually to verbalize justifications, beliefs, explanations and generalizations, so that spontaneous reports about lived experience are usually poor and unreliable. Nevertheless, interview methods such as explicitation (Petitmengin, 2006) and video self-confrontation (Theureau, 2010) make possible to overcome these weaknesses. They help interviewees to retrieve and evoke lived experience by focalisation on a particular occurrence, and by prompting techniques fostering accurate descriptions of actions, thoughts and feelings. A set of objective verbal, non verbal and para-verbal clues allow researchers to check the effectiveness of evocation. The resulting verbal reports are completed by in situ video records and written traces, gathered in multi-folded corpuses.

A second person approach implies individualized understanding of other’s experience (Depraz, 2012). The researcher has to “move closer” to each agent’s perspective, which compels to previously become familiar with each agent’s language and culture and to agree on the collaboration. These conditions not only meet an ethical concern but also a scientific one: they constitute socio-political conditions for validity of the research.

A first stage of comprehensive data analysis leads to the identification of successive units. From the heterogeneous corpuses, the researcher identifies temporal intervals and labels them in order to represent the experience of each agent. It requires an open semiology: both intervals and labels are not defined *a priori*. But in order to produce general results, a second stage of comparative analysis is needed: the researcher has to revisit the comprehensive descriptions and compare them using a limited number of categories.

Findings

In the enactive perspective, knowledge is considered as *distinction*, which is the identification of entities (situations, elements, processes, etc.) and relations between them (Maturana, 2000; Maturana & Varela, 1980). Similarly to the “Knowledge in Pieces” approach (diSessa, 2014), they form knowledge elements which are experienced together in various ways. Therefore, when we account for lived experience of learners over a stretch of a few minutes, we describe a lot of different distinctions: only a few resemble those experienced by the teacher during the same time, some others possess only some common features, and yet others have nothing to do with them. Metaphorically, we could speak about a “diffraction” of only a part of the distinctions experienced by the teacher; the other part is often not even foreseen.

Our approach allows investigating the widespread and yet disregarded silent activity of learners. Thus, during lectures in teacher education programs, learners’ experience was shaped by the imbrications of different actions (listening, copying, taking notes, reflecting, having fun, etc.) regarding different dynamical perturbations (teacher’s and/or other learners’ talk, documents,

displayed slides, notes taken, etc). The different rhythms of these dynamics created a temporal complexity in which “backtracking” (retroactively thinking to what was previously expressed) was frequent.

Partial consensuses were reached between learners and teacher through a progressive overlapping of some distinctions; nevertheless, certain discrepancies could also foster learning. In sum, learners’ silent activity resembles anything but a simple passive following of what is expressed in learning situations: it rather appears as a complex, rich, imaginative and very diverse process.

Theoretical and educational significance of the research

Following the development of situative perspectives in learning research, many fine-grained studies of ecological situations exclusively investigate various forms of interactional processes, primarily considering *collective activity systems* as units to analyze. Nevertheless, their methods and analytical concepts are less powerful for considering learning at an individual level.

Choosing lived experience as the unit to analyze enlightens this individual level; as shown by our results about overlapping and partial consensuses, it does not exclude the collective one. This level supposes to work “outwards” from the individual level of experience to the collective level of activity in an opposite manner from the “inwards” direction of collectivist situative approaches (Greeno, 1998).

Furthermore, the multiplicity of distinctions we observe, among learners and in each learner’s individual experience, questions the models of knowledge development which are based on the succession of a limited number of relatively stable knowledge stages.

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