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Twisting the meaning of learning

Moira von Wright

By *learning* we commonly mean the acquisition of a form of knowledge through the use of experience, and for learning to take place experience is used in some way so that the result is knowledge, or somehow dependent on knowledge (Honderich 2005). In the field of education, learning is understood in close relation to *Bildung*, because it is concerned with human growth and flourishing. There is an ongoing discussion about whether learning is first and foremost a process of external impact or one of internal development, and many people conclude that it is a result of a situated and interactive process of meaning and knowledge construction. The word *learning*, however, is used in so many different ways that, as a teacher educator, one is inclined to refrain from using it once and for all. In the department of education where I work, most of my colleagues shun the word, holding that it is so widely employed that it brings more confusion than clarification into education. Although eyebrows may be raised, I myself am not yet ready to give it up. I believe that there is something educationally significant which can (only?) be said by using the concept of learning, something which cannot be simply articulated with other available concepts without running a risk of mixing up learning with change in general. Learning is no longer the property of education or psychology. It has become an important political weapon and a disputed democratic right as well. It appears in all kinds of discourse. This makes me want to explore the use of the word *learning* and to find out what could possibly threaten to make it an unusable concept.

The new language of learning

A language of learning has found its way into many areas of society outside the established educational institutions. According to Biesta (2005), there are at least four trends that have contributed to the rise of this new language of learning. They are (1) the new theories of learning, such as constructivist and sociocultural theories, which according to Biesta have shifted the attention from teaching to student learning; (2) postmodernism with its questioning of education; (3) the fact that people engage in several different kinds of learning both inside and outside educational institutions; and (4) the erosion of the welfare state, with a growing focus on learners as consumers. Biesta argues that this new language allows education to be described in terms of economic transactions, which again is not fair to the process of education itself. It also allows learning to be understood primarily as a question of individual preference. In this way, learning is in danger of losing its important intersubjective dimensions of response and responsibility, as well as its potential for surprise and unpredictability (Biesta, 2005; von Wright, 2000). Biesta therefore suggests that, instead of understanding learning as the acquisition of something external and connecting possessive metaphors like 'mastering' to it, we should see it as a response and as an attempt to reorganise and reintegrate what is disintegrated. He wishes to save the meaning of learning by reframing it in a language of trust, violence and responsibility. But would such an alternative language of learning lessen the 'misuse' of 'learning'? It seems as if learning is a concept that has all the qualities needed to transcend borders, change shape and mutate meaning.

The widespread use of *learning*

One area where 'learning' is increasingly being used, although seldom with reference to educational theory or practice, is that of primary health care. This is particularly evident in countries such as Sweden, where pharmacological treatment and the pharmaceutical industry work together. A glance at the Internet shows that health care issues are very widely recognised and easily accessible. Facts, information and writing about disease, illness, health and different forms of care are within the reach of everyone who uses the Internet. In order to meet the supposed needs of a public that now has access to what used to be medical secrets, and thus questions medical traditions and authority more than previous generations, the primary health care system is including learning in its agenda – either in the form of patient education or as mutual learning for both patients and medical

teams. Patient organisations are calling for more learning, because it is considered to be intimately linked to participation and influence over treatment. These organisations argue that knowledge is a prerequisite for authority and influence in the healing process, and therefore it is a civil right to learn about the different forms of possible treatment and about the disease from which one is suffering. In this situation, learning has a dimension of empowerment and is seen as part of the process of democratic participation in decision making, and as a key to mastering one's own future as a person and as a citizen.

Another field in which 'learning' is used extensively, but differently, is that of educational leadership. In Sweden a new kind of educational manager, principal or head teacher, the 'learning leader', was introduced and established some years ago. 'Learning organisations' was already a well-known concept, but 'learning leaders' was a term constructed by the authorities which surprised those working in the field, and questions were asked about whether it was a matter of a semantic innovation, a brand new concept of leadership – or something else.

Clearly, both of the areas mentioned above use the word *learning* in a broad and not very specific sense. Learning seems to mark a positive value which those who articulate the discourse and actually write the texts wish to emphasise: learning is associated with activity, progress and change towards the better. Learning also has something to do with individual responsibility, e.g. individual responsibility for one's own care and recovery, or individual responsibility to always keep up to date and do the right things. An interesting discrepancy between these two areas in which learning is an important word, however, is that learning is associated with different values: whereas in health care it has a strong connection to emancipation and democratic deliberation, within educational leadership the term seems to have a very limited meaning of top-down control. And yet in neither field does 'learning' retain what I believe is its common historically factual meaning – although one can have many different ideas as to how this learning comes about: as a communicative intersubjective process, or as appropriation, or whatever. But I will not go into that discussion here. The important aspect for the point that I want to make is that learning switches from being used in a very strict literal meaning to being used as a value-laden leading word, or as a metaphor.

The aim of this paper
In this paper I will restrict myself to a discussion about the twisting of the word *learning* when it is used as a leading word and a metaphor. Many philosophers of education have discussed the different metaphors attached to different ways of understanding the phenomenon of 'learning' (e.g. Hager, 2005). I will critically analyse how the word *learning* in itself marks other aspects than 'learning', that is the educational process of *Bildung*, meaning and knowledge construction etc. in educational institutions, and I will discuss the semantic innovations that possibly arise. My aim is to discuss to what extent an ambiguous concept like learning can deliver semantic innovations and be stretched and distorted without losing its literal meaning altogether or turning into an empty concept or dead metaphor.

Changing language and shifting meaning
With the help of subtle changes in the language, we can alter the values accompanying a text, and with the help of new leading words a discourse might turn in a new direction. When a new idea or perspective is introduced, the arguments that are expressed to support it are often deliberately formulated in opposition to another perspective. This is where new concepts and telling metaphors are crucial. The previously loved and commonly used metaphors might have lost their metaphorical significance and come to resemble unambiguous concepts, and so new metaphors are introduced in order to suggest plural meanings: when the metaphorical tension disappears, a new metaphorical language can emerge. The metaphors that are used in theoretical texts are mostly written 'within' the perspective itself and thus have a limited and demarcated significance. When they are separated from their immediate theoretical framework and placed in a general educational

discourse, their significance becomes vague. Yet the variety of meanings is not endless. One question of interest is therefore how these meanings are regulated, and how the limits of possible meanings can be analysed. I will not, however, try to give a general answer, but will discuss and analyse some examples with the help of the thoughts of Paul Ricoeur (1997).

Metaphors and novelty
Ricoeur describes a metaphor in the following terms:

> Metaphor is the rhetorical process by which discourse unleashes the power that certain fictions have to redescribe reality. By linking fiction and redescription in this way, we restore the full depth of meaning to Aristotle's discovery in the Poetics, which was that the *poiesis* of language arises out of the connection between *muthos* and *mimesis*. (Ricoeur, p. 7)

From this conjunction between fiction and redescription Ricoeur concludes that the 'place' of metaphor is the copula of the verb *to be*. The metaphorical *is* at once signifies both 'is not' and 'is like'. The meaning effects produced by metaphors belong to the phenomenon of semantic innovation. Semantic innovation is produced on the level of discourse, that is, the level of acts of language equal to or greater than the sentence. Ricoeur joins Aristotle in saying that being good at making metaphors is equivalent to being perceptive of resemblances.

As long as we can perceive the resistance of the words in their ordinary use, we can consider the metaphor to be alive. It serves the process that takes place on the level of the entire sentence. Its function is to save the new pertinence of the 'odd' predication threatened by the literal incongruity of the attribution. Metaphors have many features in common with narratives, where the semantic innovation lies in the inventing of another work of synthesis – a plot. In both cases the semantic innovation can be traced back to the productive imagination. Ricoeur (1997) further suggests that *poetic discourse* brings to language aspects, qualities and values which lack access to language that is directly descriptive and which can be expressed only by means of the complex interplay between the metaphorical utterance and the rule-governed transcendence of the usual meanings of our words. This is why metaphors are commonly used to introduce new ways of thinking – sometimes perhaps vaguely.

Successful semantic innovations

> 'To metaphorise well', said Aristotle, 'implies an intuitive perception of the similarities of the dissimilar.' Thus, resemblance itself must be understood as a tension between identity and difference in the predicative operation set in motion by semantic innovation. (Ricoeur, p. 6)

The sociocultural concept of learning entered the Swedish educational discourse in the 1990s, and in most cases a new meaning of 'learning' (*lärande*) replaced the former expression 'learning-in' (*inlärning*), which was criticised for its limited cognitive meaning and considered only to imply transmission from the outside to the inside, thus lacking an interactive dimension. At the time one could often hear the saving clause that learning was always more than itself and there was no learning as such, because there was always 'someone learning about something from someone'. This indicated that human subjects were implicitly present in every learning situation, even if they were not explicitly mentioned. In the sociocultural approach to learning, situated action became the core concept for understanding educational practice and learning (Säljö, 2000; Wertsch, 1995). The sociocultural approach has introduced several new metaphors and in this particular sense it has been successful in its semantic innovations, especially as regards the introduction of the metaphor of 'room' or 'space' (Swedish *rum*). I will therefore use it as an example of how a metaphor can function as a successful innovation.

Constructivist educators had previously formulated their arguments mainly in opposition to behaviourism, emphasising what had been 'wrong' in the behaviourist account of learning, such as the metaphors of 'transmission' and 'inside–outside'. Instead, they introduced the metaphors of 'construction', 'transfer' and 'facilitation' as more appropriate descriptions of the processes of teaching and learning. In a similar manner, those arguing in favour of a sociocultural perspective opposed constructivism and its metaphors by introducing metaphors referring to tools and space. The metaphor of a 'room' was introduced to draw attention to tensions in educational practice:

The idea of a 'room' signifies a tension between the subjects in a teaching and learning situation, e.g. between a teacher and a student. A room has given outer limits and yet it points to the possibilities that stretch beyond the interaction of the subjects, because a room has obvious limits and an end. As mentioned earlier, a metaphor signifies a tension, and with 'room' the sociocultural idea that learning is always situated in a practice is clearly marked. When educational practice is talked about in terms of 'creating a room (or space) for learning', the metaphorical tension presupposes the unspoken, namely the subjects. The room metaphor blurs the seemingly unambiguous constructivist concept of learning as an individual process of construction of meaning. Unlike Biesta (2005), I cannot see that the sociocultural perspective focuses our attention on human individuals (learners). Rather I argue that, in contrast to the constructivist discourse of *transfer of knowledge*, the sociocultural *organising of a room for learning* leads to an understanding of learning as something that occurs or happens as a result of optimal circumstances, rather than being a matter of concern between humans.

Metaphorical tensions do not last for ever; once its task as a protest against another kind of metaphorical language is completed, the metaphor loses its function and its significance tends to be crucially transformed.

Learning Leaders

Learning Leaders (*Lärande Ledare*, 2001, my translation) is a report from the Swedish Ministry of Education that was written by a group of experts with the aim of changing, improving and regulating the work of principals/head teachers (Swedish *rektor*). Here I will analyse how the word *learning* is used, and in what way, and what values are connected to it. I will try to see it as a semantic innovation, and in that particular sense I consider it to be a metaphor. It is risky to discuss learning as a metaphor because it is such an ambiguous concept, but by doing so we might grasp new aspects of how the word is used and its meaning is twisted. According to Ricoeur, a metaphor is alive as long as we can perceive the resistance of the words in their ordinary use and therefore their incompatibility at the level of a literal interpretation of the sentence. 'Learning', in the text I have read, is certainly not used in an ordinary way, but does it serve the purpose of being a semantic innovation?

Learning leadership, according to the authors of the text, is a concept introduced in order to develop strategies for goal-oriented leadership, which has been the (discursive) ideal in the context of the recent changes in the governance of schools. Whatever the reasons might be, I find it interesting enough that the term *learning* in this text is closely accompanied by the words *democratic* and *communicative*. Together these three words constitute keywords in the text, and they point to a new ideal of leadership within schools. That these value-laden words are brought together is in a way surprising. 'Democratic' and 'communicative' are so-called political 'plus words' and guiding principles for the official development of education towards inclusion and genuine participation. 'Communicative', for instance, arouses expectations of a leadership with an emphasis on verbal exchange, deliberation and mutual interest. 'Democratic' again is tied to expectations of participation and influence, or at least fair representation. Are we dealing here with a totally new conception of leadership, put forward as 'learning leadership'? Is this a successful semantic innovation? These questions of course cannot fully be answered through a reading alone, but a

critical reading might give us a hint as to the possibilities and limits of a metaphorical language of learning. I will start with a brief discussion about the concepts 'democratic' and 'communicative', which accompany the discourse about learning leaders.

The limits of creative metaphorising?
There are several definitions of 'democracy' and 'democratic', but common to most of them, and characteristic of the official Swedish reception of the concept of democracy in education, are the following themes: the basic value and rights of each individual; taking the standpoint of others into consideration in making decisions; and embracing plurality and difference. Democracy is also tied to some kind of order and organisation, in which each member has at least some responsibilities and rights. To be 'communicative' means to be willing to talk and listen to others.

Democratic and democracy mark an ideal, and, together with 'communicative', 'democratic' bears a positive normative value signalling inclusion and communication. In this combination, 'communicative' particularly emphasises the inclusion of others. Both 'democratic' and 'communicative' are open concepts signifying a process rather than a specific result. So when these two keywords appear together with 'learning' as guidelines for leadership, one could assume (at least I do) that they suggest an open meaning and a rationality different from the top-down, subject–object one. Perhaps even a communicative rationality with a subject–subject relationship?

I have identified 'learning' as the most important word, the leading word. 'Learning' is the first word in the title of the report, and it is the main issue, in relation to which other questions are discussed and mirrored. This means that 'learning' – even when it is not expressly referred to – is implicitly present in the meanings suggested by the text. The term 'learning' indicates at least two different areas: one is the learning processes of those involved in school activities (principals, teachers and pupils) and the other is the learning of the organisation: a learning organisation that continually changes (for the better), along with the learning of the principal and her or his co-workers.

> In a learning organisation the principal and her or his co-workers are simultaneously responsible for planning work and solving problems, doing the work and developing and improving work and activities. The focus is on learning, in which experiences from one's own everyday work and that of others form the basis for a search for new knowledge, which is constructed in interaction with practice, theory and research. (*Learning Leaders*, p. 27, my translation)

'Democratic' is a description, it tells us what something or someone is, and it is said to be a norm and guideline for the work of the 'learning leader':

> A democratic principal is active and sets the agenda for developmental discussions. This implies that the principal takes the initiative as regards what educational debates and discussions are to take place at the school and for what purpose. … The democratic principal also draws the boundaries for opinions and actions which break with the values of the school and with its democratic mission. (*Learning Leaders*, p. 12, my translation)

To be 'democratic' means not only to do certain things, but also to be active and to identify with the basic values, and to set the agenda that defines what discussions are to take place and which ones are not to take place. Democracy here implies that a person identifies with certain basic values, and therefore democracy in this text points to sameness, not to difference.

> To lead and develop a school which is founded on the basis of democracy means that the leader identifies with and is a carrier of the foundational values of the curriculum and makes certain that the perspectives and dimensions of the value foundations clearly permeate the leader's work with the activities of the school. (*Learning Leaders*, appendix 2, my translation)

The idea of democracy as a bearer of difference is absent: the democratic leader determines an unambiguous way forward and marks its limits. Democracy is a very strong word and when it is used it mostly has a positive significance. It marks the meaning of other words, and ties certain values to them. In this text for learning leaders, however, it seems to change meaning altogether. What is 'democratic' ceases to be an open question. Instead the word is used to mark certain rule-bound ways of communicating. Democratic is thus used in perhaps its most limited sense of a regulated formality.

A word as strong as 'democratic', which usually has a leading position and marks the meaning of other words, alters in this discourse. The 'old' or expected significance becomes blurred and 'democratic' turns into a specific way of doing things. Plurality and difference are excluded by sameness, as the following passage clearly indicates:

> The leader and the co-worker embrace the same goals and visions as guiding principles for
> the work of schools. (*Learning Leaders* 2001, appendix 2, my translation)

There is something coercive in the discourse suggested. The significance of the words learning, democratic and communicative fades away when they are brought together in this way. They also cease to be open concepts and their meaning becomes fixed as they become part of this leadership discourse: 'learning' comes to mean readiness for change, preparedness (as leaders and followers) to do whatever is asked from the top. Learning thus ceases to be a question of *Bildung* and lacks all aspects of interaction or mutual deliberation: it merely means being receptive. Following this, what is 'learning leadership' and what is a 'learning leader' actually doing as the principal of a school or other educational institution?

Perhaps a benevolent reader could interpret the formulations in *Learning Leaders* as an attempt to generate a new poetic discourse, but new meaning demands that the references are 'cross-fertilised', and it needs to clearly express what is similar, and what is dissimilar. The words *democratic*, *communicative* and *learning* do not lead to a semantic innovation, and the arbitrary and capricious way in which they have been used brings no new meaning whatsoever: 'A democratic leader is active and sets the agenda for developmental discussions' (*Learning Leaders*, p 12, my translation).

This statement, or predication, does not transcend the meanings that the words already have. Instead they lose their meaning through the paradox that 'a democratic principal' is one who is 'active and sets the agenda'. To be democratic here means to take the initiative, keep it – and rule. The common meaning that democratic has within education ceases to be telling, which leads to the conclusion that something is odd: it is not a fruitful paradox to 'be democratic', on the one hand, and 'decide the agenda', on the other. One cannot create innovations in educational language simply by combining words in different constellations. New metaphorical meanings presuppose transcendence, and they need to be clear about what is the 'old' and what is the 'new' meaning, and to maintain this tension. In order for the writer of a text to succeed in using metaphors in an innovative way, she or he needs to capture both difference and likeness, and the points of agreement should be understood as a tension between identity and difference in the new semantic innovation that comes about (Ricoeur, 1997).

Twisting the meaning of learning into authoritative control
The leading words *democratic*, *communicative* and *learning* have been used in the authoritative text that I have read as if they were metaphors and semantic innovations that could bring about a change in the language of leadership. The meanings of these words are, however, limited by the seemingly arbitrary way in which they are used, and the expected semantic innovation fails to arise. When 'democratic', 'communicative' and 'learning' are joined together in this way, they lose the

qualities of tension and they cease to bring to the language the qualities that they were (supposedly) intended to bring to it. Instead, their meaning becomes locked and the language becomes coercive. I have suggested that *Learning Leaders* tries to imply the following overall meanings:

- *Learning* means being willing to change; to be ready to flexibly change oneself and the work of the institution/organisation in accordance with the expectations and demands of the authorities.
- *Democratic* is about doing things in a certain manner according to agreements set up in advance. And to be democratic is also to keep the initiative in your hands.
- *Communicative* means to give straightforward orders, clear information and unequivocal tasks to one's followers: the more, the better; and the more alike the co-workers (followers) are, the better.

My reading has made me see how frail language can be, and it has made me observant of how misuse or careless use of common value-laden words and concepts weakens them. I have been surprised to find that the cherished words learning, democracy and communication can so easily be undermined and deprived of the strong values formerly associated with them when they are brought into conformity with a one-dimensional and hierarchical discourse. The metaphors lose their poetic possibilities, and the leading words lose their value-laden meaning: suddenly 'democratic' is a leading word in a discourse about uniformity and restrictions; 'communicative' turns out to be synonymous with unambiguous; and 'learning' means obedience and docility. In order to see through the superficial layer of meaning that the text tries to impose , the reader needs to undertake an alert and critical reading. Otherwise the use of these value-laden words and metaphors will mislead the reader into believing that the text actually supports the values that are commonly associated with them.

Concluding remarks

According to Aristotle and Ricoeur, good metaphorising implies a perception of the similarities of the dissimilar. What is 'like learning' and what is not? It is not easy to tell, distinctions are blurred, and I have come to the conclusion that *Learning Leaders* does not metaphorise well. Bringing in learning, accompanied by the concepts of 'communicative' and 'democratic', could potentially lend new dimensions to educational leadership. Perhaps this is simply an innocent text in which the writers have failed to achieve the semantic lift that they wanted, because they have failed to bring about a semantic innovation, and the paradoxes that are constructed are not fruitful ones either.

One could argue that this is typical of authoritative texts, that they are political and do not aim to be unambiguous, and that one therefore should not care if they make extensive use of words in a way that leads to loss of meaning and dead metaphors. At the beginning of this paper, I discussed how a language of learning is spreading and opening the way for wider use of the word *learning*. As its meaning becomes ever vaguer, the words that accompany it and the values formerly connected with it fade away. Creative use of language generally opens up space for unexpected understanding, but arbitrary use of words undermines the meanings that learning could actually have, and which are closer to or explicitly differ from its common literal meaning. Suppose that I as a leader take my own reading of *Learning Leaders* seriously (and I assume that the Ministry of Education intended it to be read seriously). Not only do the words 'learning', 'democratic' and 'communicative' in this context fit into a discourse that supports values which democratic and communicative were actually intended to oppose. A widespread use of value-laden and leading words constructs an authoritative language in which these words are swallowed up and their former literal meanings and values are twisted or wiped out. This 'new language of learning leadership' gives me an excuse not to bother very much about the values attached to 'democratic' and 'communicative'. Such a language paves the way for fundamentalism and top-down control.

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