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Book Review: Generative Knowing: Principles, Methods, and Dispositions of an Emerging Adult Learning Theory

ALIKI NICOLAIDES (2023)

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‘Being demands learning’ (Jarvis, 2009, p.208). This proposition is indicative of the vitality of learning in life. Therefore, it is of no surprise that diachronically one of the concerns of scholars in the field of education is to research human learning. The book we are discussing in this review offers a new perspective in this continuing exploration.

The topics that Nicolaides investigates and the tools offers are not the result of an epiphany about the phenomenon of learning. Indeed, from her first steps in research, she started seeking answers about the form, nature, and processes of learning caused by a learner’s interaction with an experience that is not effortlessly interpretable. That is to say, those situations that threaten to challenge the certainties we usually employ to make sense of our everyday actions and emotions. Although contact with the unknown is a recognised source of knowledge, in this book Nicolaides attempts something unique: the recognition of the processes that take place beneath experience, or the appreciation of the processes of becoming that are born from ‘the entangled intra-active aspects of our identity’ (p.2).

Nicolaides neither ignores nor criticises existing theories of learning. She acknowledges their value while appreciating that the contemporary context of our lives creates conditions that require a new form of human agency that is rooted in the intangible knowledge that supports our actions without always being perceived. In her quest, she does not rely on safe theoretical grounds but rather she performs, like an athlete of giant slalom, an investigation that explores a new territory with flexibility, avoiding conflicts with grand narratives and meaning-making schemes that claim a constant presence in our thought processes. In this sense of constant motion among theories, Nicolaides’ approach is nomadic. Readers of this book should not expect the emergence of fixed interpretations for learning, but a genuine testimony that will assist them

to recognise the fluidity that occurs from the complexity of our everyday life or from the processes of generative *knowing*.

This exploration requires conceptual support and therefore the author offers us three new concepts: ‘ruptures’, ‘in-scending’ and ‘awaring’. These concepts are introduced in the first chapter. They are the meaning tools that help us understand the author’s approach. The first term refers to the rupture that occurs with given knowledge when one decides to examine the experience of experience. In-scending is a neologism created by the author to define the process of seeking the underlying essence of experience. Finally, awaring refers to the process that allows the dynamic of contact with the unknown to act as a source of knowledge.

In the second chapter, the author draws elegantly on the work of Deleuze (1994) to justify the necessity of a theoretical approach more open to complexity and an exploration of learning beyond its instrumental and communicative nature. In the third chapter, she emphasises the inter-subjective meaning-making process that lies in the heart of phenomenology. This process that highlights the value of lived experience is generative only through the public reflexive exposure of the researcher’s own vulnerability. The dialogues presented here are helpful in preparing the reader for what is to follow.

The next four chapters are the essence of the book. The author utilises personal stories through which the tools mentioned above are highlighted. In the previous chapters, the author has pointed out that understanding generative knowing requires negotiating with the unknown. This process includes significant risk because it requires challenging assumptions that construct our identity. Here, the author takes this risk herself by presenting an inquiry in the lived experiences of her biography as well as in the biography of her parents. In these stories, the reader will more fully realise the meaning of the term in-scending, the heart of the central process of generative knowing. As a practice of embodied reflexivity, this has the potential to lead to one of the central goals of generative knowing, which is freedom:

Freedom is one aim of generative knowing. Freedom signals creation and permission to make something different. To make something different frees us from the system’s desire to keep reproducing the same thing, its dominance. Freedom is vitality, Vitality is potential that creates something new, different, joyful. (p.71)

Chapter seven is written by Dr. Ahreum Lim, with whom the author worked at the University of Georgia. In this chapter, Lim thoughtfully describes her

personal experiences from the world of labour, utilizing the cognitive tools of generative knowing. Through a reflexive construal of her parents' experiences in workplaces in South Korea, she provides us with the dynamics of generative knowing that do not reduce learning to mere preparation for the future but elevate it to a generative force.

Finally, the last chapter summarises the presentation of generative knowing as a theory of adult learning. This is a theory that has no predetermined elements but 'receives, returns and responds to all that is given' (p.130). It is a theory that begins with being and makes possible new ways of becoming based on the language of sensations. Accepting such a view of adult learning requires from educators, according to Nicolaides 'resonant intimacy', 'courageous vulnerability', and 'flexible emergence'. These dispositions constitute for the author the necessary conditions where the learning process becomes 'generative', offering the essential common time needed for creative potential to take shape.

This new perspective on the learning process in adulthood offered by Nicolaides will be of interest to all those adult educators who understand the potency of learning in adulthood for liberation and transformation.

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