

Main Articles

Learning versus studying: A false dichotomy

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When studying is shorn of the negative connotations and misconceptions that it is laden with, it becomes clear that studying is most often a necessary condition for learning anything of value in a meaningful manner. When one is engaged by a subject, topic, activity, or any facet of life, studying provides one with a deeper understanding of and an enhanced ability to do something.

Introduction

In a 1996 interview, the American actress Natalie Portman said, "I don't love studying. I hate studying. I like learning. Learning is beautiful." These words soon became one of the most famous quotes circulating on the internet. Their fame, however, is not solely due to the fact that they were spoken by a pop-culture icon. The simplistic dichotomy set up by Portman resonates with all those people who identify formal education with the drudgery of studying, but, in time and with some luck, might come to realize that learning transcends their experiences at school. The fact that a teenager uttered the above words makes this point even more vital. At the time of the interview, Portman was only a 14-year-old actress whose main claim to fame was her debut in *Léon: The Professional*. However, over the years she has starred in many successful movies, notable amongst which is *Black Swan*. This is the story of a ballerina who is fully committed to her art and after winning the lead role in Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* feels compelled to study so hard that she starts to lose grip on her sanity. The story is somewhat germane to a discussion concerning the dichotomy between learning and studying due to the fact that when learning ceases to be perceived as "beautiful" it impairs our ability to enjoy it and jeopardizes our capacity to profit from it.

Studying and Student Engagement

Studying has many negative connotations due to the bleak experiences some people went through in formal education. In many parts of the world education is increasingly assessment-driven and students are expected to amass a store of knowledge that they might not consider relevant or interesting because it is far-removed from the world they live in and is taught with no consideration for their personal identities. Hence, they grow up to associate studying with humdrum work that is mainly conducted for examination purposes. This misconception affects the engagement that studying can lead to when you discover something you are genuinely interested in learning more about. Both the National Survey of Student Engagement in the USA and the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement consider active learning to be one of the factors constituting student engagement, which may be defined as "students' involvement with activities and conditions likely to generate high-quality learning" (Coates, 2009, p. 3). In fact, a lack of engagement undermines the opportunity for students to experience deep learning, which is defined as "the process through which an individual becomes capable of taking what was learned in one situation and applying it to new situations" (Pellegrino & Hilton, 2012, p. 5). One of the ramifications of this is that the studying that students might feel obliged to do for examination purposes

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does not necessarily lead to any form of transference beyond the educational domain.

The dichotomy between studying and learning can, in a way, be seen as rather false. When studying is shorn of the negative connotations and misconceptions that it is laden with, it becomes clear that studying is most often a necessary condition for learning anything of value in a meaningful manner. When one is engaged by a subject, topic, activity, or any facet of life, studying provides one with a deeper understanding of and an enhanced ability to do something. As attested by Sally Ride, the first American woman in space and the youngest astronaut from her country to have travelled to space, in many ways studying seems to be an essential component of our ability to master what we want to learn more about. After the Space Shuttle *Columbia* disaster in 2003, Ride expressed her belief in the resilience of humanity's endeavours to extend its understanding of the universe it inhabits: "Studying whether there's life on Mars or studying how the universe began, there's something magical about pushing back the frontiers of knowledge. That's something that is almost part of being human, and I'm certain that will continue." For Ride and the countless people like her who have, over the millennia, fallen in love with learning new things, the allure of studying is irresistible. Ensuring that as many young people as possible are intrigued by the potential afforded by studying should be elemental in the contemporary educational milieu.

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Assessment's Potential

Studying is beautiful because it conflates disparate elements into one vast tapestry of knowledge, skills, and competences; it enriches the life of every single person who engages in it. Education should use assessment in such a way as to encourage young people to embrace that idea and thus develop their attitude towards studying. A significant way of doing this is to utilize a blend of summative and formative modes of assessment (Marshall, 2011). Ensuring that assessment of learning is complemented by assessment for learning is paramount given that the latter "provides information to be used as feedback by teachers, and by their students in assessing themselves and each other, to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged" (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall & William, 2003, p. 2). Student learning is augmented even further by means of assessment as learning, in which the key assessor is the learner who engages in self-monitoring, self-correction and adjustment with reference to personal goals and external standards (Earl, 2003). A balance of all three approaches to assessment should be sought for the sake of student engagement.

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Assessment can help students to discover how they learn best so that studying will no longer strike them as dreary. By making them consider different ways in which they could study, some of them perhaps more consonant with who they are as individuals, education can exploit assessment in order to put a premium on autonomous learning. This is of fundamental importance considering that one of the most significant effects on learning is when students become their own teachers (Hattie, 2012). Education should capitalize on assessment’s potential in order to enable young people to grasp how to study more effectively so that they may magnify the power of learning.

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Language assessment literacy (LAL): The case for exchange between teacher-testers and researchers

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What is ‘literacy’ today?

Once understood as the ability to read and write, the term ‘literacy’ has evolved in meaning over the past several decades to imply now an understanding of and ability to converse meaningfully about a subject. In today’s world, the concept of

literacy is applied in areas as diverse as information and communications technology (ICT), media, and health. As such, it is perhaps unsurprising that an area of interest has also sprung up in communication about assessment and how to facilitate this through a common understanding and a common language.

What is (language) assessment literacy?

Fulcher (2012) offers the following widely accepted and broad working definition of assessment literacy based on recent research findings:

The knowledge, skills and abilities required to design, develop, maintain, or evaluate large-scale standardized and/or classroom-based tests, familiarity with test processes and awareness of principles and concepts that guide and underpin practice, including ethics and codes of practice. The ability to place knowledge, skills, processes, principles, and concepts within wider historical, social, political, and philosophical frameworks in order to understand why practices have arisen as they have and to evaluate the role and impact of testing on society, institutions, and individuals (p. 125).

By extension, in the case of language assessment literacy (LAL), the above indicators are understood as referring specifically to the context of language learning, teaching, and assessment. That is, an individual displays aspects of LAL if he or she can successfully design a sound language testing instrument which is valid, reliable, objective, and practicable, or analyze and report assessment data in a constructive manner.

Why does LAL matter?

Douglas (2010) notes that “no test, including a language test, is given in a value-free vacuum, isolated from the social, educational, and political contexts in which we all must live” (p. 11). There is, therefore, a genuine need to expand and promote general understanding of the field. However, not all players in the field need to have the same level of competence – this can justifiably vary depending on the context they are operating in (Taylor, 2013).

With reference to learning settings in particular, Popham (2009) observes that “teachers who are genuinely assessment literate will not only know how to create more suitable assessments, but will also be more conversant with a wide array of potential assessment options” (p. 7). That is, he claims, “assessment-literate teachers will typically make better decisions” (p. 6). By extension we can posit that any stakeholder in the field of testing – whether researcher, test taker, language instructor, or policymaker – will be better equipped to make appropriate decisions if they have a range of competencies in LAL to draw on.

Who should be concerned with LAL?

Language assessment used to be quite clearly the domain of teachers, test designers, and researchers, but with the language learning landscape brought about by globalization and migration as well as a general perception of the need for exam success for acceptance at university and admission to and promotion in the workforce, the circle has widened. It now includes – amongst others – university admissions officers, immigration agents, and policymakers (Taylor, 2009).

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