Introduction

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The relation between development and learning is one of those foundational issues that historically has served to define the field of developmental psychology – whether negatively, as reflected in Bijou and Baer's [1961] claim that development can be reduced to (is 'nothing but') the accumulated products of learning, or more positively, as reflected in the claim of the same era that a distinction needed to be made between superficial, reversible processes of learning, and deeper, more fundamental, and irreversible processes of development, with the latter defining the subject matter of developmental psychology.

That distinction did not prove viable. In our initial microgenetic study published in 1982, Phelps and I noted that microgenetic research led to a blurring of the distinction between learning and development, but the conclusion we drew was that the sharp distinction between the two disappeared not because development could be reduced to learning, but because learning had come to be recognized as having many of the same characteristics of structure and organization that had previously been restricted to development. The continuity between processes of development and learning seems even more apparent today. But where does this leave developmentalists? If both development and learning are now understood and studied as complexly structured and organized processes of change, is there any room or need for distinctions between them? For example, are there constraints on one that do not apply to the other? If it is concluded that there are no important distinctions, what are the implications for the field of developmental psychology? Is there a definable set of phenomena involving change that the field addresses?

The articles in this special issue reflect a diversity of answers to these questions, making it clear that the issue of the relation between development and learning is by no means resolved. No one any longer endorses the solution that learning be dismissed as not worthy of consideration – a superficial imposition on a more genuine, lasting process of development deserving our exclusive attention. But, excluding this one, a whole gamut of remaining solutions continue to be voiced. Halford sees the sophisticated analysis of a single process of learning as the most promising approach. Others want to retain the two terms but differ widely as to the connection between them. Fischer and Granott characterize learning and development as similar processes having

different time frames. Feldman sees development and learning as situated along a gradual continuum, with no clear dividing line between them. Taking a similar position extended to multiple dimensions, van Geert regards development and learning as occupying different parts of a continuous space.

Others distinguish development and learning more sharply. Youniss in particular laments what he sees lost when the distinction is disregarded. Within their respective frameworks, Lindenberger and Baltes, as well as Pascual-Leone, discuss learning as a contributor to

development. Zimmerman treats development as a subclass of learning, while Lerner specifies the reverse relation, despite the fact that both label themselves as contextualists.

These authors each make their cases for the solutions they advocate, within a broader framework of proposals that includes issues of method as well as theory. The diversity of solutions suggests the continuing foundational status of the question, with the stance authors take regarding it illuminating how they construe their subject matter more generally. As Wertsch and Sohmer suggest in discussing Vygotsky's views on the issue, the relation between development and learning depends on a broader theoretical context within which these terms are defined.

Are there conclusions to be drawn as to how best to proceed from here? Halford's resolution to focus on a single process of change may turn out to be the most fruitful approach. Or a very different conclusion to draw is that our existing vocabulary is insufficient to characterize the many forms of change that are a part of human experience. Developing a richer vocabulary adequate for the purpose may be the task that awaits us if we are to arrive at a more rigorous definition of the subject matter of developmental psychology.

References

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