

# Learning as Meaning Making

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## Synonyms

Meaning construction; Sense-making

## Definition

“Meaning making” designates the process by which people interpret situations, events, objects, or discourses, in the light of their previous knowledge and experience. “Learning as meaning making” is an expression emphasizing the fact that in any situation of learning, people are actively engaged in making sense of the situation – the frame, objects, relationships – drawing on their history of similar situations and on available cultural resources. It also emphasizes the fact that learning involves identities and emotions.

## Theoretical Background

To learn something means to acquire knowledge, skills, or dispositions that enable the learner to act, think, and feel in ways that are recognized as important by oneself or others. A number of significant educational, psychological, and philosophical perspectives have emphasized the idea that learning in this sense is best conceived as meaning making. These perspectives include cultural-historical psychology, pragmatism, constructivism, and social constructionism. According to these perspectives, to learn something means to establish a meaningful relation to the subject matter so that it makes sense to the learner. Learning to read means learning to see the letters as forming meaningful sentences, and learning to play house means learning the overarching system of meanings that involves a mother, father, children, and cultural ideas about the family. If learning is not conceptualized in mechanical terms and extended to such things as computers and machines, then it seems that there is an element of meaning making in most if not all processes of learning.

If learning involves meaning making, we need to address that which is made, that is, meaning. In a minimal sense, human action, thought, or cultural products are considered meaningful when they cannot be adequately described in purely physical terms. Thus, the same physical movement of a human eye, a wink for

example, can express different meanings (flirtation, a signal of conspiracy, etc.) depending on the purpose and context of the wink. But the meaning of the movement cannot be found in its physical properties as such.

In this sense, meaning involves two aspects: intentionality and normativity. Intentionality is sometimes called “aboutness” and signifies the fact that things that are meaningful extend beyond themselves by referring to or pointing to something else. The wink of the eye is meaningful because it is a signal, and the letters on this page are meaningful because they are about certain theories of learning. Normativity refers to standards of correctness, which is to say that meaningful actions are subject to normative appraisal. A wink can only be meaningful because there are more and less correct ways of using this sign, and letters, words, and sentences are meaningful because there are right and wrong ways of using language.

This view of meaning, as a composite of intentionality and normativity, is related to both classic and contemporary theories of the mind in social and cultural psychology. In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey came close to defining mental phenomena in terms of meaning, for instance in the following quote: “The difference between an adjustment to a physical stimulus and a *mental* act is that the latter involves response to a thing in its *meaning*; the former does not.” (Dewey 1916, p. 29). Nothing, for Dewey, has meaning in itself, but only on the background of a larger social practice, which accentuates the importance of context in understanding anything meaningful (and psychological). In *Acts of Meaning*, Bruner (1990) argues that we cannot understand human beings without understanding how experience and action are formed by the mind, and we cannot understand the mind without taking cultural systems of meaning into account.

We propose to distinguish between three levels of meaning (semantic, pragmatic, and existential) all of which are relevant in relation to learning:

1. *Semantic meaning* concerns the meaning of language, signs, and symbols. Acquiring an understanding of the world involves establishing conceptual relations to the world, and this is a process of meaning making that predominantly takes place in social situations. Dewey observed the following in *Democracy and Education*: “the sound h-a-t gains meaning in precisely the same way that the thing “hat” gains it, by being used in a given way.” (Dewey 1916, p. 15). The child learns the semantic or conceptual meaning of the sound “hat,” because the sound is part of certain activities that involve this object. This context is social, for “the thing and the sound are first employed in a *joint activity*, as a means of setting up an active connection between the child and a grown-up.” (p. 15). On a semantic level, learning as meaning making involves being socialized into cultural-discursive systems of meaning. This idea was further developed by Vygotsky (1986) in his reflection of the relationship between language and thinking: Meaning making appears as the process by which socially given and shared words organize thinking and how thinking gives life to words. Vygotsky’s work has also highlighted the tension taking place between the socially shared meaning of a word and the more subjective sense it can acquire for a person, in a given place and moment.
2. *Pragmatic meaning* concerns the social practices of a culture. Culture is comprised of social practices that are constantly performed and reconstructed, and learners must acquire the capacity to participate adequately in these social practices. A useful analytic approach to these processes is found in studies of situated learning and apprenticeship (Lave & Wenger) and cultural approaches to apprenticeship in thinking (Rogoff). Building on anthropological studies of tailors, midwives, and other forms of activity in social practice, such studies suggest that learning involves acquiring an identity in a given community of practice. Thus, newcomers to a practice will begin at a peripheral position in the community of practice, but if they see a meaningful trajectory ahead of them, and if their activity is acknowledged by others, they will often be able to work hard to attain a more central position. The basic idea is that meaning motivates, and that there is a process of meaning and identity construction in any complex form of learning.
3. Finally, we will point to an *existential level* of meaning making in learning. Here, learning is considered as located within a person’s life trajectory, and, as it is often triggered by situations of rupture or uncertainty, it might question or reshape his or her whole perspective on her past and future possibilities – that is, a life-meaning. This existential aspect has been emphasized in studies in adult learning (as in Mezirow’s transformative learning). From a semiotic perspective, meaning making can also designate the processes by which emotionally laden life experiences acquire a semiotic shape, which makes them thinkable and communicable. As such, these processes contribute to, or impede, the actual processes of learning about an object, others, or the world (see for instance Zittoun, in press, 2011).

### Important Scientific Research and Open Questions

The idea of learning as meaning making has been very useful in deepening our understanding of teaching–learning dynamics. Current studies have used it to deepen three main lines of inquiry: The first describes and analyzes teaching–learning settings; the second develops didactic means to improve these; and the third aims at improving theoretical understanding of thinking.

Current descriptions of the teaching–learning situation identify parameters that contribute to the learner’s meaning making processes (see Perret-Clermont et al. 2004). First, studies have identified aspects of the *frame* of the teaching–learning activity – the didactic contract, the shared definition of the situation – that guides the learner’s meaning making. Mediating artifacts, such as tools, books, and new technologies, also support and shape these meanings. Second, other studies emphasize the processes of negotiation of intersubjectivity and the construction of shared understanding. Third, some researches insist on the role of the subjectivity of learners, which, depending on personal histories and sociocultural trajectories, might shape meaning making processes in learning situations (Rochex 1998). One of the questions recurrently emerging from such studies is that of the generality of meaning making: If learning depends on meaning making, and the latter is situation-specific, how is it possible to use knowledge developed in a given situation in another one? Is learning through meaning making more likely to take place when learning and teaching settings look similar to everyday situations?

Other studies use the idea of learning as meaning making to solve a pragmatic question: How to improve learning conditions? These tend to focus on the development of means that might support or mediate adequate meaning making: Computer software likely to give an everyday or playful flavor to school tasks; strategies that facilitate learners' capacities to listen to others' arguments and to formulate one's own, as in current research on argumentation; forms of mediation that might facilitate externalization of thinking and affect, and subsequent reflectivity through verbal elaboration, such as in techniques of life story in adult education, etc.

Theoretical advancement is based on the idea of learning as meaning making is deeply linked to authors' specific understandings of "meaning." In the field outlined here, open questions include: What are the psychological processes by which meaning making takes place? If, as some authors admit, meaning making requires "relating" discrete experiences, what are the modalities of these relationships (e.g., analogies, metaphors, reasoning by proximities, etc.)? If personal sense and socially shared meaning can be differentiated, how can these processes and their mutual relationship be described? If meaning making is a way of turning new or uncertain experiences into a person's self-narrative, by which processes does it occur? More generally, the emphasis on meaning making has tended to background classical questions related to the nature of reasoning and thinking (such as in Piaget). However, if it has been a step forward to show that a learner can solve a mathematical problem only if he or she has conferred meaning to it (see two points above), it might not be enough to account for the actual processes of reasoning

involved. If this is so, how can we describe the relationships between processes of meaning making and other processes of arguing, reasoning, etc.?

## Cross-References

- ▶ Adult Learning/Andragogy
- ▶ Argumentation and Learning
- ▶ Bruner, Jerome S (1915-)
- ▶ Communities of Practice
- ▶ Dewey, John (1858–1952)
- ▶ Identity and Learning
- ▶ Jack Mezirow on Transformative Learning
- ▶ Meaningful Learning
- ▶ Piaget, Jean (1896–1980)
- ▶ Socio-cultural Research on Learning
- ▶ Vygotsky, Lev (1896–1934)

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