

# The Learner

*Dr Erica Sainsbury*

## **Introduction**

All humans are learners. The type of learning, the pace of learning, the intentionality of learning, the motivation for learning, the application of learning, and the identity that emerges from learning may and do vary according to age and stage of life. Sometimes learning is not possible – for example individuals who are in a coma or whose mental status effectively precludes them from learning – but by and large to be alive is to be a learner. Although we are focussing on learners of school age, it is appropriate to consider the nature of learning and the learner in a wider sense in order to understand the place of schooling in learning. The educational literature has much to offer in understanding the learner, however it is imperative that we begin by understanding the learner as a human being, created, redeemed and sustained by God.

## **The learner as human**

In an earlier chapter, Michael Jensen has argued that in order to know and understand true humanity, the only valid starting point is our understanding of God. As the knowledge of God is only possible through divine revelation, so a proper understanding of humanity must begin with what God makes known. Further, this knowledge is revealed in the relationship between God and humanity: “whatever human beings are, they are in relation to the divine being” (pp. 3-4<sup>[1]</sup>). Most importantly, the pattern of humanity is revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ, the perfect man. When the nature of humanity is regarded from these perspectives, a number of consequences ensue. Firstly, humans cannot be adequately described simply by a list of qualities and roles. While these qualities and roles are features of humans, they need to be understood in the light of God’s revelation and purpose for what it means to be human. Secondly, since being human is at its core relational, as God is relational, humanity is also fundamentally social. Regarding the individual in isolation from the communities in which we are located severely constrains our capacity to understand what it is to be human. Thirdly, being human must be understood in historical context, particularly (but not exclusively) the Biblical context of creation, redemption and future consummation (p. 4).

Understanding our place in the Biblical context is fundamental to an exploration of what it means to be a human and what it means to be a human who learns. God reveals in the first chapter of Genesis that he has created humanity in his own image. As Michael Jensen has pointed out (p. 5), this concept is problematic and has been interpreted in many different ways. The position of this book is his contention that the image of God “is not then a property or quality which each human being carries, or a function they exercise, but rather a *calling* which is addressed to each human person and to all human persons. *The human creature is called by God to be his presence in the world; and as the one addressed by God, is equipped by him for the task.*” (p. 7, original italics). In this call to be God’s image, and the understanding that this call is to all humans, lie both the source of our identity, and our recognition of the worth and value of every person. God has

equipped us with the means to respond to this call as creatures with significant capacities, but capacities which are limited and constrained by our created nature. Unlike God, whose capacity is unlimited, humans must develop their capacities by learning.

However, although we have been called to the image of God, the reality is that sin has destroyed our ability to meet this calling. We are under the judgement of God and will be called to account. In and of ourselves we are not able to stand before this judgement, and no amount of education, learning or personal development will suffice to avoid it. Only acceptance of the gift of life brought about by Jesus' death and resurrection is able to turn away God's wrath and allow us to escape the punishment we merit. We live in the end times, secure in the knowledge that redemption has been achieved, but awaiting its consummation in the return of Christ. As we wait, sin continues to flourish, and humans must engage in learning within an imperfect world. Learning itself is under a curse: as work was made difficult and painful as a result of the Fall, so learning also can be difficult and full of toil. Nonetheless, the ability to learn is the gift of God, and a means of approaching our calling to the image of God.

The following sections explore these ideas in more detail, focussing on both Biblical understanding and the understanding offered by the literature of education.

### **The learner as social and relational**

From the beginning, humans were created for relationship. We were created for relationship with God and we were created for relationship with each other. There was found among the animals no helper fit for Adam, and thus God provided the woman, Eve. Further, God's purpose included the generation of human families and communities, and the language of the Bible makes it clear that these families and communities are integral to our humanness. God created us for relationship and for community, and a need for belongingness is one of our deepest needs (Ryan & Deci, 2000). We are children of God, the church is called the family of God, and we are called the brothers and sisters of Christ. Families and communities are the sites of our learning, and Claire Smith has argued cogently that the early Christian church was a learning community (Claire's thesis). Community, then, is an important concept in the understanding of being human.

It is important to recognise, however, that no human is a member of only one community; we are members of multiple, overlapping communities both simultaneously and serially. The initial community is the family, within which the first relationships develop, and the earliest learning takes place. The 'family' itself may be multiple and overlapping, with parents, grandparents, siblings and other relatives all involved in different ways and at different times with the infant and young child. As children grow, their communities multiply to include playgroups, schools, social and sporting groups, friendships and ultimately professions and work communities. Membership of and participation in some communities lasts only for a short period, for others it persists for a longer period, and for some, membership is for the whole of the individual's life. At any time an individual is a member of multiple communities, however membership of one community may be more prominent at particular points in time (eg a child is inherently part of a family, but when she is at school, the membership of her school and class communities is in the

foreground, while her family membership is present but in the background). These multiple memberships, whether foregrounded or backgrounded, nevertheless are critical in shaping participation in all communities, and for Christians, membership of God's family is at the core.

Community membership and participation shape and channel an individual's learning and development (Valsiner, 1997) and prepare the individual for later participation, learning and development in subsequent communities. The nature of a child's family community will contribute to shaping how that child participates at school, and the nature of school interaction will contribute to shaping interactions and participation in other communities. School thus plays a pivotal role in an individual's learning and development, not simply as a place where children are taught content, but as a community which is both shaped by and shapes the life trajectories of its members.

Communities are environments which foster the emergence and consolidation of identity, and in the same way as community memberships are multiple and overlapping, so individuals acquire multiple overlapping aspects of their identities. Again, the initial identity will be that of a family member; aspects which develop later may include boy/girl, cultural or ethnic background, school child, football player, friend, musician, Christian, teacher, engineer or doctor. Any person, at a particular stage of life, will thus self-identify in a large number of ways, with some aspects of identity at the forefront and others necessarily in the background. One is always the child of one's parents, but that aspect of identity may become less prominent when the individual creates new family relationships through marriage and child-bearing, or when parents die. During one's professional life, the aspect of identity dealing with career is often highly foregrounded, but after retirement it may slip quietly into the background as other aspects move to the forefront.

However, it is important to recognise that these aspects of identity, and thus identity itself, although inextricably part of the individual, emerge and are enacted socially and relationally. To be a member of a family is to understand one's place in relation to other members, and to act in ways which demonstrate this relationship. To be a football player involves interaction with other individuals who share similar interests and are willing to engage in cooperative activity involving a football. To be an engineer is to be recognised by the community of engineers as a member, to engage in social and professional actions which are characteristic of engineers, and to communicate successfully with other engineers in the accepted language of engineering (Gee, 1999). To be a Christian is to recognise one's relationship with God and with fellow believers – and to act in ways which make this relationship manifest.

Communities have the potential to bring about great good, both for their members and also for the wider world, and many are explicitly formulated with these purposes in mind. However, as result of sin, communities also form for purposes which do not have as a goal the common good, but the elevation of a minority, or the creation of discord, or other purposes which are considered less socially acceptable (eg gangs) (Rogoff, 1998). Even when communities are created with 'good' goals, they are unlikely to achieve their purposes fully because their members are sinful humans. Families, friendships, schools, sporting organisations and workplaces are all 'good' institutions, but all are marred by sin.

Communities are created and maintained as the individuals who constitute them participate, interact, engage, communicate and become enculturated into traditions which have developed over the history of the community. Inherently, however, all communities are learning communities, as newer members learn how the community functions and how they can play a role in them, and as more established members gradually learn and develop greater expertise. School and other formal educational settings are only some of the communities in which learning occurs. Understanding this, it then becomes important to consider the multiplicity of communities of which school students are members, because the trajectories of learning and development which emerge for each individual must necessarily result from the nature and extent of identification with each community. School children are not blank slates when they arrive at school, nor is school necessarily the most important influence on their developmental trajectories. All aspects of their lives and all aspects of their identities contribute interdependently to the ways in which they engage in the school community, and to the shaping of their learning.

### **The learner as a whole person**

Human beings are whole people, and attempts to deconstruct them into their constituent parts are neither helpful nor successful. Nevertheless it is helpful to consider a number of interrelated characteristics of human beings as we seek to formulate an understanding of the learner. These characteristics form part of the ways God has equipped us for our calling to be his image in the world. Although by no means an exhaustive set of ideas, we consider in the following sections human communication, activity and creativity, motivation and embodiedness.

### ***Communicator***

In order to reveal who he is, God has chosen to communicate with humanity, and has done so by means of words. He has spoken through the Scriptures, through the prophets, and through his Son, who is described as the Word made flesh. We know about God because he has communicated to us in human languages. The significance of language is evident in God's work: he uses language to create the world, to call, to make promises, to create and sustain his covenants, to pronounce his judgements and wrath, to bless and to curse. God speaking to us serves his purpose of restoring his kingdom and rule over us. As his children, God desires that we communicate with him in words: of praise, thanks, confession and supplication. It is with words that we confess our faith and allegiance to him.

The unique dignity of man is clearly seen in our ability to communicate by the spoken word, which is not shared with animals or plants. We do not have the same capacity as God to create solely by words, but we do share the capacity to make promises and covenants, to bless and to curse. Once we have reached an age where verbal communication is possible, our relationships are mediated primarily by means of language. Much of our learning and development is therefore mediated significantly by language.

Communication is at the centre of community. One of the characteristics of communities is that they have developed means of effective and efficient communication among members of the community which are meaningful to ‘insiders’ but which are often obscure to non-members. This includes both the words which are actually used in communication and the patterns of speaking using those words (Gee, 1999). Becoming a member of a community entails appropriation of these communicative patterns so that those who are already members of the community recognise the newcomer as one of them. In order to be accepted as a scientist, for example, an individual must not only present appropriate academic credentials, but also demonstrate ‘fluency’ in the language of science. The same is true for formal educational settings such as schools – individuals need to master the special languages of school in order to be successful.

Further, enculturation into a community also involves appropriation of the beliefs, values and behaviours which are characteristic of the community. These must also be communicated, and all are essentially grounded in language. Language is thus the primary mediating process by which individuals are enculturated into a community, and by which the culture of the community is enacted by current participants and passed on to future participants (Wells, 1999). Halliday perceived the purpose of language as being intended “to explain, within any particular cultural and linguistic community, what people can mean, and how they can use their linguistic resources to do so” (Wells, 1999, p. 6). However, communication by means of language does not result in a static reproduction of the community or its practices. Since each individual is shaped by a multiplicity of communities, each is able to make a unique contribution to any activity in which he or she is involved, thus opening the potential for transformation of the activity and ultimately the social structure in which the activity is situated (Wells, 1999).

There is of course another side to human verbal communication. Unlike God, humans use language to corrupt relationships and community. We use words to lie, to break promises, to gossip, to denigrate, to abuse, to wound and to create disharmony. We use words to promote ourselves and to belittle others. We use words to coerce and betray and defame and blaspheme. We learn these too in the context of relationships and community, as expressions of our sinful nature.

Further, we no longer enjoy perfect communication of meaning when we use words. Within the Trinity, communication is unambiguous and results in perfect sharing of meaning between the three Persons. Within human verbal communication, meaning is often clouded and obscure, and the speaker and hearer interpret the spoken words differently. This dissonance is partly a result of the different trajectories of speaker and hearer but it is also a consequence of the fallen nature of humanity. As God “confused the language of the whole world” at Babel (Gen 11:9), so human communication has been ambiguous ever since.

The nature of the human as communicator has profound consequences for learning and schooling. Firstly, learning is most significantly mediated by verbal communication, and formal learning at school is no exception. God has given us the ideal tool for learning in our capacity to share meaning through the use of words, and learning the skills of verbal communication is highly valued – literacy is regarded as essential for living in the Western world at least. Secondly,

schools need to be acknowledged as communities in their own right, with their own distinctive social practices and languages or patterns of speaking (many of which are so ingrained that they are effectively invisible and therefore taken for granted). Students must learn not only the visible curriculum, but also the invisible expectations and practices that constitute the ways of ‘doing school’. Thirdly, school communities are constituted by sinful humans, and thus feature some communication practices which are helpful for their communities and others which act towards destruction. Fourthly, even when members of school communities act with good intentions, their communication is problematic, and learning is marred by misinterpretation, misunderstanding and misconception.

### *Active and creative*

As Genesis 2:15 makes clear, God created humans to be active in the world. Even after the Fall, Adam is expected to work the ground, albeit now under great difficulty. It is our experience also that humans continue to be active, in work and in other aspects of their lives.

Learning, too, is an active process. There is abundant evidence in educational literature that learners do not simply receive understanding in a passive manner, but that they need to construct for themselves ways of understanding the world and the information which is made available to them. This notion has for many years been described as constructivism, although the term itself has come to mean much more than its root concept. Phillips (1995) even goes so far as to suggest that constructivism has become something like a secular religion, and he argues that “[a]s in all living religions, constructivism has many sects – each of which harbours some distrust of its rivals” (p. 5). At the heart, however, is the relatively simple concept that human knowledge does not come pre-packaged within the newborn child, nor is it absorbed by direct transmission of what is observed or perceived, but that it is constructed by the individual person in interaction with the world (and by extension, within communities). This constructive activity is a primary source of diversity among humans, since construction takes place within an individual with unique prior experience and understanding, and who attends in a uniquely selective manner to the vast array of stimuli within the (learning) environment.

For schools and other places of learning, an understanding of the constructive nature of the learning process, and the constructive capacities of the learner are critical to the development of learning outcomes, curricula, learning activities and assessments. Allowance needs to be made for both commonalities and differences in learning. Constraints and affordances such as motivation and interest, prior learning and experience, capabilities and opportunities will interact to channel learning, and the resulting outcomes will be richly diverse.

### *Motivated*

As humans are designed to be active, so too are we designed to act in ways which are shaped by motivations and emotions. Motivation is about being moved to do something (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and is thus a critical aspect of human behaviour. Humans experience different levels of motivation (how much) and different orientations of motivation (why) at different times and in different situations. For the Christian, motivation and goal-direction is intimately tied to our understanding of who we are in the sight of God, and his plans for us. However, as with other human characteristics, motivation is also subject to the distortion resulting from sin.

Christian motivation arises from the understanding that we are created by God for a purpose, that we are utterly dependent on him for all things, and that we are sinful. A recognition that we can do nothing to earn or achieve our salvation, and the revelation that our gracious God has done all that is needed to save us, through Jesus his Son, leads to a desire to love, serve and obey Him. We are saved by grace and our desire or motivation for obedience arises from an understanding, imperfect though it is, of the immensity of that grace. This motivation can be demonstrated in many ways – in doing “good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Eph 2:9), in preaching the gospel, in looking forward to Jesus’ return and the final judgement, and so on.

This is not to suggest, of course, that the motivation of a Christian is pure, since motivation along with the rest of human characteristics, has been corrupted by sin. It is indisputable, however, that motives are not hidden from God: “the LORD searches every heart and understands every motive behind the thoughts” (1 Chron 28:9).

Learning is always goal-directed, although the goals which direct learning are many and varied. Additionally, many other motivational factors influence the ways in which learning occurs, including perceptions of self and others, values and emotions. Motivation is well documented as a significant shaping factor for learning, and its complexity results in a wide range of learning approaches and outcomes.

On reading even the fringes of the motivation research literature, it becomes apparent that not only are there many theories and approaches, but many differ in relatively subtle ways. The key to understanding motivation in relation to student learning is to draw out the key ideas and integrate them into an approach which provides a framework for understanding how classroom practice and individual learners interact to enhance (or constrain) motivation.

Prior to the 1950s, motivation was described primarily in behaviourist terms, focussing on such aspects as reinforcement by reward or punishment. In the 1950s and 1960s, the focus changed to that of needs (the need to succeed, the need to belong and so on) although it was not clear from the research or theory where the needs arose from. From the 1970s came an increasing recognition of the cognitive nature of motivation, in that thoughts were able to influence emotions, motivation and behaviour. The cognitive basis for motivation remains the dominant perspective, with both positive and negative thoughts perceived as significant in shaping motivation.

Within these approaches, the implicit assumption initially was that motivation was a relatively stable, internal trait which was not significantly influenced by external factors. However more recent approaches, while not denying the significance of either needs or thoughts, have described motivation in terms of dispositions which are influenced by a range of circumstances, meaning that an individual’s state of motivation will change according to circumstances. Considering

motivation as dispositional and situation-dependent, and therefore variable rather than fixed, creates opportunities for teachers to enhance motivational conditions in their classrooms.

The concept of motivation as shaped both by needs and thoughts fits well within a Christian worldview, since a Christian must first and foremost acknowledge a need for God in all things – for life, for sustenance, for relationship, and above all for salvation. Acknowledgement of the need for God, and understanding of his provision, is a powerful stimulus for the Christian to act in particular ways. Further, actions such as Christian prayer are able to focus and channel an individual's thoughts in directions which inspire and motivate action. An understanding that God answers prayer further strengthens the link between prayer and motivation.

Dispositional approaches to motivation include extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, attribution theory, goal theory and self-efficacy theory. While these are by no means the only published approaches, they have all received significant attention, and together provide a robust framework for understanding the major dimensions of motivation, particularly in relation to learning.

***Extrinsic and intrinsic motivation:*** Intrinsic motivation can be defined as that type of motivation which is associated with the inherent satisfaction of carrying out an activity in the absence of any material consequence or reward (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Extrinsic motivation, on the other hand, is associated with actions which are designed to achieve an outcome which is separable from the activity – some form of external reward. Intrinsic motivation is described as underlying activities which satisfy the innate psychological needs of competence, autonomy and belongingness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The rewards which lead to extrinsic motivation may include those which are primarily based on avoidance (eg avoidance of punishment) and those where the individual undertakes an otherwise uninteresting activity because of its perceived utility (eg studying a particular subject because a good performance will allow entry to the tertiary course of choice).

Ryan and Deci (2000) argue that, in most cases, students are intrinsically motivated only for short periods of time – for example when starting a new phase in education. It is probably true that for many students, extrinsic motivation is more compelling – the presence of rewards and punishments promotes particular behaviours and the development of particular goals. Interestingly, research has demonstrated negative effects on intrinsic motivation by the use of rewards in that it has been suggested that the rewards can become perceived by the individual as controlling their behaviour. For example, in the case of a talented player of sport, initially the sport is played for fun (ie the activity is intrinsically motivating), however if the player becomes a professional, sport becomes a job which is rewarded by money, and the possibility arises that the prior intrinsic motivation has now become extrinsic – the reward is now not the enjoyment but the financial gain. Intrinsic motivation has also been shown to be decreased by the presence of other controlling behaviours such as deadlines, surveillance, imposed goals, and in some cases, verbal praise. However, if the reward is perceived by the individual as providing information or feedback, the negative effect may not be apparent – the suggested explanation is that if the reward is perceived as providing autonomy support, this enhances intrinsic motivation. Autonomy-supportive environments are those which are structured in such a way as to allow individuals freedom of choice in what they do and how they do it, while at the same time

providing clarity about the purpose and expected outcomes (Reeve, 2006). The key is how the reward is perceived by the individual – as controlling behaviour or providing autonomy support.

**Attribution theory:** Attribution theory postulates that individuals attribute success or failure to particular factors, both intrapersonal and interpersonal (Weiner, 2000). These factors are described as located in three dimensions: locus, stability and control. Locus relates to whether the factor is internal or external to the individual, stability relates to whether the factors are perceived to be fixed (stable) or changeable (unstable), and control refers to the extent that the individual is able to control the factor. For example, ability would generally be perceived as internal, stable and uncontrollable, whereas effort would generally be perceived as internal, unstable and controllable. Task difficulty would be perceived as external, stable and uncontrollable. According to this theory, the mechanism of achievement is the mediational role of attributions in shaping motivation to participate in activities. Thus, failure in a school task might be attributed to poor ability (internal, stable, uncontrollable) or to task difficulty (external, stable, uncontrollable) or to inadequate effort (internal, unstable, controllable) or to bad luck (external, unstable, uncontrollable), and the effect on the learner's motivation to attempt future school tasks will be shaped by the attribution that is attached to the previous failure. Weiner suggests that a search for attribution is more likely when an outcome is negative, unexpected and/or important, and that individuals are more likely to take personal credit for a successful outcome and to attribute failure to other causes than the self.

**Goal theory:** Any individual at any time is potentially motivated by a range of goals, ranging from the very specific and particular (eg learning a specific guitar chord, learning a new memory verse), through to general life goals (eg finding happiness, growing in the Christian life). In the context of student learning, two type of goals are prominent, namely achievement goals and social goals.

Achievement goals are usually defined in terms of mastery and performance goals, and within the performance category, as performance-approach and performance-avoid. Mastery goals “reflect a focus on developing competence, learning, and understanding the task, and the use of self-referenced standards of improvement” (Pintrich, Conley & Kempler, 2003, p. 321). Performance goals are focused on how the individual appears to others: if an individual is positively motivated to perform for the purpose of demonstrating competence and superiority over others, this is described as a performance-approach orientation, whereas when an individual is motivated by a desire to avoid failure or to avoid appearing stupid or incompetent, this is described as a performance-avoid orientation. Mastery goals have been recently postulated to include both approach and avoid dimensions, but this has not been clearly accepted in mainstream research (Pintrich et al, 2003).

Empirical research has supported the conclusion that the most adaptive type of goals are mastery goals, and that environments in which mastery goals are facilitated are more likely to promote deeper cognitive processing, more effective metacognition and positive effects on motivation. However there is also some evidence that performance goals in themselves are not associated with maladaptive patterns of learning, and that a combination of mastery and performance-

approach goals may have some benefit in some situations. Performance-approach goals can promote increased effort and engagement in a task, but there is always the risk that failure will have significant detrimental effects. Performance-avoid goals have consistently been found to be associated with maladaptive patterns such as reduced effort, self-handicapping behaviours, avoidance of seeking assistance and increased likelihood of cheating. Current perceptions suggest that the creation of environments which promote the development of mastery goals are more likely to result in effective learning.

Achievement goals are, however, not the only goals which motivate students, and it is equally important to consider the role of social goals. Social goals can be considered in two major contexts: within and outside the academic achievement domain (the latter is not discussed). Social goals as part of academic achievement relate to the ways in which students perceive their relationships as being affected by achievement. Dowson and McInerney (2003) identify five social goals: social affiliation (to become or remain part of a group), social approval (to gain approval of parents, teachers or peers), social responsibility (to follow social or moral rules), social status (to maintain social position at school or later in life) and social concern (to be able to assist others).

**Self-efficacy:** Self-efficacy, a key component of Bandura's social cognitive theory, is described as an individual's perception or judgement of the capability possessed by the individual to carry out a specific task (Zimmerman, 2000). It is related to similar constructs of self, self-worth and self-concept, but is distinctive. Self-worth is described as a general perception of the self in terms such as being a good person, or being like others. Self-concept relates to perceptions of the self in particular broad domains, such as being good at mathematics but poor at sport. Self-efficacy is the narrowest of the three notions, in that it relates to the perceived ability to carry out a specific activity within a domain, for example, being good at addition but poor at division. Self-efficacy is important because it has been found to be a strong predictor of performance, and in many cases a stronger predictor than actual prior performance: if the individual believes that the task is within capabilities, then that task is more likely to be successfully achieved.

Sources of self-efficacy – that is sources of the perception of capability – include personal accomplishments in the past (if I have done something in the past, I believe I can do it again), vicarious experiences (if I watch someone else carry out the task, I will be able to do it), verbal persuasion (if I am told I can do it, I can do it) and physiological states such as confidence or anxiety. The major consequences of self-efficacy beliefs include effects on cognitive performance, motivation (attributions and goal setting), affect (anxiety, confidence, stress and mood) and selection of tasks and environments that will be attempted.

These four approaches clearly overlap with each other to some extent, while focusing in particular on specific aspects of motivation, however all essentially accord primacy to the individual – it is the individual's intrinsic or extrinsic motivation, the individual's goals, the individual's attributions and the individual's self efficacy. More recently, however, motivation theorists and researchers have begun to focus on the social nature and origins of motivation. While there is some distinction in emphasis drawn between researchers from different

epistemological positions, there is nonetheless a growing movement suggesting that motivation arises from the interaction of individuals with other individuals and the environments in which they find themselves. This is an extension of the dispositional movement in that it recognises the flexibility of motivation, but is distinct in that it accords primacy to the social rather than the individual. In other words, the individual who is engaged or immersed in some activity becomes engaged in some way by the activity, and motivation to continue and potentially change the activity emerges as a consequence. The individual may have been prepared beforehand by prior experience to be predisposed to engagement, thus may enter the activity with pre-existing motivation, however subsequent participation has the capacity to channel motivation further (either to increase or decrease).

These recent developments focusing on the social and relationship dimensions of motivation suggest possibilities for enhancing learning through focusing on the development of positive and supporting relationships. From the Christian perspective, a relationship with God will be central, and will be a critical motivating influence. However strong Christian family bonds, friendships and relationships with peers and teachers will also mould the development and emergence of motivation in different domains. Aspects such as the learning environment and curriculum also have key roles in a complex interplay of factors which shape the learner's motivation, either positively or negatively.

### ***Embodied***

*This section still not developed – not sure where to look or how to proceed.*

### **The learner as situated in time and place**

We have argued earlier in this chapter that an understanding of what it is to be human requires that we recognise and acknowledge our place within the Biblical history of creation, redemption and consummation. We live in the end times, between the decisive redemptive events of the cross and resurrection, and the future consummation of God's kingdom in the return of Jesus. Thus we have confidence in our eternal destiny but we are also required to live in the present world. However, the world is not homogeneous but diverse, and being human is thus situated in time and place within the wider Biblical historical context. All human activity, including learning, thus takes place within the affordances and constraints of the temporal and spatial locations in which individuals and communities are positioned.

Just as the learner is profoundly shaped by membership of multiple communities, so those communities are shaped not only by current members, but also by their histories. When a child is born into a family, she enters a community which is uniquely a product of current and previous family members. Those families themselves are further shaped by the cultural and social settings in which they exist, so that a child who is born in a remote mountain village will encounter significantly different family and community experiences compared with a child who is born into an urban family in a large city. What and how these two children learn will also differ significantly in many ways. Differences in tangible aspects such as political and economic

situation and available resources, as well as less tangible elements such as goals, expectations, values and beliefs of the family, community and wider society will interact with individual capabilities, goals and opportunities to channel learning trajectories in particular directions. Indeed it is one of the tragedies of the present world that these trajectories differ so greatly, as a result of inequities between societies and communities.

Further, the historical, social and cultural setting privileges the types of knowledge that are valued, the processes of learning which are adopted, and the content to be learned. Knowledge may be theoretical or practical, pure or applied, concrete or abstract, relational or self-focussed, and each type is privileged and more highly valued in different settings. In many communities, learning is based on an apprenticeship model, whereby children are socialised into the activities of their parents by observation and imitation (Rogoff, 1998) rather than formal teaching. In Western societies, formal education plays a more prominent role whereby the State takes a leadership role in dictating the nature and extent of compulsory schooling. Historical context also sets the boundaries for knowledge, particularly in the sciences, as succeeding generations discover new approaches and understandings of the world which provide the best available fit to what is observed. Examples of the latter include development of the understanding that the earth is spherical rather than flat, and increasing knowledge of the biochemistry of the human body.

At the same time, the historically situated nature of knowledge reminds us that as creatures, our knowledge and understanding are limited, incomplete, and in God's grace, evolving. On the one hand we recognise that there is an objectivity to the world; that there is an objective reality which is more than simply our subjective experience of it. This objective reality – God's world – is revealed to us but because we are creatures and not the omniscient Creator, we observe and interpret this understanding and revelation only partially. There is such a thing as objective truth – truth is not relative – but our observation and interpretation serve to move us closer to that objective truth while being inadequate for the task. As a consequence, what we know, believe, understand, and perceive of the world is shaped by the historical, cultural and social milieu in which we find ourselves. We see a part of the picture only, and the part that we see is different from the part seen by others who live and have lived in different times and settings.

Time and place are also significant on a more narrow scale in relation to how children learn during the school-age years. As argued earlier in this chapter, the school community shapes and is shaped by its members, but that school community is also profoundly shaped by the broader social and historical environment in which it is embedded. Furthermore, it is critical to remember that learning, at school and outside it, is designed to prepare learners for participation in the world beyond school; that is, there is a future focus for learning in addition to a present-time focus. Learners are situated in the present, which has emerged from the past, but learning prepares them for future situations into which they will grow and mature. Polman (2006) warns against focusing too heavily on "*presentism*, which assumes the past was just the same as the present" (p. 225), but the corollary is also true, that we must continually remind ourselves that the future will be different from the present. We have no means of predicting the future, but that does not absolve us of the responsibility of considering it and seeking to prepare learners for it. For the Christian, of course, there is hope and comfort in knowing that God is the God of past, present and future, and that nothing occurs outside his will and plan. The Christian is described in future terms – as

an alien and stranger in this world, and a citizen of the world that it is to come – but is still called to live in the world.

### **The learner and identity**

Sfard & Prusak (2005) have raised two important questions about human behaviour which should concern educators in relation to student learning: “*Why do different individuals act differently in the same situations? And why, differences notwithstanding, do different individuals’ actions often reveal a distinct family resemblance?*” (p. 14). They suggest that the answers to these questions can be found in a consideration of the emergence and transformation of identities, both individual and collective (Eccles, 2009). The notion of identity provides a means of drawing together much of the previous discussion about what it means to be human and the nature of the learner.

At the heart of what it is to be human is a sense of identity, which shapes our perceptions of who we are and where our place is in the world. Eccles (2009) suggests that humans are driven to seek answers to key questions such as “*Who am I? What am I about?...What do I value? What do I want to do with my life?*” (p. 78). McCaslin (2009) further suggests that school students are vitally concerned with answers to the questions *What is learning?* and *Am I welcome here?* The answers to these and related questions will guide the goals that individuals will set and the actions that will be undertaken to fulfil these goals. As is argued earlier in this chapter, each unique individual is simultaneously and sequentially a member of multiple overlapping communities, and each community membership will contribute to the trajectory of identity development. Some communities will reinforce existing identity, whereas others will cause transformations. Indeed Polman (2006) suggests that individuals hold multiple identity trajectories at any one time, depending on the communities with which they identify. These trajectories are not fixed, but are shaped by the interplay of the individual’s participations in these communities, and the ways in which they change over time. Polman (2006) further describes identity as relational, as having to do with how individuals perceive themselves in relation to others. The relational aspect is essential – a man cannot identify as a father unless he has a child, friendship needs at least two participants, to be a teacher is to be in relationship with a learner.

For the Christian, relational identity is a critical concept, since identity is first and foremost found in a relationship with God, and secondly in relationship with other believers. Sfard and Prusak (2005) argue for identities to be described as “stories about persons” (p. 14), by which they mean not that identities are expressed through stories, but that the stories themselves constitute identities. Thus the stories which constitute the Christian’s identity are the stories of the individual’s place in God’s plan of creation, redemption and consummation, the stories of relationships, the stories of transformations, the stories of what it means to live in the present world while waiting for the world to come. It is no coincidence that we tell each other the stories of our lives and in doing so, we reveal something of ourselves – our identities – to each other. Talking – communicating – by means of stories allows individuals to articulate what it is about their past experiences that allows/assists them to cope with new experiences and to plan for the future (Sfard & Prusak, 2005). Not all stories will contribute to identity formation and development – those stories which reinforce the individual’s ongoing being or doing, and which are most closely associated with membership in (or exclusion from) certain communities are most likely to be significant as identity narratives (Sfard & Prusak, 2005). Narratives do not need to be

communicated always to other humans; the stories told by ourselves to ourselves are likely to be the most significant and comprise the strongest core identities.

Although identity may be manifest in actions and in states of being which may be described in terms such as personality, identity is more than simply personality, character and nature, or beliefs and attitudes (Sfard & Prusak, 2005). It is also more than simply mastery of actions or capabilities (Polman, 2006). An individual may be capable of carrying out a particular action, even with considerable expertise, but that capability is not part of the critical narrative of the individual's identity. Conversely, individuals may strongly identify with an action in which they are novices. For example, a school student may be able to perform well in science examinations without identifying as a scientist, but may identify as a guitar player despite a low level of skill. Wertsch (Polman, 2006) distinguishes between mastery and appropriation, where mastery involves the development of expertise and appropriation involves taking it on board as personally meaningful. In the Christian life, this distinction can be readily manifest – individuals are willing to believe the gospel story, but are not willing to appropriate it for themselves; they may know many Bible verses, yet not make the connection between the Bible and their daily lives.

Importantly, if identities are seen as stories, the nature of identity in any given situation will depend heavily on who is telling the story, and to whom the story is being told. Some aspects of identity remain core and are manifest in most or all settings. Hopefully, one's identity as a Christian is one of these – but there is no guarantee that this is the case. Nevertheless, the story told as a first-person account will usually differ from that told as a second or third person, and will also often differ between listeners. This is not necessarily a sign of deceitfulness, but can be a means of enhancing communication based on shared understanding or experience (Sfard & Prusak, 2005).

The Bible gives Christians a clear picture of their identity. Genesis makes it clear that humans are created in the image of God, and thus that their identity is most closely and truly found in God. More significantly, the New Testament describes Christians as the children of God and the heirs of God, brought about by God's choice of adoption. This is made possible only through Jesus Christ, the perfect human, who manifests the true identity to which all humans are called. Acceptance of Jesus as Lord and Saviour results in a transformation of relationship and thus of identity: "to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God" (John 1:12-13). The transformed identity includes being crucified with Christ and being raised to new life; seeking not to conform to the world's expectations but to those of God; seeking to serve rather than to be served; seeking fulfilment in faith and obedience to Jesus.

Identities are made manifest to others through actions. An individual whose identity trajectory includes that of a good student will behave in school in ways that are approved and validated by the school authorities. Identifying as a musician will result in an individual engaging in those practices which are recognised as musical. Identity as a child of God will be enacted in attitudes, relationships and behaviours.

## Conclusion

This chapter began by considering the learner as a human being, created, redeemed and sustained by God and has traced a number of aspects of what it means to be so – to be social, relational, communicative, active, creative, motivated, embodied and situated. Understanding the learner is a critical key to creating and sustaining environments and processes for effective and fruitful learning, but more importantly is a fundamental basis for understanding the way that learning contributes to and shapes the development of identity and sense of the individual's place and purpose in the world. Subsequent chapters explore in more detail how other aspects of learning and schooling interact with the learner to mould and shape each unique individual.

## References

- Dowson, M. & McInerney, D.M. (2003). What do students say about their motivational goals? Towards a more complex and dynamic perspective on student motivation. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 28, 91-113.
- Eccles, J. (2009). Who am I and what am I going to do with my life? Personal and collective identities as motivators of action. *Educational Psychologist*, 44, 78-89.
- Gee, J.P. (1999). *An introduction to discourse analysis: Theory and method*. London: Routledge.
- McCaslin, M. (2009). Co-regulation of student motivation and emergent identity. *Educational Psychologist*, 44, 137-146.
- Phillips, D.C. (1995). The good, the bad and the ugly: The many faces of constructivism. *Educational Researcher*, 24(7), 5-12.
- Pintrich, P.R., Conley, A.M. & Kempler, T.M. (2003). Current issues in achievement goal theory and research. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 39, 319-337.
- Polman, J.L. (2006). Mastery and appropriation as means to understand the interplay of history learning and identity trajectories. *Journal of the Learning Sciences*, 15, 221-259.
- Reeve, J. (2006). Teachers as facilitators: What autonomy-supportive teachers do and why their students benefit. *The Elementary School Journal*, 106 (3), 225-236.

Rogoff, B. (1998). Cognition as a collaborative process, In: W. Damon (Ed-in-chief.), Volume 2, D. Kuhn & R. Siegler (Eds.), *Handbook of Child Psychology* (5<sup>th</sup> Ed.) (pp. 679-744). New York: Wiley.

Ryan, R.M. & Deci, E.L. (2000). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations: Classic definitions and new directions. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 25, 54-67.

Sfard, A. & Prusak, A. (2005). Telling identities: In search of an analytic tool for investigating learning as a culturally shaped activity. *Educational Researcher*, 34, (4) 14-22.

Valsiner, J. (1997). *Culture and the development of children's action: A theory of human development*. (2<sup>nd</sup>Ed.). New York: Wiley.

Weiner, B. (2000). Intrapersonal and interpersonal theories of motivation from an attributional perspective. *Educational Psychology Review*, 12 (1), 1-14.

Wells, G. (1999). *Dialogic enquiry: Towards a sociocultural practice and theory of education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Zimmerman, B.J. (2000). Self-efficacy: An essential motive to learn. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 25, 82-91.

---

[1] Page references are to Michael's chapter draft dated 31<sup>st</sup> May 2010 unless otherwise indicated