



Actions of Their Own to Learn: Studies in Knowing, Acting, and Being

Shapiro, Bonnie, ed.
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Book Review

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Reviewed by: Angela Cowser, *Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary*

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Actions of Their Own to Learn: Studies in Knowing, Acting, and Being is an edited volume of fourteen essays which explore the question of what it means to take actions of one's own to learn. Taking action to learn happens within both formal and informal settings; it also happens during the process of building new knowledge as learners pose questions about the world and design new ways to collect and analyze information to answer those questions (4). The researchers argue that "a conception of what it means to learn must be framed as part of a larger process of building understanding that involves more than the mind" (4). In this constructivist worldview, learning "is a process in which learners are actively involved in the mental construction of ideas using prior knowledge and experiences as a foundation" (6). Building understanding (can) include participants working simultaneously as researchers, teachers, and learners (5).

The book is divided into three sections: (1) the power and agency of the learner, (2) active learning with others to build knowledge and community, and (3) the environments that support active learning.

In section one, through the use of a mutual learning process, researchers themselves take action to learn and understand the emerging values of the communities they study. For example, White uses autoethnography (and a carbon footprint calculator) to document changes needed to reduce her carbon footprint. She then uses her learning to design a curriculum to help her students take action to reduce their own carbon footprints. As a Provincial Parks educator, Den Hoed challenged "top-down, political, disciplined" educational processes by using Mezirow's basic theory of transformative learning to "teach for change." In so doing, he helps his students transform sets of fixed assumptions and expectations to be more "inclusive,

discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change” (63, quoting Cranton [*Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning*, 2006]).

In section two, scholars who construct knowledge-building communities among disparate groups of learners (grade-school children, physics teachers, math students) have discovered that improvisational co-action, in which ideas “become taken up, built upon, developed, reworked, and elaborated upon by others,” enables shared understandings and learnings that are collectively determined: the class as a whole becomes “the body that learns” (138-140). Towers and Martin discover that improvisational learning, listening authentically to children’s ideas, and building trust helps both teachers and students evolve to see themselves as collaborators rather than competitors (12-13).

Finally, section three describes environments that support active learning, including classrooms where students are in control of decisions about how scientific inquiries will proceed, and another, where people come together and create film and photographs (photovoice) to educate, build awareness, and encourage political action. These processes help students develop a deeper connection with course content (208).

This book presents a variety of qualitative approaches (narrative, interviews, autoethnography, case study) to activist learning in multiple and variegated learning environments. The scholarship affirms teaching that is firmly student-centered, where teacherly authority is decentered, and power between students and teacher is shared throughout the life of the learning cycle.

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