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Your Story, Your Life, Your Learning: Autobiography Reveals Basis for Supporting Personalized, Holistic Pedagogy

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Abstract

Keywords

Autobiography;
Subjectivity; Learning;
Personalized Learning;
Holistic Learning;
Lifeworld; Pedagogy;
Covid-19; Inclusivity;
DEI

Each person ongoingly experiences the world uniquely through vital processes shaping their subjectivity, personhood, and sense of self. Learning, an innate characteristic or modality of each human life, of living, likewise arises subjectively or idiosyncratically. In this paper, a phenomenological lens is applied to auto/biographical excerpts concerned with various learning experiences to help reveal essential, subjective characteristics of emergent learning. The insights help establish a basis for challenging the primacy of objectivist learning evaluations. The insights also confirm the importance of personalizing learning as a pedagogical gesture nurturing and enfranchising student learning in significant ways beyond conventional educational approaches that generally ignore subjectivity. Personalized, holistic learning is also proposed here as a solution to address many challenges and issues emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper is based on the author's recent PhD research.

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Human learning is innate or commensurate with our existence from birth or earlier and experienced lifelong. In its invisible grasp and with the help of bodily senses, organs, and tissues, babies become mobile, crawling, walking, and embracing the surrounding world with animated determination. As perceiving bodies, we touch and explore, listen and mimic, and discover – *learn* – the nature of the world through this engagement. The arc of this pathic “learning journey,” within and without, opens into a horizon of being and knowing that, itself, seems boundless.

Each human life unfolds in this manner, with every experience helping create new synaptic connections distributed throughout the body. In this way, each person, young and old, participates in the creation of their unique subjectivity – their personhood. Curiously, despite this self-evident truth, we have devised an education system that largely ignores the inhering values of subjectivity and its associated learning potential, something I have puzzled over throughout my life and my 30+ year education career.

Since the Enlightenment and the emergence of natural science based on objectivist thinking, scientists and the first analytic psychologists developed numerous abstract theories of human learning allied with rational empiricism (Kaufman, 2013). Today, learning continues to be framed in the language of prediction and measurement, emphasizing cognitive schemata and objectivist psychologism¹. This may be seen in this definition by the American Psychological Association (2022) which describes learning as

the acquisition of novel information, behaviors, or abilities after practice, observation, or other experiences, as evidenced by change in behavior, knowledge, or brain function. Learning involves consciously or nonconsciously attending to relevant aspects of incoming information, mentally organizing the information into a coherent cognitive representation, and integrating it with relevant existing knowledge activated from long-term memory.

My recent doctoral research began by questioning objectivist definitions of learning through a comprehensive literature review before completing two studies of learning. The first comprised a study of auto/biographical excerpts in which I discerned a phenomenality of learning rooted in essential characteristics of subjectivity.

This paper refracts this study of auto/biographical and observational (pedagogical) insights, which are shared below. The first insight is a personal and potent memoir from my childhood. This exploration focusing biographically, qualitatively, and phenomenologically on the lived significance of learning will contribute to the research supporting personalized holistic learning.

This orientation to learning is growing in prevalence throughout K-12, post-secondary, and adult-oriented North American schooling, but is not well understood at present (Gross et al., 2018; Spier et al., 2019). I believe this research will also contribute insights related to efforts in K-12 and higher education settings across North America to increase educational equity related to neurodiversity and special education, differentiated instruction, DEI initiatives, and First Nations education. This paper also identifies personalized learning as an important and valid response to increased mental health problems in youth linked to the recent COVID-19

¹ Psychologism is a philosophical doctrine or approach that attempts to reduce all concepts, principles, and knowledge to psychological facts or mental processes. This view holds that all human knowledge and understanding are ultimately rooted in psychological or mental activities of individuals, such as perception, sensation, memory, and reasoning (ChatGPT, 2023, <https://chat.openai.com/>).

pandemic.

I have a deep interest in exploring learning, and not just as a reference for considering the arc of my own life journey. In my career as an educator of 30+ years, I have often personalized my approach to nurturing student learning in several K-12 and post-secondary programs². I have devoted much time to exploring the nature of learning by pondering how learning “hangs together.” The word *gestalt* means “shape” or “form” and, to philosopher-poet Jan Zwicky, *gestalt* comprehension provides “insight into how things hang together” (2019, p. 5), how a whole phenomenon arises differently than an assemblage of parts. To Zwicky, empirical science focuses on the reduction of wholes into components and then infers the behavior of wholes from the behavior of parts, which she asserts is often erroneous. Such *gestalt* perception is also a function of education, starting, I believe, with how each student is perceived: as a “whole person” or a component assembly of “parts” – behaviors, sensibilities, and perceived competencies, etc. This is a critical distinction, one that guides the creation of learning activities and gestures, and also educators’ determinations and observations about student learning abilities, aptitudes, and potential.

I’ve also read widely about learning and long puzzled over the pronouncement from educator-author Peter Jarvis who writes in *Paradoxes of Learning* (1992), “Learning is wider than education,” and “all the social institutions cannot contain learning since it is fundamental to human being and to life itself” (p. 10). This prompts me to wonder how I might recognize learning in its fundamental *appearing* in my life and subsequently, human *being* itself. Below, I share a reflection from my young life in which I apperceive learning arising most potently.

The Appearance of Learning: Childhood Pond/ering

From a time when I was very young, perhaps three years old, I recollect vague, hazy memories of *being-in-world* such as splashing in the water, petting a dog, and reaching out to be-with and feel the embrace of my mother and father. These and other childhood memories seem rooted in a sensibility as strong as a need for food and safety, impelling me to engage with and explore the world and uncover its personal meaning. One vivid recollection exemplifies this sensibility.

“It’s getting dark, Michael, five more minutes and we have to go. Look at you, you’re filthy. And put all the frogs you caught back in the pond. They’re not coming home with us.”

This pond, a swamp really, five to six kilometers from my home, is my prized “go-to-place”. I am four or five years old, and I beg my mother to bring me here, after school, on weekends, anytime in spring, summer, or fall. There, aided by a dip net and magnifying glass, I pull off my boots and jacket and commune with the life of the pond. As my feet sink into the mud and I dip my arm in water up to the elbow, my senses are engulfed as I observe, hear, smell, and feel. I experience a pondering in which I am extended in all sensory ways. I have no preferential trajectory except that which calls me most strongly in-the-moment. There’s a wriggling tadpole. There’s a water beetle swimming upside down. There’s a painted turtle! Uh-oh, there’s another leech on my leg. Mom! Hour after hour, the pond entralls me as I wade about, poking here and there in my quest to learn its secrets and make sense of it all. I feel so good, so buzzing with life that I don’t notice time whizzing by, pangs of hunger, or the mosquitos and deerflies using me as a pincushion.

² Experiences include co-founding and leading two innovative schools (BC Canada) oriented to personalized learning and serving as adjunct professor in the Individualized Masters (IMA) program of Antioch University (Online).



Figure 1 Michael at a highly favored pond he explored as a young boy

To this day, I recollect with much fondness and in vivid detail my *Pond/ering* as a young boy. This experience tested my resolve, catalyzed cascading emotions, and helped propel me in numerous ways into a lifelong love of the natural world in its myriad expressions – swimming, hiking, camping, and heading into an early career in geology. Despite my young age, this experience exposed the core of my being to the raw plasma of *life*, engaging all aspects of my *living-being* – my perception of myself, imagination, and intellect as well as my corporeal senses and sensibilities.

The description above reveals much about deeply personal learning through emotional states of excitement and anxiety, of physically and psychologically engaging encounters, and of meaning ascribed to events as they unfold. Describing such life events is more than any simple recounting. This description affords insight into the very character or nature of life-wide and lifelong learning as it *appeared* and arose for me.

Such experiences of learning resonate with how French phenomenologist Michel Henry describes “modalities of life” – as aspects of reality irrevocably linked to self and one’s *being*. Henry asserts every life “is marked at its heart with a radical and insurmountable individuality” and “in every living being life comes to pass as a Self” (Henry, 2003, p. 105). Though I lacked the vocabulary to express this, this was true for me each time I waded into my special pond.

Sociologist Edith Cobb recognized this imperative in her text, *The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood* (1977), in which she wrote, “The primordial perceptual experience that remains a living drive and permeates all the organs and cells of the body, is the dynamic experience of self and world as a temporal and spatial continuum” (p. 48). Cobb (1977) linked this notion of self to learning arising in childhood, first, pre-reflectively, as a poetic and creative experience, “lyrical, rhythmic, and formative in a generative sense” as an experience of “sensory integration of self and environment, awaiting verbal expression” (p. 89). Then, she continued, with the help of language, “the child develops a continually wider ability to create ever greater complexity of gestalten in play, thought, and word,” (p. 95) that helps shape and deepen meaning not only of a child’s perceptual world but likewise of an emerging sense of self.

To Cobb, learning is not merely an act between things external to a self, but a seamless, convivial act between a self and a world that engulfs and grips a self, influencing and shaping the self’s growth and trajectory. Learning, thus, fully implicates a self in experiencing the engulfing-gripping world.

In wondering if learning might be considered a “modality of life,” I see this sentiment brought forward by researchers and authors who describe learning experiences as innate components of life, of *living*, arising dynamically and vitally; dynamic because of their w/holistic-interacting nature (Diamond, 2013), and vital because of the associations with qualities and essences of animated life/living (Henry, 2008; Sheets-Johnstone, 2017; S. Smith, 2017). Neurobiological learning is also seen arising dynamically and vitally across countless organisms and taxa but it is also distinguished in each species arising uniquely (Cobb, 1977; LeDoux, 2019).

Notions of “vitality” are, likewise, emphasized in the work of the late psychiatrist and author, Daniel Stern. In his works, Stern asserts that dynamic, relational forms of vitality significantly influence human learning beginning in infancy and continuing throughout one’s life. To Stern, vitality is both a subjective experience and phenomenal reality, arising as a whole, a “Gestalt that emerges from the theoretically separate experiences of movement, force, time, space, and intention” (2010, pp. 4–5).

I perceive learning arising as a complex phenomenon in the way that phenomenological scholars and researchers have come to describe phenomena as an “event,” a “situation,” a sustained experience of pathic reflection. In a primary sense, learning is invisible and lacking in physical substance³, in much the way phenomenologist Jean-Luc Marion describes:

There are certain phenomena that can only phenomenize themselves by remaining invisible and must manifest themselves by the feeling in which I experience them. These phenomena are manifested without being aimed at, hence without visibility, but by the affection of original feeling. (2012, p. 28)

To Marion’s point, no one can hold learning in their grasp as an objective matter, or point to something and say, definitively, “here is learning.” Yet, through personal experiences and as an educator – and through many attempts to ‘personalize’ learning for my students – I believe I have gotten “up close” to discern *and experience* learning arising on many occasions, to have perceived it emerging visually, auditorily, somatically, affectively, relationally, socially, intellectually. I have also perceived learning reflected through people’s capacities, interests, and habits, which, according to (Dewey, 1929) “must be continually interpreted” to know what they mean and thus better understand their educational value” (p. 292).

Interpreting Learning

Interpreting learning is an act that personally calls us to directly reflect on our own learning, as I did in relating my *Pond/ering* experience, or to carefully perceive reflections and insights shared by others. On reflection, I believe my learning *is* highly personalized, unique, or idiosyncratic. My sense of self and sense of the world is intertwined with learning experiences that continue to shape me, as they have from when I was a young child. These experiences – indeed, some more potent or resonant than others – thrust upon me meanings and truths that have shaped my engagement in the world as well as my character and identity, my *ipseity*. These experiences contributed not only to my “world-making,” but, conversely, to a sense of “how

³ I make this claim despite the assertions and body of work known colloquially as “Visible Learning” associated with Australian educator John Hattie. Through meta-analysis of 138 factors influencing classroom learning, Hattie points to the resulting statistical representations (histograms) as evidence of “visible” learning) which he ranks from strong to weak (2008). Popular among educators, Visible Learning has nonetheless drawn significant criticism for procedural flaws from various scholars (Bergeron & Rivard, 2017; Rømer, 2019).

the world has made me” in dynamic, multi-faceted, and idiosyncratic ways. The result is no assembly of parts but a unique complex, whole in sensibility (reflecting the Latin verb *sentire*, to feel) while also continuing to learn and evolve who I am and how my *being* arises and appears.

In addition to considering the idiosyncratic arising of learning for me, personally, as an educator, I am likewise curious how learning sensibilities arise for others, and particularly for students in various educative contexts. Standardized approaches to directing and evaluating learning experiences rarely reveal this; in fact, they most often diminish or vanquish the person by design (Gatto, 2000; Kaufman, 2013; F. Smith, 1998). To interpret student learning, sensibly, requires careful observing, interacting, and also noting how learners self-reflect on their experiences and derive meaning from them.

This helps uncover significant truths, which can and often vary from learner to learner. To this end, I have perceived learning to reveal itself as a punch in the air, an enthusiastic shout, a twinkle in the eye, and a shrug. It may also be entirely concealed and undisclosed, and one person's shout-out may well be her neighbour's, “meh.”

These encounters put me in mind how phenomenology researcher Stephen Smith describes relational subjectivity as a form of “vital contact” realized through the practice of heightened carnal and affective attunement with children and adults, and animals, too. S. Smith writes, “Moments of vital contact with the world occur in bursts of energy, rushes of excitement, surges of feeling, swellings and risings of joy. There is contact in such moments with a primary impulse, a life force, which animates the places inhabited” (2014, p. 233).

Auto/biographical Insights into Learning

The insights from Henry, Cobb, and Smith above resonate with me as I reflect on the felt sense and affectivity of myriad learning experiences. They also compel me to want to better understand the nature of learning – elusive though it may be – as a way to inform my life, my *living*, as it continues to unfold, and also influence my educational praxis. In seeking to achieve this, I hope to reconcile in some way the diminishment of the *subject* – the individual person – as it has manifested in conventional educational praxis. This has long frustrated me and sparked my hunger to explore the subjective nature of learning.

An important place I discovered yielding examples of this was in auto/biography. Auto/biographical reflection is concerned with constructing a coherent narrative through sharing personal insights and subjective experiences. Its use has been validated in counseling practices and also qualitative and quantitative research spanning various domains, including education (Moustakas, 1994; Siegel, 2010; J. A. Smith, 2017). Pedagogical (educator) observation and reflection also serve as a way to synthesize important details about student experiences of learning, albeit from a third-party or researcher perspective.

In deepening my doctoral research about the nature of learning, I grew curious to explore what auto/biography might reveal about this, especially after reading how Edith Cobb compiled an extensive collection of childhood memoirs in researching *The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood* (1977). In my case, I had retained a small collection of auto/biographical excerpts for many years which I felt provided potent insights into learning experiences suffused with pathic sensibilities and evidence of “vital contact.” With fresh energy, I reviewed additional memoirs and then chose a suite of examples depicting varying experiences of learning from joyful to painful. This study of auto/biography – which formed a part of my recent dissertation

research focused on exploring learning experiences through a lens of phenomenology⁴ – was undertaken with an “exploratory mindset” to listen to the ways learning and living were described-as-experienced and, following, to refract and unfold essential and variegated characteristics and meanings associated with the descriptions. Through this revealing, I gained an inkling of the subjective *appearances* of learning and its relation to Being.

Below, I share a sampling from my PhD study of first-person auto/biographical excerpts describing and reflecting on learning experiences and three auto/biographical educator observations and reflections, including my own. These excerpts contribute to denoting a phenomenal gestalt of subjective learning and unfolding narratives that reveal a sensible and meaning-laden nature of learning. Following, I will summarize my insights from these examples. But I also invite readers to be open to perceiving learning arising and appearing for each author as you read the excerpts and also consider what this may signify for each author.

***Unfolding Learning* – Auto/biographical reflection i: childhood learning experiences described by author-disability rights activist Helen Keller:**

As the cool stream gushed over one hand (my teacher) spelled into the other the word water, first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten—a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that “w-a-t-e-r” meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free! There were barriers still, it is true, but barriers that could in time be swept away. (1905, loc. 263-264)

***Unfolding Learning* – Auto/biographical reflection ii: childhood learning experiences described by actor John Lithgow:**

Standing onstage at age seven in my first scene in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is one of the most potent memories of my childhood. ... Poetry pours forth from Oberon and Titania as Shakespeare seems to swoon at the chance to write dialogue for fairy royalty. And there I stood, half-forgetting that I was in a play, drinking it all in -- in the moonlit night, the pungent summer air, the cool breeze, the warm glow of stage lights, the distant shriek of cicadas, and the mysterious, half-lit faces of the audience hanging on every word. ... And age seven, I barely knew what any of those phrases meant, but their sheer beauty enthralled me. (2012, p. 12)

***Unfolding Learning* – Auto/biographical reflection iii: childhood learning experiences described by writer Susan Sontag:**

When I was five or six, I read Eve Curie’s biography of her mother. I read comic

⁴ **Phenomenology** – Phenomenology is an approach to philosophy and qualitative research that seeks to describe and analyze subjective experiences or phenomena as they are consciously experienced by individuals. This approach was developed by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl in the early 20th century and has since been expanded and developed by many other philosophers. At its core, phenomenology seeks to examine the structures of experience and the ways in which we perceive, interpret, and understand the world around us. It focuses on the first-person perspective and the way in which individuals experience the world, rather than on objective or external facts. Phenomenology also aims to uncover the essential features of different types of experience, such as perception, imagination, emotion, and consciousness (ChatGPT, 2023 (<https://chat.openai.com/>)).

books, dictionaries, and encyclopedias indiscriminately, and with great pleasure. ... It felt like the more I took in, the stronger I was, the bigger I got, the bigger the world got...I started writing when I was about seven. I started a newspaper when I was eight, which I filled with stories and poems and plays and articles. (as cited in Sacks, 2018, pp. 130-132)

***Unfolding Learning* – Auto/biographical reflection iv: adolescent learning experiences described by autistic student Donna Williams:**

I was twelve years old. It was the seventies, and my new teacher was something of a hippie. ... He brought in records and asked us to tell him what we thought the music and songs were saying to us. What I liked, most of all, was that there were no wrong answers. ... This teacher spent a lot of time with me, trying to understand how I felt and why I did the things I did. Even when he raised his voice, I could still sense his gentleness. He was the first teacher at that school to whom I made an effort to explain what was happening at home, though I still never discussed what was happening within myself. His mood never changed. He never seemed to betray my trust. (1992, p. 47)

***Unfolding Learning* – Auto/biographical reflection v: young adult learning experiences described by Academy Award-winning documentary film-maker Michael Moore:**

I loooooooved the movies. I always did. ... At seventeen, I saw Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*, and then I saw everything else by Kubrick, and after that there was no looking back. I was hooked on the potential and the power of cinema ... Two years later I opened my own "art haus" in Flint where, for just two nights a week, I would show everything by Truffaut, Bergman, Fassbinder, Kurosawa, Herzog, Scorsese, Woody Allen, Buñuel, Fellini, Kubrick, and the masters of cinema. Each film would get four showings, and I would spend my Friday and Saturday evenings watching all four shows. On the first viewing [,] I would sit close and enjoy the experience. On the following three screenings, I would sit in the back and study them, sometimes taking notes. This became my one-room, one-student film school. (2011, pp. 398-399)

***Unfolding Learning* – Auto/biographical reflection vi: teen learning experiences described by (autistic, non-verbal) writer Naoki Higashida**

(listening and writing) Spoken language is a blue sea. Everyone else is swimming, diving [,] and frolicking freely, while I'm alone, stuck in a tiny boat, swayed from side to side. Rushing toward me are waves of sound. Sometimes the swaying is gentle. ... When I'm working on my alphabet grid or my computer, I feel as if someone's cast a magic spell and turned me into a dolphin. I dive down deep – then shoot back up, break the surface and surprise all the swimmers. The process can feel so free, so effortless, that I almost forget I was ever stuck in that boat. (2017, p. 61)

***Unfolding Learning* – Auto/biographical reflection vii: childhood and adolescent learning experiences arising through abuses described by First Nations students who attended Canadian First Nations Residential Schools:**

Even our own language was considered ugly; we weren't allowed to speak Cree language. I wasn't allowed to be myself as a Cree woman. Everything was filthy, even our monthlies and that's how I learned it at home and what I learned from the residential school, everything was ugly. And that's where I learned a lot of ugliness also, I became a compulsive liar, learned to live in the world of denial. When I was younger, I learned how to hate, I hated my own mother, I blamed her for allowing us to be taken away even though at that time I didn't realize she didn't have a choice. It wasn't until 1990 that she told us that "I didn't have a choice. It was either that, or me going to jail. I had to let you kids go to school," 'cause that's when I disclosed to them both my mom and dad what I went through in residential school in 1990. (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, pp. 56-57)

***Unfolding Learning* – Auto/biographical reflection viii: childhood learning experiences arising through childhood abuse described by poet rupi kaur:**

believe them when they say
 you are nothing
 repeat it to yourself
 like a wish
i am nothing
i am nothing
i am nothing
 so often
 the only reason you know
 you're still alive is from the
 heaving of your chest
 - *the art of being empty* (2015, p. 33)

***Unfolding Learning* – Auto/biographical reflection ix: adult learning experiences described by writer-photographer Hannah Bourne-Taylor:**

For the next 84 days, the fledgling lived on me. We became inseparable. He would fly alongside me, or cling to me as I went from room to room in the house, while we walked the grasslands or when I drove. He'd rest in my hand. As he learned to fly, he'd make short flights from my hand, to my shoulder, to my head, then abseil down my waist-length hair to rest again.

I learned his different calls; he purred when he was content, sounded a high-pitched alarm when he was afraid. I'd forage for his food and clean up his litter, which was exhausting. I never named him because he didn't belong to me – I had to remind myself that he needed to return to the wild. (2022, par. 7)

***Unfolding Learning* – Personal auto/biographical reflection x: observation of learning**

while seeking to personalize learning for one of my students:⁵

Addy:⁶ I first met Addy in 2014 when he was 15 and enrolled as a Special Needs learner, diagnosed as autistic with several other impairment issues. Addy had previously had many negative experiences at a local public school and he was working below the expected grade levels for his age. With additional program funding, he was receiving personal tutoring at a private learning center in his community. I was contracted to be Addy's learning consultant (educator) via a BC-based, innovative, online school oriented to personalizing learning. Meeting Addy on a visit to the learning center, it was challenging to converse with him as he retreated behind a dark hoodie and said very little. His mother confirmed he lacked confidence though he was clearly well supported by her and the learning center tutors.

Throughout the year, Addy made modest progress on a range of social, behavioral, and academic goals as summarized in his Individual Education Plan (IEP); I received reports from his tutors, and I had monthly contact with them via Skype. Over this time, I sensed my relationship with him was growing and it was also evident he was becoming more animated with his tutors who responded in kind. One day in our second year of working together he said he had a writing project he'd been working on at his home, something about monsters, a favorite subject of his. He hadn't shown it to his mother or his tutors, but he knew I was a writer (I'd shared some of my writing experiences with him), and he was willing to share his story with me. I encouraged him to send it along and an email message from him soon followed with an attached file, *Monster Quest*. I opened it tentatively and read it over. I was stunned. He had written a near-flawless short story of around 12,000 words. The subject matter might have been a little "cheesy" but it had gripping drama, excellent cadence and flow, and it was polished. I re-contacted him immediately via Skype to offer my congratulations and review with him what I thought were the story highlights and why I admired the writing. He was beaming, shaking in fact, at getting such feedback. He consented to my sharing my impressions with his mother and tutors, and I did so. They were all deeply surprised and emotionally moved by the news. His mother sobbed when I remarked to her that I thought this was a step that would change Addy's life trajectory. Somehow, he had learned how to write, I said, and I confirmed his cognitive writing abilities were equal to most adults I knew, and maybe better.

We checked in with Addy to ask him how he wanted to use this achievement to continue learning. He was elated that we recognized his achievement, and told us he wanted to continue writing, and just keep on with the habits he was developing and nurturing at the center. We agreed that was a good plan.

I continued as Addy's learning consultant for two more years, during which time he completed additional story manuscripts - sequels to, and on par with, the original *Monster Quest*. He soon accelerated in other aspects of his learning life,

⁵ Personalizing learning, for me, as an educator, arises through, first, perceiving a learner as a person, striving to come-into-being, and then, working to create a relationship of co-existence, in which we may work together in serving his or her learning interests.

⁶ "Addy" is a pseudonym.

catching up to his expected grade levels in core subjects, the progress of which he documented in learning reports he wrote and sent to me. By this time his hoodie was gone and Addy presented himself in and beyond the center with zeal and confidence. When I last spoke with him and his mother, in 2017, he was anticipating graduating from high school with a Dogwood diploma, after which he hoped to join her in her cleaning business. And as I had suggested to him, he was sending his story manuscripts to potential publishers.

To my perception, something “clicked” for Addy in the winter and spring of 2015, priming a deep, personal urge to develop his writing skills and tell a story, through which his sense of self significantly shifted. This experience happened for him, I believe, neither accidentally nor serendipitously, but in conjunction with unconditional, positive support offered to him by his mother, two tutors, and myself, and through seeing him, not as we wanted him to be, but just as he was in his being-and-becoming. I felt as if all of us had waded in the water and were helping steady a canoe until Addy found the right balance and confidence to push off from shore confidently with his own power.

Unfolding Learning – Auto/biographical reflection xi: observation of learning by Anne Sullivan, tutor-educator to Helen Keller:

Helen acquired language by practice and habit rather than by study of rules and definitions. Grammar with its puzzling array of classifications, nomenclatures, and paradigms, was wholly discarded in her education. She learned language by being brought in contact with the LIVING language itself; she was made to deal with it in everyday conversation, and in her books, and to turn it over in a variety of ways until she was able to use it correctly...Children will educate themselves under [the] right conditions. They require guidance and sympathy far more than instruction. (Keller, 1905, loc. 4940)

Unfolding Learning – Auto/biographical reflection xii: observation of learning by author-educator John Holt:

On days when I have a lesson, I bring my cello to school, take it to a classroom, and give the children a turn at “playing” it. Except for the timid ones, who make a few half-hearted passes with the bow and then quit, almost all little children attack the cello in the same way. They are really doing three things at once. They are making the machine go. They are enjoying the luxury of making sounds. And they are making scientific experiments. They start off by working the bow vigorously back and forth across one of the strings. They keep this up for a long time. Just the feel and sound of it are exciting. Then they begin to vary their bowing a bit, trying different rhythms. After a while, they begin to move the bow so that it touches more than one string, or they move to another string. But it is important to note that the first few times they do this, they do not seem to be doing it in the spirit of an experiment, to find out what will happen. They do it for the sake of doing it. They have been bowing one way, making one kind of noise; now they want to bow another way and make another kind of noise. Only after some time does it seem to occur to them that there was a relation between the way they bowed and the kind of noise they got. Then there is quite a change in their way of doing

things...They have to pile up quite a mass of raw sensory data before they begin trying to sort it out and make sense of it.

A trained scientist wants to cut all irrelevant data out of his experiment. He is asking nature a question, he wants to cut down the noise, the static, the random information, to a minimum, so he can hear the answer. But a child doesn't work that way. He is used to getting his answers out of the noise. He has, after all, grown up in a strange world where everything is noise, where he can only understand and make sense of a tiny part of what he experiences. His way of attacking the cello problem is to produce the maximum amount of data possible, to do as many things as he can, to use his hands and the bow in as many ways as possible. Then, as he goes along, he begins to notice regularities and patterns. He begins to ask questions—that is, to make deliberate experiments. . . . And these are the vital skills of thought which, in our hurry to get him thinking the way we do, we may very well stunt or destroy in the process of “educating” him. (Holt, 1967, 1982, loc. 1064-1120)

What is Revealed through these Reflections?

Phenomenological philosopher and author Max van Manen asserts (1990) that “the project of phenomenological reflection and explication is to effect a more direct contact with the experience as lived” (p. 78). The auto/biographical excerpts above imply broad and diverse appearances of learning. Yet amidst these appearances I interpret learning as directly or tacitly refracted in these descriptions as bound to subjectivity, affectivity, relationality, and an emerging, animated selfhood temporally cast.

Specifically, I perceive learning arising and entangled with the foundational characteristics listed below and linked to understanding the grasping of “selfhood” and nurturing of relationships:

- learning is fused with a sense of emerging selfhood, arising idiosyncratically and often linked to deep, vital interests and personal meaning, or questing to create meaning.
- arising as an animated and embodied dynamic act of the sensing (affective) body and life-infused body.
- arising through aspects of relationality (intersubjectivity, pedagogy) arising in some fusion with the surrounding environment, the “lifeworld”, including non-human living things.
- arising as an event of some sustained duration and temporality.

I believe the meanings or essences arising from this study I denote above, which you, the reader, may share or not, also help reveal subjective experience or subjectivity as a critical determinant of learning. This characteristic is often overlooked or dismissed by an educational psychologism based on empirical rationalism and dispassionate objectivity traced to Enlightenment philosophy. This psychologism has significantly influenced many developments in modern education that have historically prioritized objectivity over subjectivity and diminished personalized approaches to nurturing learning (Brass & Lynch, 2020; Gatto, 2000). Brudzinska (2014), says “scientific rationality, by cutting off all references to human existence, essentially leads to the alienation of the natural human experience,” correlating, for her, to a

manner of “self-oblivion” (p. 93). As the auto/biographical excerpts help demonstrate, learning arising through subjective experience should be re-cognized as important as any objectivist determination of learning. This finding was also confirmed by fieldwork research I undertook in the completion of my dissertation.⁷

How Might Educators Recognize and Better Support the Subject, Self, and Person in Our Efforts to Nurture Learning?

During my career as an educator, I have come to experience and know the most about learning and honor subjectivity through *personalizing* learning. In this I have sought to create a relationship with a learner - face to face, or virtually – and subsequently enable her or him and me to better know the nature of the learning arising and appearing in material and non-material ways. I also feel fortunate to have observed learning experiences that deeply and positively transform students' lives.

Educators wishing to personalize learning for their students may face challenges in initiating personalized learning whether they are experienced or new to teaching. A critical first step for educators lies in re-cognizing or acknowledging the student before them as a *legitimate self* and whole person. For an experienced educator, this likely means participating in a different, and often deeper pedagogical relationality than in conventional course instruction. Educators must also note *how* differences arise among students. For example, at a surface level, educators may perceive a uniformity of basic literacy skills among their students. But on closer examination, differences are discerned: one enjoys reading science fiction, another comics, another is experiencing challenges learning a second or third language, and so forth.

Pedagogical tendrils connecting to personalizing learning, and specifically acknowledging a learner as a subject as opposed to an object, are found in philosophical phenomenology. For example, in his landmark book, *I and Thou* (1958), philosopher Martin Buber conceptualized a “philosophy of dialogue” in which he described how one could view a tree, objectively, as an “it,” in myriad ways, but one could also be “bound up in relation” to the tree and no longer consider the tree an “it” but a “thou.” “If I face a human being as my Thou,” Buber wrote, “he is not a thing among things, and does not consist of things” (1958, p. 8). This is similar to the vision of relational ethics and confirmation articulated by educational philosopher Nel Noddings in her book *Caring* (1984):

Confirmation, the loveliest of human functions, depends upon and interacts with dialogue and practice. ... To confirm, I must see and receive the other - see clearly what he has actually done and receive the feelings with which it was done. (1984, p. 196)

Phenomenological scholar and author Max van Manen (2012) locates pedagogical experiences as occurring “when adults stand in pedagogical situations and relations with children or young people” (p. 8). A phenomenological reflection of a pedagogical gesture, he adds, helps to reveal “the manner that we see, feel, sense, reflect, and respond” to our students (2012, p. 10). To van Manen, educators personalizing learning reflects a pedagogical manner that confirms a student’s “being” and “coming into being” or “becoming” through his or her learning in all its varied forms, in and beyond school. Max van Manen frames such sensitive pedagogy as a “tactful” act, through which “we make contact with the talents and intelligences, vulnerabilities and fears, happiness and hopes—the inner lives of the children and young

⁷ See (Maser, 2023).

people we teach. Only through genuine contact can teachers open up the spheres of pedagogical encounters (2012, pp. 30-31).

To my observation, a “pedagogical encounter” with a student in conventional education is often interpreted by educators pragmatically regarding curricular or other standardized educational goals. Students may be consulted about a determination or assessment, but often they are not. In engaging a student relationally, personally, and pedagogically, I seek to encounter a student, first, through discerning “who” that student truly is, if even a little, and then through seeking to engage them in dialogue. These can be simple but effective gestures, based on prior understanding but also (co)exploring what a particular learning trajectory might look like, and how a student might wish to be supported.

Responding in this way, re-cognizing the/a student as a *legitimate self* and *whole person* helps to enfranchise students as a subject of learning and not as its object. To further grasp this idea, it has been important for me to hold an understanding of a student's biological and psychological developmental trajectory - comprising universal and unique, individualized details - at the same time as I see that student as a *subject* grasped by the pitch and swell of their life's variegated currents, rooted in idiosyncratic experiences, emotions, thoughts, beliefs, and acts, and other material and non-material influences.⁸ Surveying students, as I have done, and using the information to help modify my pedagogical “encountering,” has almost always helped to enfranchise a student in his/her learning and contributes to what makes personalizing learning deeply interesting and inspiring! The auto/biographical anecdote I shared earlier about relating to Addy reflected my efforts in service of this.

Consideration of More Personalized Learning Opportunities for Students

In this study, I perceived a strong alignment between subjectivity and learning, no matter the experience. An example of this was my *Pond/ering* experience I shared at the outset. In educative contexts, this translates into perceiving much potential for learning interests to seed future learning directions, including career possibilities for learners. Though this study of auto/biography was of limited size, I hope educators may see cause to advocate for or initiate more personalized learning opportunities and experiences for their students. Such experiences could be accommodated by offering more opportunities grounded in personalized coursework, interest-oriented projects, and interest-area job 'shadowing' and apprenticeships. Student learning is not, of course, limited to that which accrues to the purview of schooling or formal education. To this end, and with the provision of internet and community-based opportunities, learning for all students – to some degree – is certainly “wider than education.” It is, therefore, appropriate to recognize and validate learning that students experience beyond the purview of schooling.

Consideration of Personalizing Learning in the Face of the COVID-19 Pandemic

In early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted K-12 and higher education more significantly than any other event in the lives of most educators and students. Soon after its detection in 2020, and through subsequent virus-variant waves rippling worldwide, schools and campuses shut down to in-person learning and relegated education to online scenarios. Many

⁸ To this end, I have created several different *Personal Ecography* surveying instruments that I have used to elicit information from students at the outset of a new course. Using these instruments has helped me personalize learning for my students, and in a recent research project, other educators reviewing the instruments confirm they would value using them, too (Maser, 2021).

educational issues arose from shutdowns, including course and program interruptions; numerous problems were tallied relating to services and hardware access, technological (in)competency, student isolation, and others.

Mental and emotional health issues are still being assessed but recent research of university, college, and K-12 populations confirms far-ranging and deep effects registered by many students. These include many aspects of schooling; anxiety; food, job, and housing insecurity; family worries; physical health problems (including overcoming COVID-19); and numerous mental and emotional health issues (Leshner & Scherer, 2021; The Hope Center, 2021). Krause et al. (2022) report that many adolescent students “faced disruptions and adverse experiences that posed significant barriers to learning” (p. 33).

According to health researcher and instructor Mays Imad, lingering or future pandemic effects on student mental health may comprise significant ongoing challenges. In *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (2021), she implores higher education administrators to really listen to students to meet them “where they’re at,” and embrace a personalized approach to student health care. Imad writes, “I am calling for higher education to cultivate our moral imagination where every student is seen, where we invest in the well-being of the whole student, and where we ground all of our work in an ethics of care (2021, par. 12). Imad’s point is extended by Laurie Fladd, Director of Holistic Student Supports for Achieving the Dream, a network serving 300 US-based community colleges. Not all students experienced COVID-related educational disruption in the same way, Fladd says (cited in Alonso, 2022), making the case for student needs to be met through individualized support on a case-by-case basis. Fladd adds, “in our network, we see that supporting students holistically and really taking a commitment to equity ... really does help” (Alonso, 2022, par. 18).

I agree with Imad and Fladd, and I urge educators and educational authorities to pursue personalized learning as an option to nurture healing and build resilience to pandemic-related learning challenges.

Closing Remarks

The auto/biographical insights presented in this article help confirm the primacy of subjectivity, of *personhood*, and the dynamic forces shaping each person’s learning. To meet the promise of holistic personalized learning, educators need to be curious about the lifeworlds of their students – no matter their students’ background. As Dr. Barry Prizant says about his interactions with autistic children, helping an autistic child does not begin with seeking to identify a problem and determining to “fix it.” Rather, he says, help begins by listening and paying close attention to what a child is trying to relate. “We need to work to understand them, and then change what we do” (Prizant & Fields-Meyer, 2015, p. 3). To this end, through pedagogically sensitive encounters and inquiries, educators can deepen their understandings of *who* their students truly are, observe *how* and *where* authentic student learning is striving to emerge and more richly enable its arising.

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