

LEARNING TO TELL APART

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During the last two decades there has been a growing awareness among educational researchers of the situated nature of learning. Learning is always embedded in a practice, we have been told, accomplished frequently by several interlocutors, using physical and cultural artefacts, notably language.

Learning, when seen in this way, appears as just one aspect of complex social situations, imbued by specific cultural patterns of speaking and acting, an aspect which is not easily separated from the situation which it is an aspect of.

On the other hand, we are also told, presumably by others, that the main task of education and of the learning that is supposed to take place, is to prepare the students for an increasingly unknown future, to enable them to handle novel situations in powerful ways.

Given we accept both these dictums (and in fact it seems hard not to), we are facing a paradox: We have to prepare students for situations that we can not even imagine, by means of learning that is a seemingly inseparable aspect of the situations in which it is taking place.

The origin of this paradox is what I would like to call "The doctrine of sameness". We (scholars of learning as well as JPF ("just plain folks")) habitually assume that in order to use something in a situation that you have learned in another situation, you have to see the sameness of the two situations, and above all the sameness of the two problems you have to deal with in the two situations. Again, this is probably a fairly well-taken point. The thing is , however, that to the extent the two situations, and the two problems, differ, you have to be able to see *how* they differ, in order to be able to see how they are the same. The corollary is that when learning, the learner has to be helped to attend different ways in which situations and problems might differ. In order to become able to deal with unknown situations in powerful ways the learner has to learn to tell apart one situation from another and one aspect of a situation from another aspect of the same situation