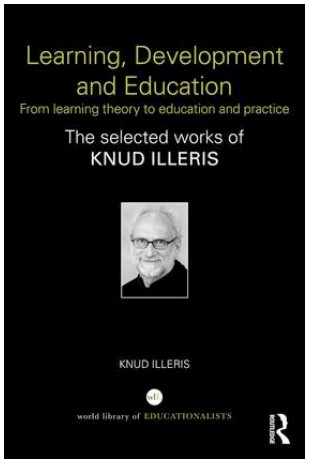

Learning, Development and Education: From Learning Theory to Education and Practice

Illeris, Knud
Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016

Book Review

Tags: learning theory | student learning | types of learning

Reviewed by: Ryan Korstange, *Middle Tennessee State University*
Date Reviewed: January 30, 2017

There can be no question that understanding (implicit or explicit) learning theory undergirds effective teaching. This is especially true when instructional topics become confusing or diverge from the common experience of students. Many of the topics students encounter as they study theology and religion fall into this category, and it is for this reason that the collection of Knud Illeris's works, *Learning, Development and Education*, has value for teachers of theology and religion.

Illeris has spent his career figuring out how learning works and determining how to create authentic, transformative learning experiences. This collection of essays demonstrates the way in which Illeris's theories developed over time, and shows the breadth of topics that come to bear on the understanding of student learning. Illeris categorizes his selected works into five parts, containing essays that were originally published between the late 1990s and 2015. Some of the essays have not previously appeared in English. The first two sections have the most bearing on the teaching of theology and religion, so they will be the focus of this review.

The three essays in Part One succinctly describe Illeris's comprehensive theory of learning, articulated more fully in his 2007 monograph *How We Learn* (New York: Routledge). In brief, Illeris argues that learning has two fundamental processes and three dimensions. The processes are "an external interaction process between the learner and his or her social, cultural, or material environment, and an internal psychological process of elaboration and acquisition" (10). Illeris also identifies three dimensions of learning: the content dimension deals with the material being learned, the incentive dimension considers the motivation and energy necessary for learning, and the interaction dimension categorizes dispositions that provide the genesis of learning. Illeris further identifies several barriers to learning (15-17)

Published by the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion
301 West Wabash Ave, Crawfordsville, IN 47933
(765) 361-6047 (800) 655-7177 fax (765) 361-6051
Fully Funded by Lilly Endowment Inc. and Located at Wabash College

after recognizing that education is rife with “non-learning and mislearning” (15).

According to Illeris, there are four types of learning: cumulative, assimilative, accommodative, and significant/transformational learning. Each of these types of learning is connected to a phase in psycho-social development in Part Two, where Illeris lays out his understanding of lifelong learning (48-55) and gives extended treatment to the function of learning at the youth and adult stages. He argues that education during the phase of youth is typified by a quest for what he calls “self-orientation,” which means the “process where one orients oneself with a view to finding oneself, one’s options, ways of functioning, and preferences” (69). In his view, all educational experiences (inside and outside of the classroom) contribute to and are undergirded by the youth’s quest for self-orientation. The situation is different with adult learners, who have already found their orientation, and so accept responsibility for their actions and their learning. In Illeris’ estimation, this different approach to learning requires different foundations for adult education.

Part Three, “Special Learning Issues,” is a compilation of chapters that do not fit in the other sections but provide a theoretical grounding for the arguments Illeris makes in parts one and two. Part Four, “Various Approaches to Education,” includes the oldest of the selected articles, and describes how some of Illeris’s theories were put into practice at Danish universities in the 1970s. The final part concerns learning in working life. Here Illeris applies his comprehensive theory of learning (articulated in Part One) to the workplace.

While there is certainly room for criticism of Illeris’s understanding of learning, and in particular, his connections of types of learning with phases of psycho-social development, Illeris’s comprehensive theory of learning is helpful as a foundation for effective theological education. Three observations, in particular, deserve mention. First, his contention that learning is not merely knowledge transfer, or skills acquisition, but includes a variety of psychological, biological, and social factors is worth keeping in mind as we construct learning experiences for our students. Second, Illeris’s observation that youth and adults have a different foundation for learning is significant, especially as there are now more adults students enrolling in college than ever. Finally, it is incredibly important to consider the various barriers students face as they try to learn. While it is certainly the case that students are responsible for their education, Illeris is right to argue that teachers both create and tear down barriers.

https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/resources/book_reviews/learning-development-and-education-from-learning-theory-to-education-and-practice/