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Article Critique #5

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Wolfe, P. (2006). The role of meaning and emotion in learning. *New directions for adult and continuing education: The neuroscience of adult learning*, (110), 35-41.

Article Critique of “The role of meaning and emotion in learning”

Summary

In this journal article Wolfe points out that the theories regarding the measure of learning are different today than they were many years ago. That is, previously learning was thought to take place when information was acquired and manipulated. More recently, however, it is believed that learning takes place “as a result of cognitive structuring and restructuring” (Wolfe, 2006, p. 35).

According to Wolfe memory occurs as the result of a person’s unique life experiences. The brain stores information by filtering what is meaningful and most relevant at the time, then encoding the information and forming networks between the neurons. Thus, each brain is as unique as a person’s fingerprints based on unique personal experiences. Wolfe points out that “the brain is designed to forget ... information it does not find useful or important” (p. 36), which makes *attention* the first step in the learning process. When students find meaning in what is being taught, and when they are emotionally interested, then they are much more likely to remember important information.

For new information to be meaningful the brain must perceive a connection between existing and new information. Therefore, “a good place to begin teaching is to first find out what learners already know, on the basis of their previous experiences” (Wolfe, p. 38). If, however,

the learner is being taught information that is new and there are no previous experiences to draw upon, then there are several ways to create meaning. Namely, meaning can be created (1) through the use of metaphor, analogy and simile; (2) by actively involving the student in concrete experiences; and/or (3) through projects and problem solving.

Wolfe indicates that emotion also plays an important role in learning. An effective learning environment needs to be both physically and psychologically safe because the stress response impedes cortical connects that are required for higher order thinking or problem solving. During perceived stressful situations the brain tends to shut down and attend only to its immediate needs in order to survive.

In summary, to enhance lasting learning it is important to develop trusting relationships and a caring environment in which the learner is given opportunities to choose what is personally meaningful and is given time to reflect, make mistakes, and think through problems.