Miller (Allen H.) & Sachse-Akerlind (Gerlese) (Eds) *The Learner in Higher Education: A Forgotten Species?* (Research and Development in Higher Education, Volume 9). Kensington, Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA), 1987, 588 p.
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This is a significant title. It deserves attention. It is not the student that is forgotten. Rather, in research in higher education, it is a perspective on the student (as learner!) that is often subordinate. The preface points out that 'until recently research into higher education had placed an emphasis on teaching rather than learning'. What does this mean? If one allows for the experience of students to add to the picture of higher education, then such frequently occurring concepts as 'educational effect', 'impact of' or 'affecting factors' are not the most adequate. Subsequently, among the 68 contributions in this book, one finds headings which clearly indicate that both perspectives are represented. Let me give some examples: 'Both sides of the fence: student and staff views of an alternative course handbook'; 'Some observations and experiences of a mature student'; 'Student approaches to language learning'; 'Learning from the experience of staff and students in the context curriculum: the first two years'; 'The learner in tertiary education, a forgotten experience'; 'Influence of assessment demands on first year university students' approaches to learning'.

As, I think, is evident from the examples presented, both learning and teaching perspectives are represented. But as Paul Ramsden says in his paper, in which he strongly argues for the learning perspective, even if 'the approach focuses on student learning [it is] not because teaching and teachers are unimportant but because they are very important'.

This slightly paradoxical statement is argued for in different ways. In one line of reasoning, the tradition of teaching students how to learn is scrutinized. Learning skills programmes include examination preparation, good studying habits, note-taking, reading strategies, and more sophisticated elements such as reading and learning strategies. In its most naïve form, students are instructed to imitate the behaviour of successful learners, ie those focusing on the main message in a text. These students seem to have in common a certain approach to the learning task. This approach has been labelled *deep-level processing* and is distinguished by students who, when reading, more or less conspicuously ask themselves questions like 'Which are the parts of this text?', 'How are the parts related to each other and to the overall message?', etc. In a learning experiment, subjects in the experimental group were recommended to ask themselves these kinds of question, and thereby the

assumption was that a deep-level approach should be induced and thus a better understanding attained. Results show the opposite. With regard to *understanding*, these students were less successful than a control group that was left without intervention. On the other hand, the experimental group excelled in remembering isolated topics and parts of the text.

The general idea behind learning skills programmes is to increase the awareness in students of various aspects of the learning process. The assumption is that students who are provided with this knowledge could use it (metacognitively) as a means in learning situations. The conclusions from experiments within this area of research are far from unambiguous. Seemingly conflicting results have been resolved by new insights, some of them impelling to traditional demands of scientific work. For instance, if a deep-level approach is considered desirable among students in higher education, one would like to specify circumstances that make it possible to predict the appearance of that approach.

However, as is apparent from the learning study, students react to perceived situations which are not necessarily the same as intended (or 'real') situations. Furthermore, the key issue in the study-skill tradition, namely that of treating an *aspect* of learning (the metacognitive) as a separate unit, can be questioned on several grounds. Rather, in the perspective espoused, the relation between student content and context is regarded as the unit, and the conclusion is that 'the object of improving learning' should be to improve learning *something*, not to improve *how* we learn something.

In this review I have presented some of the thoughts behind the theme of the book. A lasting impression is that questions related to the living and learning of students in higher education are brought out of the counselling context and put into a research framework. But the student perspective is far from (and should not be) a homogenous perspective. Leo West describes three fairly elaborate approaches to student learning. In at least two of them I discern a close relationship between the clearly emphasized student perspective and an unmentioned communication perspective.

However important the learning perspective may be, I think this book argues for something even more important and maybe there is something prophetic about the title of B. Stone's paper 'Teacher, come back... meet the learner'.

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