
Maturation and Learning in the Bahá'í Community¹

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The Bahá'í Community has always been interested in the subject of learning, and recent emphasis on the institute process has heightened awareness of the need for both individuals and communities, as a whole, to become more knowledgeable about methods by which we learn. This paper examines a range of current thinking about how we 'come to know', and suggests some approaches that could prove useful, whether to the institute process, or to learning directed at other specific activities, such as service on a Local Spiritual Assembly.

Bahá'ís act in and make meaning of their personal and shared worlds from knowledge generated in many different paradigms, but when it comes to Bahá'í decision-making, it is a constructivist paradigm which seems most consistent with the theoretical description of consultation. For ease of decision-making then, it would be useful for Bahá'ís to become adept at moving from whatever paradigms they currently hold to a constructivist one during the process of consultation, rather than attempt to converse across paradigms.

To move comfortably and consciously from one paradigm-for-action to this constructivist paradigm-for-decision-making, and back, requires consciousness and learning about how we come 'to know', what influences this 'knowing' and what we value as 'knowledge', as opposed to 'vain imaginings' or 'idle fancies'.

Understanding this movement between paradigms and the tentativeness of our knowledge is suggested as a sign of maturity. This maturity is indicated by critical reflection on what, how and why we think the way we do, and act the way we do, in our personal and shared worlds, as well as the ability to adopt the appropriate paradigm at the appropriate time. This critical consciousness liberates and emancipates the individual

1. This paper was first presented as a thesis for a Bachelor of Applied Science (Honours) with major studies in Social Ecology at the University of Western Sydney, Hawkesbury. The author has commenced Doctoral studies which include the Bahá'í community's application of the theory contained within its writings.

and institutions from the prison of uncritical thinking and acting, from being trapped within a single, albeit seemingly effective paradigm. It is a manifestation of fair-mindedness and justice, the “best beloved of all things in My sight.”²

To explore this concept of critical consciousness and learning might be useful to Bahá'ís, who anticipate the inevitable ‘maturation’ of their decision-making institutions around the turn of the century (synchronising with the completion of the building projects at the Bahá'í World Centre and establishment of the Lesser Peace)³ and who have embarked on a global learning program through ‘institutes’ or ‘centres of learning’.

Paradigms

Paradigms are not simply worldviews. They are the context for our making sense of our being, our doing and our thinking. They dictate the methods we use to find out about our world. They are often invisible to our consciousness. According to Guba,⁴ a paradigm is bounded by perceptions of the nature of reality, the nature of how we find out about that reality and the nature of the relationship between the knower and what can be known about ‘reality’.

What individuals accept as the nature of ‘reality’ (ontology) can be quite different. Some accept a realist ontology (reality exists ‘out there’). Others hold to a critical realist ontology, believing reality exists ‘out there’ but can never be fully apprehended. Still others hold to a relativist ontology (‘realities’ exist in the form of multiple mental constructions, dependent on the persons who hold them).

The nature of how we find out about ‘reality’ (methodology) can be just as diverse. Some hold to an experimental/manipulative approach in which hypotheses are stated in advance and subjected to empirical tests under carefully controlled conditions. Others hold to a dialogic-transformative approach, by which they seek to eliminate ‘false’ consciousness and to energise, facilitate and transform them. Still others hold to a hermeneutic-dialectic approach, through which individual constructions are elicited and refined, compared and contrasted through discussion, with the aim of generating one construction on which there is substantial consensus.⁵ A hermeneutic approach attempts to recover and interpret the meanings of social actions from the point of view of those who performed them, as opposed to the point of view of onlookers.⁶ Dick

2. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words*, 11th ed. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990.

3. Shoghi Effendi, letter dated October 1, 1954, Messages to the Bahá'í World 1950-1957, Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1954, p.74.

4. E.G. Guba, ‘The Alternative Paradigm Dialog’ in E.G. Guba, (ed) *The Paradigm Dialog*, Newbury Park, Sage Publications, 1990.

5. *Ibid.*, p.27.

6. J. Higgs, *Qualitative Research: Discourse on Methodologies*, Sydney: Hampden Press, 1988, p.6.

writes, “Dialectical processes use disagreements to generate agreement”.⁷

Following this pattern of diversity, the nature of the relationship between the knower and what can be known (epistemology) reveals such stances as those of the dualist/objectivist (‘I am distinct from reality’), the modified objectivist (‘the distinction between reality and I is blurred’) and the subjectivist (‘I am a part of my reality’).

Each of these components of a paradigm – ontology, methodology and epistemology – are interwoven to offer a sensible way both to understand our personal and shared worlds, to predict what will happen in those worlds, and to act accordingly. Labels for various combinations of these ontologies, methodologies and epistemologies include: positivist, post-positivist, critical theorist and constructivist paradigms. Each offers unique ways in which to understand the world and make predictions about it, thus affecting the way we act in the world. It is suggested that because we use paradigms in every decision we make throughout the day, they become second nature to us, especially if they offer successful ways of dealing with the world and people around us. In becoming second nature, they become invisible.

The paradigm for Bahá'í decision-making (consultation)

A case for the Bahá'í Faith operating within a constructivist paradigm can be developed from the ‘theory’ contained within the Bahá'í writings. Such a paradigm sees the nature of ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ as relative to each individual, not absolute. It follows – if each individual operates according to his or her own ‘reality’ – that, to find out about these ‘realities’, individual constructions need to be elicited and made explicit, so that, through conversation, these ‘realities’ can be compared, contrasted, explored and modified, to generate a single construction of ‘reality’ on which there can be substantial consensus.⁸ Thus, the nature of the relationship between the knower and what can be known is a subjectivist one: knowledge is literally the creation of the process of the interaction between the knower and his/her ‘reality’.

A relativist ontology

Bahá'u'lláh suggests the world of creation is not real at all: “The world is but a show, vain and empty, a mere nothing, bearing the semblance of reality... the world is like the vapour in a desert which the thirsty dreameth to be water and striveth after it with all his might, until

7. B. Dick, ‘Rigour Without Numbers – The Potential of Dialectical Processes as Qualitative Research Tools’, a paper distributed at the XVIIIth Annual Meeting of Australian Social Psychologists, Greenmount, Queensland, Australia, May 12-14, 1989.

8. E.G. Guba, ‘The Alternative Paradigm Dialog’.

when he cometh unto it, he findeth it to be mere illusion.”⁹

‘Abdu’l-Bahá also points out the relativity and tentativeness of ‘truth’, stating that humanity itself creates a body of knowledge relative to its level of capacity and understanding:

*“For instance, great discoveries and announcements of former centuries are continually upset and discarded by the wise men of today. Mathematicians, astronomers, chemical scientists continually disprove and reject the conclusions of the ancients; nothing is fixed, nothing final; everything is continually changing because human reason is progressing along new roads of investigation and arriving at new conclusions every day. In the future much that is announced and accepted as true now will be rejected and disproved. And so it will continue ad infinitum.”*¹⁰

A subjectivist epistemology

Regarding the nature of the relationship between the knower and what can be known, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has spelled out the legitimacy of working within a constructivist paradigm by stating that it is more important to hold to a relative, shared ‘truth’ in unity than be disunited in holding to different, subjective ‘truths’. He wrote that it is preferable to reach consensus on a ‘wrong’ decision than risk disunity by clinging stubbornly to what one individual might perceive as being ‘right’.¹¹

Seeming to confirm further the legitimacy of a subjective epistemology, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes: “What does it mean to investigate reality? It means that man must forget all hearsay and examine truth himself, for he does not know whether statements he hears are in accordance with reality or not”.¹²

Further, in more abstruse and mystical prose, Bahá’u’lláh spells out that it is important for the individual, when establishing a relationship between himself or herself and ‘knowledge’ of the Divine Essence, to do so subjectively and without the influence of such things as love or hate, pre-conceived notions, traditions or knowledge held by present society.¹³

A hermeneutic-dialectic methodology

Methodologically, both Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá have used the word ‘consultation’ to encompass a hermeneutic-dialectic approach to

9. Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1987, pp.328-329.

10. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, 2nd ed. Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1982.

11. See also ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Compilation of Compilations*, Sydney: Bahá’í Publishing Australia, 1990, p.91.

12. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p.62.

13. See also Bahá’u’lláh, *The Kitáb-u’l-Íqán (The Book of Certitude)*, Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1989, pp.192-195.

'finding out', seeing merit in the clash of seemingly contradictory opinion as fruitful collisions of ideas from which a higher 'truth' might be reached by way of synthesis and consensus.

'Abdu'l-Bahá has stated that consultation is "not the mere voicing of personal views".¹⁴ He elaborated that "he who expresses an opinion should not voice it as correct and right, but set it forth as a contribution to the consensus of opinion, for the light of reality becomes apparent when two opinions coincide."¹⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá seems to use the positive imagery of the 'light' of 'reality' to emphasise to Bahá'ís the higher value of a comment made as a contribution to shared understanding than one made to voice what is correct and right. This reinforces the view that Bahá'ís should place more value on a subjectivist epistemology than on a dualist or objectivist one when seeking to arrive at a decision.

One commentator on this methodology of decision-making in the Bahá'í community sees consultation as "neither a compromise nor the simple addition of one thought to another: it is a new creation."¹⁶

The unconscious process of decision-making

In the myriad decisions I make each day, it has been my experience not to stop and *consciously* determine, for every decision, the influence of how I have arrived at the decision, the paradigm I held, my values at the time and the assumptions I was making, let alone consider whether the decision would result in actions to satisfy my fundamental human needs.¹⁷ It has been my experience in 12 years of participation in Bahá'í consultation (decision-making) that Bahá'ís too, as group decision-makers, do not consciously determine the method by which they arrived at a decision, the paradigm in which they explored the issues associated with it, their values at the time and the assumptions each was making. Availability of time among a group of volunteer decision-makers is a pressing factor in limiting the level of consciousness that can be developed.

What is now important in the Bahá'í community?

The Bahá'í International Community is anticipating the maturation of its administrative institutions to synchronise with the completion of the building projects at the Bahá'í World Centre and the establishment of the Lesser Peace.¹⁸ The Universal House of Justice has suggested that the Faith's national and local institutions focus their attention on the

14. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p.72.

15. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p.72.

16. J.E. Kolstoe, *Consultation – A Universal Lamp of Guidance*, Oxford: George Ronald, 1985.

17. M. Max-Neef, A. Elizalde M. Hopenhayn, *Human Scale Development: Conception, Application and Further Reflections*, London: Apex Press, 1991.

18. Shoghi Effendi, letter dated October 1, 1954, *Messages to the Bahá'í World 1950-1957*, Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1954, p.74.

development of the role of the individual, on the quality of the functioning of the local institutions and on the vitality of the local Bahá'í community. It also suggested the formation of 'institutes' or 'centres of learning', which have, as their goal "the raising up of large numbers of believers who are trained to foster and facilitate the process of entry by troops with efficiency and love."¹⁹

Maturation and learning, then, are stressed as important components of the current focus of Bahá'í activity, in the context of the individual, local institutions and local community. As proposed earlier, to move comfortably from one paradigm for action to a constructivist one for decision-making, and back, requires consciousness and learning about how we come 'to know', what influences this 'knowing' and what we value as 'knowledge'.

Maturity

Some commentators consider 'maturity' to be the ability to be conscious and aware of these paradigm jumps and levels of learning, as well as to be able to critique them. Such a perspective suggests that maturation of the Bahá'í institutions could be seen as the conscious ability of their members to jump from their individually favoured paradigms to a constructivist one for group decision-making, and back; to be conscious of various levels of making-sense and how these influence the decision being created; and to be able to critique these.

For instance, Brookfield links the notion of critical consciousness with maturity when he writes: "An adult's increasing sophistication can be seen in his or her coming to see one's own culture from a critical stance and establishing loyalties that go beyond one's immediate community."²⁰ Mezirow too points out a link between greater consciousness and maturity. He writes that: "Critical awareness or critical consciousness is 'becoming aware of our awareness' and critiquing it... Critical consciousness – and particularly theoretical reflectivity – represents a uniquely adult capacity and, as such, becomes realised through perspective transformation."²¹

Bahá'u'lláh draws a link between maturity and understanding. He writes: "For everything there is and will continue to be a station of perfection and maturity. The maturity of the gift of understanding is made manifest through consultation"²²

These commentaries on 'maturity' link it closely to understanding, to greater consciousness, to critical consciousness. Thus, from the basic

19. Universal House of Justice, *Ridván Message*, 1996.

20. S. Brookfield, *Developing Critical Thinkers*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1987, p39.

21. J. Mezirow, 'A critical theory of adult learning and education' *Adult Education*, 32:1 (1981), pp.3-24.

22. Bahá'u'lláh, *Compilation of Compilations*, Sydney: Bahá'í Publishing Australia, 1990.

pairing of maturity and learning can now be added the term 'consciousness' or awareness. Mezirow uses the word 'awareness' in relation to adult learning: "Awareness of why we attach the meanings we do to reality, especially to our roles and relationships – meanings often misconstrued out of the uncritically assimilated half-truths of conventional wisdom and power relationships assumed as fixed – may be the most significant, distinguishing characteristic of adult learning."²³ Thus, he links awareness with adult learning.

Bahá'u'lláh also introduces the notion of awareness when stating: "The intent of what hath been revealed from the Pen of the Most High is that consultation may be fully carried out among the friends, inasmuch as it is and will always be a cause of awareness and of awakening and a source of good and well-being."²⁴ So Bahá'u'lláh sees awareness as a product of the Bahá'í decision-making process of consultation. The Bahá'í notion of "mindfulness"²⁵ and the practice of bringing "thyself to account each day"²⁶ could also be understood to be a call for consciousness about what one is doing, in practice, in relation to what one knows one should do in theory.

In terms relevant to a Bahá'í institution, maturity would manifest itself as a consciousness by its members about the influence of:

- Their previous experience.
- The subject matter of what they are deciding.
- The method chosen to find out more about the issue at hand.
- Why they considered some aspects of the issue more important than others.
- The values that dictated this importance.
- The assumptions behind these values.

Being conscious of these aspects of their decision-making then places them in a position to critique their stance at any of these levels, determining if a different method might be more appropriate, whether a different set of values would be more relevant, or whether the initial assumptions are unfounded.

These can be represented diagrammatically (Figure 1) as a nested set of virtually invisible filters surrounding each individual (and group), influencing what is allowed to be 'seen' and 'known' about the world. Consciousness can be defined as becoming aware of these filters and appreciating how changing the nature of the filter can change the perspective on the issue at hand.

23. J. Mezirow, 'A critical theory of adult learning and education' *Adult Education*, 32:1 (1981), pp.3-24.

24. Bahá'u'lláh, *Compilation of Compilations*, Sydney: Bahá'í Publishing Australia, 1990.

25. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Star of the West*, 8:9. 1917.

26. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words*.

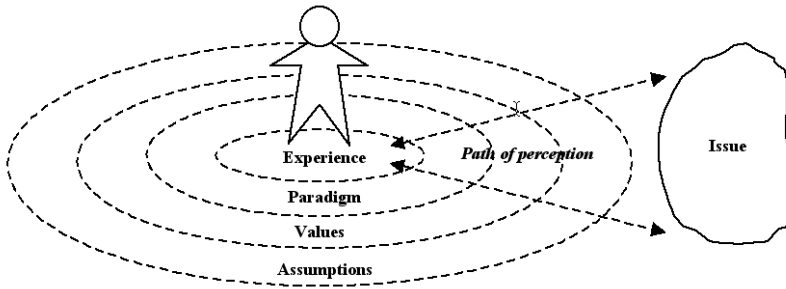


Figure 1: A suggested model of the nested filters of invisible realms influencing our perceptions of the world. Becoming conscious of their influence could lead to the appreciation and understanding of the great diversity of perceptions about our shared world.

Learning

Consciousness can also be applied to the concept of learning. The modes of learning relevant to the theme at hand include experiential learning, that is, learning *to be*; propositional learning: learning *to know*; and practical learning: learning *to do*.

Propositional learning is the style most are familiar with through formal institutions, such as schools, where teachers convey a body of knowledge to the student and expect him or her to memorise it and understand its application. Mathematics, chemistry and history are among the subjects often taught in this way. For a Bahá'í, propositional learning is useful in memorising quotations from the Bahá'í writings and in memorising prayers for personal recitation.

Practical learning is a different style. For instance, no matter how much theory one learns about riding a bicycle, one will never be able to do it until one gets on the bike and starts riding, falls off and gets back on until one gets accustomed to keeping balance. For a Bahá'í, practical learning is useful in performing the genuflections associated with the obligatory prayers. There is little point in studying the theory of the genuflections: it is the attempted action, which brings benefit to the supplicating person.

Experiential learning involves a process of learning theoretically about a situation, experiencing it, reflecting upon that experience, refining one's theoretical understanding of it, and re-engaging with the situation to act more appropriately in it. For Bahá'ís, this is particularly useful for such actions as teaching the Faith, for consulting, for proclaiming the Faith, for presenting the Faith through the Arts, for executing duties as an Assembly office bearer, for parenting, for being good citizens, for being good sons and daughters.

It is this style of learning that appears to be at the heart of the Bahá'í 'institute' process:

“The [institute] process unfolds as the group strives to deepen and train receptive members of the population; actions and materials are revised, based on their effectiveness; eventually, a progressively unfolding plan of action emerges. This continual learning process is the central, driving force of the institute’s program.”²⁷

Experiential learning requires critical reflection, consciousness, awareness: becoming conscious of what one has experienced, critiquing it and searching for further theory to understand better the experience and how future action can be modified for more effective and more satisfying experience. It is a cyclical process, with the participant repeatedly moving through the phases of theory, experience and reflection in a given context so that refinement of experience and understanding, of *being*, are made.

Just as there would appear to be a nested set of filters which one’s perceptions of the world must traverse before reaching our understanding, some commentators propose a nested set of levels of learning. These three levels of learning have been referred to by some as cognition, meta-cognition and epistemic-cognition.²⁸

Maudsley describes “the process by which learners become aware of and increasingly in control of habits of perception, inquiry, learning and growth that they have internalised” as ‘meta-learning.’²⁹ Bawden also refers to meta-learning, describing it as “learning about learning”. However, he suggests the learning shouldn’t stop there but reach the higher level of epistemic-learning, “the domain of the philosophical beliefs that each of us holds as the context for what we know and what we value.”³⁰

Thus, learning or cognition relates to *what* we are learning. Meta-cognition relates to *how* we are going about our learning, while epistemic-cognition relates to questions about *why* we are valuing these methods of learning and subject matter over other methods and subjects. For example, questions of relevance to the Australian Bahá'í Community at the epistemic level include: why does it seem, in practice, that the positions of doctor and engineer are considered more prestigious than that of plumber and artist, and why does the Bahá'í community in Australia seem to value university education over vocational education at a technical college or over an apprenticeship? It could be argued that excellence can be achieved at each of these levels and in each of these fields.

Adding these levels of learning to the previous model gives the following model (Figure 2).

27. International Teaching Centre, ‘Institute Training Programs’, 1995, p.40.

28. K. Kitchener, ‘Cognition, Meta-Cognition and Epistemic-Cognition: A Three-Level Model of Cognitive Processing’, *Human Development* No.26, 1983, pp.222-232; M. Salner, ‘Adult Cognitive and Epistemological Development in Systems Education’ in *Systems Research*, Vol.3:4 (1986), pp.225-232.

29. D. Maudsley, D., ‘A theory of meta-learning and principles of facilitation: An organismic perspective’, Ph.D., University of Toronto, 1979.

30. R. Bawden, ‘Systemic Development: A Learning Approach to Change’, an occasional paper for the Centre for Systemic Development, University of Western Sydney, Hawkesbury, March 1995.

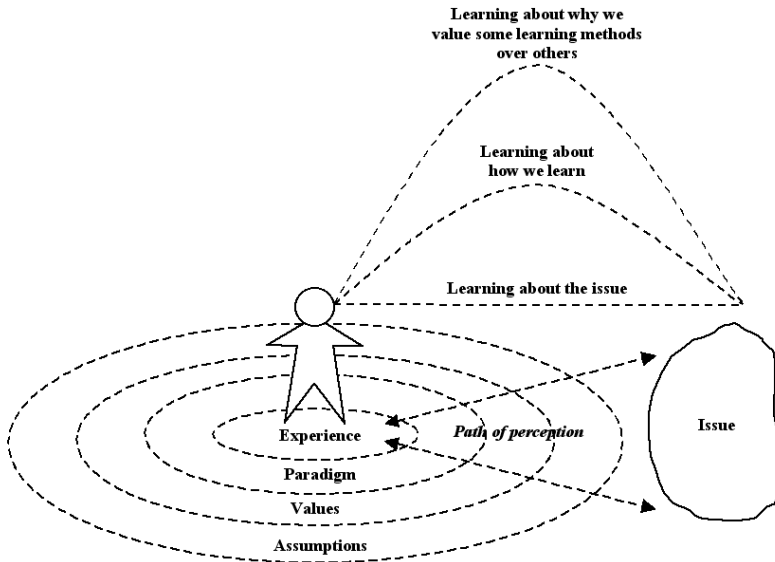


Figure 2: A suggested model of the nested filters of invisible realms influencing our perceptions of the world, along with the levels of learning which influence our sense-making. Becoming conscious of these influences could lead to a liberation of our thinking and acting in the world and our learning about it.

A conscious process of decision-making

Bringing the above strands together, it is proposed that a more conscious (and thus mature) process of decision-making could be fostered in the Bahá'í community through their centres of learning, if these institutes were to offer a course whose subjects included:

- Propositional learning about paradigms and learning levels – to give participants the language by which to articulate and critique their experiences, paradigms, values, assumptions and levels of learning, and
- Experiential learning scenarios which cycled through the phases of presenting theory about Bahá'í consultation and the constructivist paradigm (in particular), putting this theory into action in the real world by consulting about one or two specific topics (such as the delivery of a teaching project or holding a stall at the local market) and reflecting on their experience of consultation to refine their understanding of the theory about it and their past actions – with at least three repetitions of the cycle so that it becomes more habitual for participants to critique consciously their thinking, acting and reflecting.

It is envisaged that a centre of learning would, through such a course, facilitate self-directed learning among participants to liberate them from being

at the mercy of other 'knowers' and their unconscious matrix of understanding, and equip them with language and skills to think and act more consciously.

Such a course is suggested as a path by which members of Local and National Spiritual Assemblies and their committees could foster their own maturation and, thus, that of the institutions they serve on, as well as foster the development of a learning community among the rank and file of the Bahá'í Faith.