

The acquisition metaphor (for morning people)

Colby Goettel

October 22, 2015

The acquisition metaphor (AM) is a convoluted way of saying that people learn by learning (as opposed to doing). Facts, ideas, and concepts build on each other. These pieces of information — objects — are what is known as knowledge. Knowledge is then internalized and stored in memory. Historically, AM has been the metaphor used for thousands of years to describe knowledge and learning. Generally, when people think about learning, they think AM.

The participation metaphor (PM) is a learning style dictated by actions: people learn by doing. PM advocates teach that knowledge is not something that people have, it's societal and communal. Learning is done by being part of a community. This type of learning is all-encompassing — learning isn't something that anyone has, it's one part of the whole.

Proponents of AM and PM have formed into camps, warring with each other about which is the True and Living Metaphor to describe learning. I firmly believe that this so-called debate is artificial, created for the sake of argument. It allows each side to better understand themselves. AM and PM focus on two completely different aspects of learning. They're definitely related, but they also exist independently. These metaphors are symbiotic and thrive on each other.

Knowledge, neurologically speaking, is when the myelin sheaths of neurons form along certain pathways, making memory. These memories, like muscle, are reinforced as they are used and weaken when not.

In another sense, knowledge is only gained by being part of a community. Whether that be the chess club, a math class, or on a national or global level, these are all communities in which individuals learn and form memories.

PM argues that no knowledge is centrally held, but is communal. True, but it's 2015: there is no longer this primal sense of community in the world. Technology has bridged that gap and allowed individuals to join whichever communities they'd like. Go to a library and join the other communities by reading their literature. E-mail a professor and ask questions. It's odd that people are arguing PM in light of all the technological advances that seem to make it obsolete (or, at least, in need of some serious revision).

In reality, it seems that these metaphors are actually a methodology: first, an individual learns in a community (PM), but then internalizes that knowledge (AM). PM has it wrong that knowledge is some hippie-dippie, nebulous thing that exists but doesn't really exist and was created *ex nihilo*: it's facts and concepts and ideas and strategies and methodologies that are taught to people in a society and are then propagated through language and actions. And then internalized and stored in the individual's memory (AM) and in the memory of the community (PM).

These metaphors exist in harmony. People have created an artificial debate because it helps them learn. Both metaphors exist. Everyone has experienced both in their lives because that's how the world works.

Information processing