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UNDERSTANDING AND PROMOTING AUTONOMY IN SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Three conations, initiative, resourcefulness, and persistence, have been proposed as being salient characteristic manifestations of autonomous learning. This thesis will attempt to define these constructs while proposing methods that educators may take in facilitating their enactment. This theoretical treatment is based upon published literature associated with the fields of self-directed learning and psychology and concludes with the proposition that while fostering learner autonomy is not often pedagogically considered, it is both possible and desirable for an educator to foster autonomy within students through the structured inculcation of the cognitive processes related to these conative factors.

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INTRODUCTION

The importance of self-directed learning as a discipline rests in its far-reaching effects on our society of learners. Tough (1982) estimates that approximately 80 percent of adult learners initiate self-directed learning activities. Without question, the respective contexts of these learning activities cover a spectrum from work related to recreational needs. As professors, we often feel that if our students (many of whom are barely in the classification of adulthood) were more "self-directed" in their learning, then not only would they be better prepared for the courses that we offer but they would also maximize the eventual benefits of their formal education.

However the term "self-directed learning" is used to describe many types of learning activities thereby existing without a unique definition (Ponton, Carr and Confessore 2000). According to Oddi (1987) and Merriam and Caffarella (1999), self-directed learning research can be

dichotomized into two broad categories: a process perspective or a personality characteristic perspective. Furthermore, these authors assert that the process perspective is the dominant viewpoint that has been adopted by researchers within the field.

The process perspective generally focuses on the activities that the learner engages in such as goal setting, planning a learning strategy, acquiring resources, and monitoring progress (Knowles 1975; Oddi 1987). These activities parallel what Zimmerman, Bonner and Kovach (1996) refer to as "self-regulation" where self-regulation refers to the self-generated activities, both cognitive and behavioral, that a person uses to accomplish their educational goals. However, these activities are predicated on the psychological situation of the learner. As Knowles (1980) states:

Learning is described psychologically as a process of need-meeting and goal-striving by the learners. This is to say that individuals are motivated to engage in learning to the extent that they feel a need to learn and perceive a personal goal that learning will help to achieve; and they will invest their energy in making use of available resources (including teachers and readings) to the extent that they perceive them as being relevant to their needs and goals. (p. 56)

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These ideas are congruent with Long (1989) who asserts that self-directed learning can be conceptualized along a sociological dimension (addressing learner isolation), a pedagogical dimension (addressing the learner's activities), or a psychological dimension (addressing the learner's mental state). The process description of self-directed learning encompasses both the sociological and pedagogical dimensions. However, Long (1998) asserts that only "the *psychological conceptualization* is both necessary and sufficient to explain SDL [self-directed learning]" (p. 10). He states:

The psychological conceptualization implies that fundamentally learning is a self-initiated, self-directed, and self-regulated cognitive process whereby the learner can choose to ignore instruction, to merely absorb it by casual attention, to carefully memorize without critical reflection, or to seek to change or create an understanding of information. (p. 9)

One aspect of the psychological dimension consists of the learner identifying needs that serve as motivational inducements to cogitate learning goals. Another aspect of this dimension is the learner's personality characteristics.

Imagine two students working diligently in their university library on a Friday night. They appear to be involved in similar activities: finding material, reading books and articles, taking notes, evaluating their information and seeking additional information. However, there is an important difference between them. The first student is there because s/he has procrastinated for several weeks and now has an assignment that is due on Monday. The second student is there because s/he happens to be curious about a topic that a professor casually mentioned during the course of a lecture. This difference can be found in the concept of *learner autonomy*.

The concept of autonomy (Knowles 1980; Merriam and Caffarella 1999) exists under the personality characteristic rubric of self-directed learning. Chene (1983) defines learner autonomy in terms of independence. Such independence is based upon an individual's personal will to learn something of perceived value that results in the learner's discretion of how to best accomplish the desired level of learning. Thus, learner autonomy can be defined as the characteristic of the person who independently exhibits agency (i.e., intentional actions) in learning activities (Ponton 1999) where independence is the characteristic of the person who controls his or her own actions, control being "a state of mind, as well as of one's environment" (Sheldon and Elliot 1998, p. 546).

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Now while both of the students mentioned above exhibit some degree of autonomy (after all, *it is* a Friday night), the major differences between them are not solely in the process of self-directed learning (i.e., identifying a learning goal, planning a learning strategy, gathering learning resources, and evaluating learning progress) but rather in that these processes represents manifestations related to their personality characteristics as a learner (i.e., the second student has independently chosen to learn something of perceived value). These manifestations represent *autonomous learning* (i.e., *learner autonomy* can be viewed as the psychological undergirding that leads to the behaviors associated with the process of *autonomous learning*) that include initiative, resourcefulness, and persistence (Confessore 1991) referred to as conative factors because the manifestation of each is predicated on an individual's desire to engage in a learning activity. (Note that *conative* is used to describe the determination to engage in an activity or reach a future desired state, i.e., intentional.) Confessore (1991) further asserts that individuals who exhibit these conative factors in their learning activities "possess traits which are essential to successful self-direction in learning" (p. 129). Using the dichotomy of process and personality characteristic perspectives of autonomous learning can be misleading because the learning processes attributed to the behaviors of autonomous learning are manifest as a result of the learner's personality characteristics of autonomy.

For an educator to promote autonomy within his or her students requires an understanding of initiative, resourcefulness, and persistence and methods of development. It is suggested that promoting autonomous learning (i.e., the exhibition of initiative, resourcefulness, and persistence) will develop learner autonomy because of the valued outcomes that will follow, i.e., autonomy will not only enhance students' formal educational experience, but will provide them with the psychological undergirding essential for lifelong learning. The purpose of this thesis is twofold: to clarify the conative factors associated with autonomous learning and to suggest ways in which an educator can promote the development of autonomy within students.

DISCUSSION

When one asserts that a student is "showing initiative" in his/her learning, what specific manifestations are being referred to? Based upon an understanding of personal initiative developed from research conducted in non-academic environments (cf. Ghiselli 1971; Hoehne 1990; Frese, Kring, Soose, and Zempel 1996; Frohman 1997), Ponton (1999) defined the theoretical construct of personal initiative in autonomous learning as a behavioral syndrome (i.e.,

a group of co-occurring behaviors) consisting of the following five behaviors: *goal-directedness*, *action-orientation*, *active-approach to problem solving*, *persistence in overcoming obstacles*, and *self-startedness*.

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Goal-directedness refers to the conation of establishing learning goals and working toward their accomplishment. Specific and challenging goals are important to induce motivation because of the anticipated self-satisfaction that will occur when goals are realized (Bandura 1997). In addition, while adopting long-range goals provides a general direction to work toward, the establishment and accomplishment of proximal subgoals provide the learner with immediate feedback thereby facilitating an assessment as to whether the adopted learning strategies are enabling the learner to reach the ultimate distal goal.

However learning goals are adopted because of the perceived value of anticipated outcomes that will follow when goals are accomplished. Such valued outcomes may be personal (e.g., pleasure), social (e.g., respect from valued others, money), or self-evaluative (e.g., the satisfaction from behaviors meeting self-standards of performance) (Bandura 1997). Therefore, to facilitate goal-directedness, educators need to help students understand the positive correlation between specific learning goals and the outcomes that the students desire from their formal education. Humans are cognitively motivated to engage in activities directed at accomplishing specific goals when they value the expected outcomes that will likely follow, i.e., the basic premise of expectancy value theory (Atkinson 1982; Vroom 1964). Afterwards, students should be encouraged to establish their own specific and challenging goals while educators continually provide them with the learning skills necessary to accomplish these goals thereby enabling them to further the development of their individual learning skills.

When a student intends on learning something, the rapidity with which this intention is transformed into a learning activity is referred to as *action-orientation*. Chapman and Skinner (1985) state, "the intentionality of action implies a differentiation of ends and means . . . [whereby] the action is performed *in order* to bring about a certain goal" (p. 201). Thus, a person displaying initiative will be both goal-directed and action-oriented (Frese et al. 1996).

Frese and Sabini (1985) assert that "according to action theory, there must be at least a general notion of a goal and a general plan before one is able to act at all" (p. xx). This implies that when a student identifies some desired level of learning (i.e., a learning goal), the student must formulate a general plan on how to best accomplish the learning. A goal of formal education is to develop learning skills within students thereby providing them with a repertoire of learning tools to choose from depending upon the context of the desired learning. However, it is incumbent upon the educator to guide the student as to which tools are appropriate for which learning. As an example, reading current conference articles or conversing with working professionals as opposed to reading journals or books best facilitates some learning. Even the techniques required in finding desired information may be an important skill for the student to acquire. If so, educators should provide learning exercises that require students to find relevant information, compare and contrast content, while continually providing corrective modeling instructing how to best extract important ideas. Ultimately, skill development and the organization of such skills

(a.k.a. planning) in accomplishing desired levels of learning will equip the student with the means to plan learning activities expeditiously and efficiently thereby facilitating an action-orientation.

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Self-startedness, the behavior of motivating oneself to begin a learning activity, occurs when the student is able to identify desired outcomes, create goals, develop plans, and work toward goal accomplishment independently. "Such [self] motivation emerges spontaneously from internal tendencies and can motivate behavior even without the aid of extrinsic rewards or environmental controls" (Deci and Ryan 1985, p. 43). A self-starting behavior, while facilitated by valued expected outcomes and the anticipated self-satisfaction of accomplishing challenging goals, is also influenced by the perceived presence of obstacles.

Blankenship (1985) states:

The initial activities associated with the dominance of an intentional action tendency would be characterized as the OTIUM [opportunity, time, importance, urgency, means] checks that would either result in the repeated inhibition and immediate decrease of the ongoing action tendency, if OTIUM criteria were not met, or result in the additional instigation of the action tendency and withdrawal of previous inhibitory force, if the OTIUM criteria were met. (p. 168)

The importance check refers to "reflecting on the positive aspects of goal attainment" (Heckhausen and Kuhl 1985, p. 153) and is facilitated when educators help students to understand the positive correlation between the accomplishment of learning goals and the realization of desired outcomes (see *goal-directedness* above). In addition, the means check is related to learning skill development as well as the ability to plan learning activities that accomplish desired levels of learning as previously discussed.

The ability of learners to perceive that opportunity, time, and urgency are present is predicated upon their *active-approach to problem solving*. An active-approach refers to the behavior of taking the responsibility for the development of solution strategies to one's own problems. The deterrents to learning may come in many forms (cf. Darkenwald and Valentine 1985) some of which are a lack of resources (i.e., lack of opportunity), time constraints (i.e., lack of time), and a low priority of learning as compared to other activities (i.e., lack of urgency). An important goal for the educator is to convey to students that it is their responsibility to show an active-approach in their learning by taking the responsibility to create learning opportunities (e.g., seeking learning resources, designating learning environments), reserving time dedicated solely to learning activities, and create urgency in their learning (i.e., prioritizing learning above other activities) through the realization that the learning opportunities afforded by formal education are often limited in duration.

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When students realize that it is their responsibility to both solve the problems that impede desired levels of learning and to become suitably armed with a repertoire of learning and planning skills, then *persistence in overcoming obstacles* becomes an anticipated behavior. Yet such persistence is highly influenced by a student's perception of his/her perseverant capability, referred to as self-efficacy (Bandura 1997). As a student continually performs OTIUM checks and learning activities, instead of non-learning activities, are pursued through the creation of opportunity, time, importance, urgency or means, then the student learns via these mastery experiences (Bandura 1977) that s/he has the skill to successfully overcome learning obstacles. This process is facilitated when educators recognize the presence of these obstacles and encourage students to take the responsibility to use acquired skills (such as planning) or develop new skills (such as time management) to satisfy OTIUM criteria. Because everyone performs the OTIUM checks in choosing which activities to pursue, educators should encourage students to observe the behaviors of successful models and pattern their actions in creating opportunity, time, importance, urgency and means in their learning activities. When such models are chosen from similar others such as student peers, then self-efficacy may be enhanced vicariously, i.e., when people that we perceive to be like us show capability, then we often believe that we are equally capable of performing at similar levels.

As a behavior of initiative, persistence refers to the continuation of action in spite of the presence of obstacles. As Frohman (1997) asserts, "if there is one element that describes those who successfully take personal initiative, it is their dogged sense of purpose, commitment to keep going, and understanding that it takes time" (p. 47). However, perseverant behavior is also congruent with the concept of volition (Derrick, 2000) where volition is a post-decisional process whereby once one decides (i.e., intends) to engage in a behavior, volition refers to the maintenance of motivation in proceeding from intention to behavior. As Heckhausen and Kuhl (1985) state:

Motivation refers to all elaborations of values and expectancies and their integration. Once the elaborating processes of motivation have run their course or have ceased, leaving behind an invitation to action, self-commitment initiates the volition process that leads to an eventual enactment of the resulting intention in due time and at the appropriate occasion. (p. 151)

Kuhl and Fuhrman (1998) indicate that volition has two aspects, self-control and self-regulation, and that one's level of commitment to maintain participation in a behavior is related to the degree to which both of these forms of volition are present. They assert, "the mode of volition supporting the maintenance of an active goal is called *self-control* . . . whereas the mode supporting the task of maintaining one's actions in line with one's integrated self [i.e., the person's self-concept of who s/he is] is called *self-regulation*" (p. 15).

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Carr's (1999) concept of resourcefulness in autonomous learning is based upon the volitional process of self-control as previously defined by Rosenbaum (1989). Learner resourcefulness consists of the activation of four behaviors: *anticipating the future rewards of learning, prioritizing learning over other activities, delaying immediate gratification, and solving problems in one's learning* (Carr 1999). The degree to which a learner is deemed resourceful in

autonomous learning is related to the degree to which these four behaviors are manifest thereby enabling the learner to actively pursue his/her learning goal. The term "resourceful" is used because conceptually resourcefulness is used to describe a person who is capable of dealing with problematic situations that induce stress. Learning activities can induce stress not only from the perspective of the learner having to extend capability or understanding, but also from the decisions that have to be made concerning which activities to pursue caused by competing activities that vie for the learner's time and energy. In general, stress refers to "any *internal* event such as anxiety, pain, or thought that disrupts the effective performance of a target behavior" (Rosenbaum 1980, p. 110).

The four resourceful behaviors are highly interrelated (which may be expected for a unified construct) and are interrelated with personal initiative as well (which also may be expected due to their supportive roles in autonomous learning). As already mentioned, to facilitate goal-directedness the educator should highlight to the student the positive correlation between the accomplishment of learning/course goals and the valued outcomes that will likely follow. By internalizing this correlation, the student will be better able to engage in the resourceful behavior of *anticipating future rewards*. The student will then *prioritize learning over other activities* due to this anticipated benefit even if it involves *delaying the immediate gratification* that may be realized from participating in non-learning activities. Also, the development of learning and planning skills has been highlighted as being critical if a student is expected to be action-oriented in his/her learning activities. Such skill development is of paramount importance in being able to *solve the problems* associated with the development and completion of a learning activity.

In addition to planning, problem solving encompasses evaluating alternatives and anticipating consequences (Ponton, Carr and Confessore, 2000). This evaluation and anticipation is best promoted when the educator models problem solving behaviors in classroom exercises, and later internalized when students are tasked to conduct learning on their own thereby gaining experience that not only improves their ability to solve learning problems, but also improves their self-perception that they are capable of learning what they desire when they desire (i.e., increases self-efficacy in autonomous learning). This latter realization is crucial to the development of lifelong learners. The importance of resourcefulness with respect to persistence is that by exhibiting self-control in learning, students are able to focus on the value of learning activities (thereby choosing learning activities over non-learning activities that may, in the short term, be more pleasurable) and solve the problems that interfere with their desired levels of learning thereby enhancing perseverant tendencies.

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The second volitional process important to persistent behavior is self-regulation. Zimmerman, Bonner, and Kovach (1996) provide a cyclic model of self-regulated learning that involves the following processes: *self-evaluation and monitoring*, *goal setting and strategic planning*, *strategy implementation and monitoring*, and *strategic outcome monitoring* (p. 11). *Self-evaluation and monitoring* occur when the student compares current levels of learning to desired levels. Educators facilitate this process when the value of anticipated course outcomes is conveyed to students and an accurate assessment is performed to indicate the discrepancy between the students' current and desired levels of achievement. Typically, this process of

evaluation occurs whenever periodic assessments are performed. However, the ultimate goal of this process is for students to develop the requisite skills to independently identify desired learning outcomes and be able to identify not only discrepancies between current and desired future states, but be able to anticipate the effectiveness of potential learning strategies based upon past performances. *Goal setting and strategic planning* refer to the activity of establishing learning goals and planning learning activities that will hopefully lead to desirable learning outcomes. As already mentioned, autonomous goal setting and planning skills are developed through the evaluation of the effectiveness of past learning strategies of goal setting and planning—strategies that were initially modeled by the educator but later tasked to the student in course-related activities. After a plan is developed, *strategic implementation and monitoring* refer to the implementation of the plan and an evaluation as to the accuracy of the implementation. As a simple example, students who establish a plan of reading the notes from a particular course for one hour every night need to monitor their efforts (e.g., create a reading log) to determine if, in fact, they are actually reading for the intended duration. Establishing a specific plan and methods of evaluating implementation represent a specific goal in itself thereby providing motivation due to the clear discrepancy between current and desired states. *Strategic outcome monitoring* refers to the process in which the learner makes determinations as to whether adopted goals and plans are leading to desired outcomes. In class, the educator facilitates this process by helping students to understand the desirable learning outcomes at the beginning of the semester, the connection between course goals and the outcomes, why the course format best facilitates the accomplishment of the goals, and then at the end of the semester that the desirable outcomes have been realized thereby feeding directly into the beginning process of the cycle, namely self-evaluation and monitoring. In autonomous learning activities, these two processes (i.e., *strategic outcome* and *self-evaluation and monitoring*) are critical in providing feedback as to whether adopted goals and plans are adequate for the eventual levels of desired learning. Students need to be encouraged to reflect upon outcomes, goals, and strategies thereby reinforcing the importance of the self-regulation process.

Self-regulation is a critical cyclic process of persistence in autonomous learning because it represents the necessary activities required in any successful learning activity. The autonomy rests in the learner's ability to initiate these processes independently subsequent to successful modeling activities provided by the educator.

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CONCLUSIONS

The development of lifelong learners as a goal of formalized education is not a new idea (although some might think so due to the popularity of the term). Professors recognize that the content material that they offer to their students is merely foundational in that the actual needs of ultimate vocations will be met with new knowledge that is built upon the foundation created in college. We certainly hope that enough of a curriculum is provided to create a good starting point for future learning from the perspectives of salient content mastery and acquired skill in learning.

Yet fostering autonomy in students is not often pedagogically considered. It is not enough for students to "know" certain things (i.e., content mastery) and be able to "do" certain things (i.e.,

skill mastery)—they must also want to know more things and be able to muster the requisite cognitive inducements to exhibit personal initiative, resourcefulness, and persistence in their learning. As Dewey (1916) asserts:

If he [i.e., the student] cannot devise his own solution (not of course in isolation, but in correspondence with the teacher and other pupils) and find his own way out he will not learn, not even if he can recite some correct answer with one hundred per cent accuracy. We can and do supply ready-made "ideas" by the thousand; we do not usually take much pains to see that the one learning engages in significant situations where his own activities generate, support, and clinch ideas—that is, perceived meanings or connections. (p. 160)

As educators, we must work to inculcate the necessary cognitive processes that promote students to develop their "own solution" to problems. This thesis has presented many of these cognitive processes: valuing learning as a means to desired outcomes, understanding that the accomplishment of suitably chosen goals can lead to desired outcomes, and assuming responsibility for one's own learning. Based upon these prerequisite processes, additional processes are enlisted, such as: prioritizing learning over other activities, self-evaluating current states to future desired states of learning, creating suitable learning goals and plans, monitoring whether planned learning activities are leading to desired outcomes, adjusting plans accordingly, solving the problems that interfere with learning, and creating the opportunity, time, importance, urgency, and means for one's own learning activities. These processes can be reinforced within the student regardless of educational level or the instructional environment (including distance education).

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When students can autonomously initiate these processes without mandates or even encouragement from others primarily due to attributions of feelings of control over past learning successes, then educators have been truly successful in "educating" their students. As Dewey (1916) states: "The inclination to learn from life itself and to make the conditions of life such that all will learn in the process of living is the finest product of schooling" (p. 51). Our skills as educators are not complete until we understand, and are able to promote, autonomy in self-directed learning thereby enhancing our students' capability to engage in lifelong learning as individual desires evolve. Our influence on the education of our students need not and should not stop when the formal curriculum is completed.

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