

Student Affairs and Higher Education Practitioners as Self-Directed Learners: A Resource for Bridging Theory and Practice

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As a practitioner in residence life, financial aid, or student leadership (among others), what actions are taken when an unfamiliar issue arises in daily work? One solution is to look for an answer in books, manuals, and guides. As made clear by Cranton (1996), how-to materials for educators have proliferated over the last few decades, and attempting to keep up with the abundance of information can cause information anxiety. This article is not a “how-to” manual on how to become a better student affairs or higher education professional; rather, it is to help guide practitioners in continuing the learning process after they have completed their coursework and obtained their degree. The structured sense of education does not equate to learning and it is imperative to develop lifelong learning skills outside of the education one once pursued.

Learning

Learning is often viewed as a sense of power struggle between who decides what should be learned and

how those ideas should be explored (Brookfield, 2013). This article is not meant to be used as a power tool; the concept of self-directed learning is intrinsically developed. In this article, I suggest that intentional learning can instill a sense of autonomy and self-efficacy, challenge current understandings, and lead to transformational practices in one’s work. I do this by exploring the following questions:

- What is *learning*?
- What is *knowledge*?
- How can one make connections between the two in order to become a self-directed, transformative learner and educator?

As defined by Knowles (1980), andragogy, or the study of adult learning, assumes that “as a person matures, his or her self-concept moves from that of a dependent personality toward one of a self-directing human being” and that “the most potent motivations are internal rather than external” (as cited in Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 84). While this suggests that self-directedness is an ongoing developmental task, it is necessary to recognize that to take full advantage of the frameworks and strategies, one must be prepared to continually individualize and critique resources, leading to intentionally established changes.

Knowledge

Practitioners often think of themselves as trainers rather than educators. There are, however, varying types of knowledge that can be

utilized to practice an educator mindset. Habermas, as explored in Cranton's (1996) work, developed a theoretical three-domain framework of knowledge that is comprehensive in its applicability to practitioners in the field of education (see Figure 1). Most likely, practitioners tend to utilize the technical, or instrumental, domain the most by focusing on tasks at hand and controlling their external environment. Examples include checking email for hours to "get them out of the way" and responding to an emergency in housing with the appropriate protocol. The other two domains, practical and emancipatory, however, are crucial levels of knowledge when establishing transformative learning. Practical, or communicative, knowledge stems from the need to understand others and to be understood in return. Education is inherently social; therefore, practitioners can work to improve their communication through the practical application of talking,

listening, and writing to co-workers and colleagues. Emancipatory, or self-directed, knowledge is the foundation for transformative learning. This domain is representative of one's desire to grow and develop in ways that are free from personal bias and social influences (Cranton, 1996).

Self-Directed and Transformative Learning

Not only are practitioners educators, but they are also social change agents and/or keepers of the status quo. By increasing individual awareness, practitioners can more aptly direct their learning, analyze current beliefs, and transform their actions. Some educators are hesitant to invest money, time, and effort in professional development opportunities such as workshops. If educators do attend workshops, they may be more drawn to instructive workshops as opposed to those that use facilitation and delegation

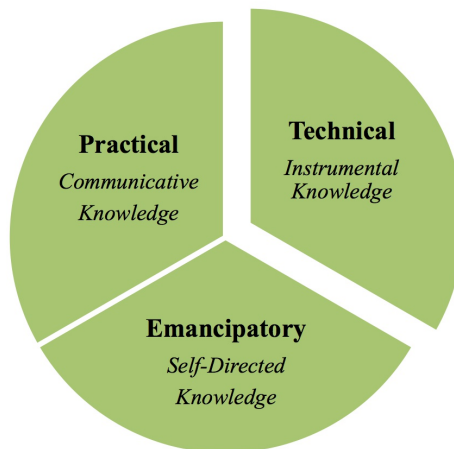


Figure 1. Habermas' three domains of knowledge: A visual representation of each domain and its respective type of knowledge. Adapted from Professional development as transformative learning: New perspectives for teachers as adults, P. Cranton, 1996, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

(Cranton, 1996). Practitioners are conditioned to be taught by an expert or teacher (as they were in school) as opposed to assisting in the creation of their own learning outcomes (Cranton, 1996). Learners are, however, more directive in their learning process when they are not monitored by external factors (Brookfield, 2013). How can educators be more directive in their own learning? The discussion thus far argues that self-directed learning can assist in this process. Below are three main goals of this concept outlined by Merriam et al. (2007):

- To enhance the ability of adult learners to be self-directed and promote personal growth;
- To foster transformational learning, or critical awareness of

one's own learning; and

- To promote emancipatory learning and social action.

In addition to defining self-directed learning, Cranton (1996) defines two more steps: critical reflection and transformative learning (see Figure 2). Critical reflection is the central process in transformative learning. At this point, practitioners tend to question their underlying assumptions and reflect as a way to solve problems. This type of reflection leads to a change in perspective. Transformative learning involves a behavioral revision of previously held assumptions, beliefs, or perspectives, yet not all critical reflection necessarily leads to transformative learning. Practitioners must revise their basic assumptions and beliefs, leading them

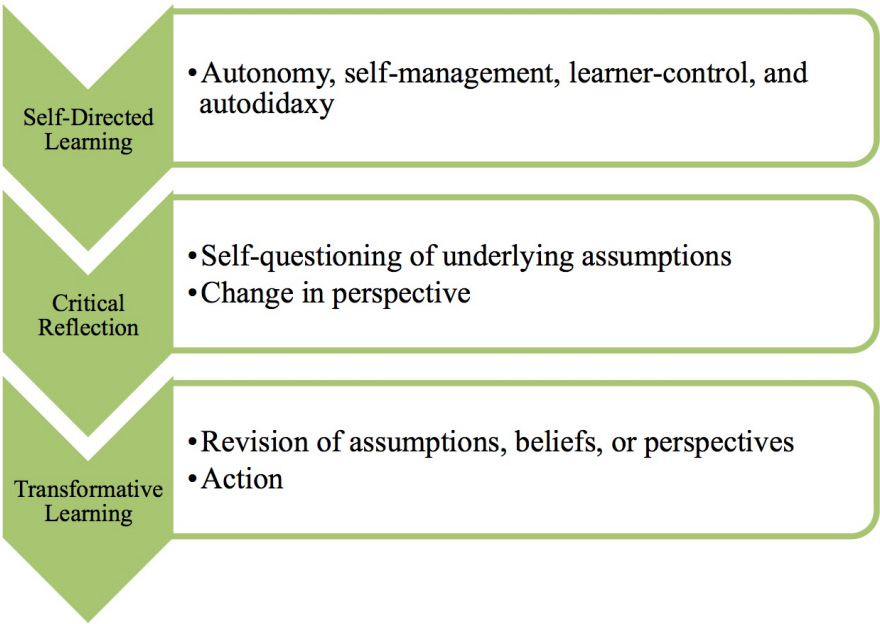


Figure 2. Steps towards transformative learning. Adapted from Professional development as transformative learning: New perspectives for teachers as adults, P. Cranton, 1996, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

to change what they know and the actions they will take as a result of critical reflection (Merriam et al., 2007).

Conclusion

What constitutes significant learning and how do individuals know whether they acquired enough skills or learned enough material during their academic program or professional training to be a significant educator and continuous learner? Fink (2013) is known for his framework in identifying factors for significant learning among college students. As a practitioner, it is beneficial to recognize at least two of his taxonomies: learning how to learn and application. Working professionals are now dependent upon their own learning and, by doing so, are capable

of continuing their learning for the rest of their careers. This sense of self-direction will enable transformative learning to take place, allowing practitioners to take action in their everyday work as a result of application.

References

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