

ADULT EDUCATION PHILOSOPHY: THE CASE OF SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING STRATEGIES IN GRADUATE TEACHING

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines graduate students' perceptions of instruction of a professor who holds an adult education philosophy of self-directed learning (SDL). Students enrolled in three online courses (N=106) in the Fall of 2013 (n=56) and the Spring of 2014 (n=50) were asked to rank 10 of the professor's behaviors in the courses based on their level of comfort with the behavior. Additionally, the students were asked to provide narrative feedback regarding the behaviors. The results of the rankings and the feedback informed the professor as to the pros and cons of course behaviors consistent with a SDL learning (teaching) philosophy. The paper concludes with a discussion of possible resolutions to negative responses as well as suggestions for future research.

INTRODUCTION

Whether a professor is a novice or a seasoned veteran in the classroom, there is always room for improvement in the teaching and learning process. Sometimes the interest in improving our teaching is stirred by new technology that emerges, a new or more current textbook, a newfound passion for the field, or maybe even a few "bad" student evaluations. Whatever the reason for wishing to improve one's teaching, the possible weaknesses must be explored in order to address them. If one of the issues is the "course seems unorganized", the fix is as simple as including a detailed course schedule in the syllabus or preparing a weekly path to completion to post in the online course. However, if the issue at hand is the fundamental underpinning of one's teaching philosophy, the resolution of the issues is not so simple.

Having "the courage to teach" (Palmer, 1998) requires not only self-reflection, but also requires us to listen to those we teach. When this is done over a period of time, we begin to develop practices and behaviors in the classroom that work best for us and hopefully our students. More importantly, we start to develop teaching practices that are often aligned with and guided by our personal values, for example, personal responsibility and democracy. As a result, what emerges is a teaching philosophy that allows students to take control of their own learning and the freedom to learn what is important to them.

Through my graduate studies in adult education, I became fascinated with the idea of self-directed learning, I suppose because it described me. It felt good. I identified with it. I felt as though my life of good personal choices, achievement through self-determination and hard work was affirmed by the concept itself and ultimately the field of adult education. This is where my teaching philosophy of self-directed learning began.

With a teaching philosophy that requires students to take personal responsibility and make their own choices for the actual learning goals, comes some issues. Many students like freedom to make choices in a course regarding assignment options, selecting their own topics for papers, forming their own groups for group work and more. However, recently I have experienced some negative feedback on student evaluations saying things like "the course has no structure", "the professor is not present", or "the professor does not give detailed instructions". This is troubling when, at least from my perspective, I was showing respect for adult learners' needs to be autonomous, the constraints on their time due to family and other responsibilities, and their need to see what they are learning meets their individual learning needs. The purpose of this study is to examine the aspects of self-directed learning as a teaching philosophy that graduate students may perceive as a professor's weakness and then suggest how those issues can be resolved.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Self-Directed Learning

The definition of the concept of self-directed learning centers on one main idea, and that being that the student is the center of the learning process. Many scholars in the field of adult education have provided insight into this concept. Self-directed learning refers to any self-teaching projects in which the learner establishes his specific goal, decides how to achieve it, finds relevant resources, plans his strategies, and maintains his motivation to learn independently (Tough, 1967). Knowles's (1975) developed and defined the characteristics of self-directed learning as "a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies and evaluating learning outcomes." (p. 18).

SDL is defined by Kumaravadivelu (2003) as learning in which making all the decisions related to learning are shouldered by the learner; however, main factors in implementing the decisions are necessarily given by authorities. Another definition of SDL is an approach to learning that relies on flexibility in time and place of learning and entrusts responsibilities of learning to the learner (Smedley, 2007).

Teaching Philosophy

One of the main tasks an educator is charged with is articulating their own education and/or teaching philosophy. Today, many employers require it as part of the application process and is a commonly included artifact in the professional dossier. Most novice educators will craft their philosophy from theories or iconic figures learned in their formal education. Since many doctoral students receive little instruction in actual college teaching (Jenkins, 2011), preparing a teaching philosophy may require reflection about one's own experiences as a learner. The veteran educator generally begins with this type of teaching philosophy and adjusts it over time. These adjustments to one's teaching philosophy are largely based on personal experiences and the best practices that may emerge in their specific teaching area.

There are many definitions in the literature regarding teaching philosophy. A teaching philosophy provides a conceptualization of a teacher's approach to teaching, establishing the foundation for articulating and clarifying teaching and learning beliefs, student learning goals, and personal development (Schönwetter, Sokal, Friesan,

& Taylor, 2002). Brookfield (1990) defined teaching philosophy as a personal vision. According to Zinn (as cited in Milheim, 2011) a teaching philosophy is much more than just teaching style, or a framework for a course. It can be defined as our beliefs about life that are carried out in our teaching practice, which serve as a foundation for our educational philosophies.

Since the author's teaching philosophy is based on the principles of self-directed learning—a pervasive concept in adult education, the need to describe various adult education philosophies exists. Arguably, the most comprehensive overview of adult education philosophies was given by Elias and Merriam (1995). These are as follows:

- Liberal Adult Education,
- Progressive Adult Education,
- Behaviorist Adult Education,
- Humanistic Adult Education, and
- Radical Adult Education.

This list of choices offers for the adult educator a guide as to their "position" regarding their approach to adult education.

Liberal

The purpose is to develop intellectual powers of the mind and to make a person literate. The learner is always a learner and seeks knowledge not just information. The teacher role is as the "expert" transmitter of knowledge and clearly directs the learning process.

Behaviorist

The purpose is to being about behavior that will ensure survival of the human species, societies, and individuals and to promote behavioral change. The learner takes an active role in learning, practicing new behavior and receiving feedback. The teacher role is as a manager, controller, and predicts and directs outcomes, designs the learning environment.

Progressive

The purpose is to transmit culture and societal structure and to promote social change, and to give the learner practical knowledge and problem solving skills. The learner's needs and interests are key. The role of the teacher is as an organizer, guides learning through experiences that are educative and evaluates the learning process.

Humanistic

The purpose is to develop people open to change and continued learning; to enhance personal growth and development and to facilitate self-actualization. The learner is highly motivated and self-directed and assumes responsibility for learning and self-development. The teacher is a facilitator, promotes, but does not direct learning, sets the mood for learning, and acts as a flexible resource for learning.

Radical

The purpose is to bring about fundamental changes to social, political, and economic changes in society through education. The learner is seen as equal with the teacher in the learning process, and has personal autonomy. The teacher is the provocateur and suggests but does not determine direction for learning.

To elaborate further, Table 1 lists the source of authority and some teaching methods for each (Zinn, 1990).

Philosophy	Source of Authority	Methods
Liberal	Western canon	Dialectic; lecture; study groups; contemplation; critical reading and discussion.
Behaviorist	Environment	Programmed instruction; contract learning; teaching machines; computer-assisted instruction; practice and reinforcement.
Progressive	Situations the learner is in	Problem-solving; scientific method; activity method; experimental method; project method; inductive method.
Humanistic	Self/learner	Experiential; group tasks; group discussion; team teaching; self-directed learning; discovery method.
Radical	Societal imbalances	Dialog; problem-posing; maximum interaction; discussion groups

Of the five adult education philosophies, the one which best describes an educator with a teaching philosophy based on self-directed learning is the humanistic philosophy. The pressing issue for one with such a philosophy is how to translate it into the teaching and learning process and how self-directed learning principles can be translated into a teaching philosophy.

Self-Directed Learning as a Teaching Philosophy

Brockett & Hiemstra (1991) define self-direction in learning as both a behavior seen in instructional method processes (self-directed learning) and a personality characteristic of the individual learner (learner self-direction). They posit that components are embedded within a personal responsibility framework and operate within the learner's social environment contributing to the outcome of self-direction in learning.

Self-directed learning as an instructional method, as previously mentioned, like any method or pedagogy, is likely adopted based on the professor's personal values or preferences for instruction. This is where self-directed learning becomes a teaching philosophy. In essence, the development of or adoption of a certain philosophy is where the educator aligns who they are on the inside with what they do on the outside. Once this development has been set into motion, the educator then constructs the various strategies or pedagogies that support the philosophy.

A possible toolbox of teaching strategies that allow the student to be self-directed are as follows: individual and group presentations, role playing, situation simulations, service learning projects, student led group discussions and more. Bolhuis (1996) suggests that teachers who want to encourage self-directed learning must free themselves from a preoccupation with tracking and correcting errors, a practice that is ego-threatening (Guthrie, et al. 1996) and Bolhuis advocate greater tolerance of uncertainty and encourage risk-taking, and capitalizing on learners' strong points instead of focusing on weaknesses, as it is more beneficial for learners to achieve a few objectives of importance to them than it is to fulfill all the objectives that are important to the teacher. Leal (1993) advocates allowing learners to explore ideas through peer discussions—even without fully intact answers. This can be a process that can yield new and valuable insights. Corno (1992) suggests allowing learners to pursue personal interests without the threat of formal evaluation. Even if they make mistakes while doing so, the activities will sustain their interest, transcend frustration, and eventually break barriers to achievement. These are just a few strategies that can embody allowing students to be self-directed.

METHOD

Problem and Purpose

After two or three semesters of student evaluation scores which were at university and college expectations, but still less than I desired, I considered several factors that may be contributing to this result. I believed myself to be respectful and genuinely concerned for my students' success, I decided to step back and evaluate my teaching philosophy. The purpose of this study is to investigate my teaching effectiveness by asking students to respond to their feelings toward my teaching techniques.

Data Collection

Students enrolled in three online graduate courses (N=106) in the Fall of 2013 (n=56) and the Spring of 2014 (n=50) were asked to rank 10 of the professor's strategies in the courses based on their level of comfort with the behavior. Additionally, the students were asked to provide narrative feedback regarding the strategies. An online survey was emailed to students in each of the courses and student responses were recorded and analyzed. Ten teaching strategies based on self-directedness were listed and students were asked to rank the entire list in order with a rank of ten being "the most comfortable" and a rank of 1 being "the least comfortable". A blank textbox was provided for any additional comments or feedback the students wished to offer. The ten items students were asked to rank were: individual presentations, group presentations, role plays, student led discussions, choices of assignments, choosing my own paper topic, service learning projects, flexible due dates, self-evaluation on assignments, and self-paced assignments.

Results

The results of the rankings elucidate the teaching strategies that are likely not to be received well by students. The least comfortable strategy for students was the choice of paper topics with a mean score of 2.89 with student led discussions being comparable with a 3.0 mean score. The two most comfortable strategies for students are self-evaluation with a 7.5 mean and flexible due dates with a mean of 7.3. Table 2 illustrates the entire range of the ratings.

Figure 1 represents the ranking of each of the self-directed learning strategies, and the highest and lowest scores given by the students.

Strategy	Mean
Choice of Paper Topics	2.86
Student Led Discussions	3.01
Choice of Assignments	4.48
Service Learning	4.63
Group Presentations	5.19
Role Play	6.43
Individual Presentations	6.75
Self-Paced Assignments	6.75
Flexible Due Dates	7.33
Self-Evaluation	7.50

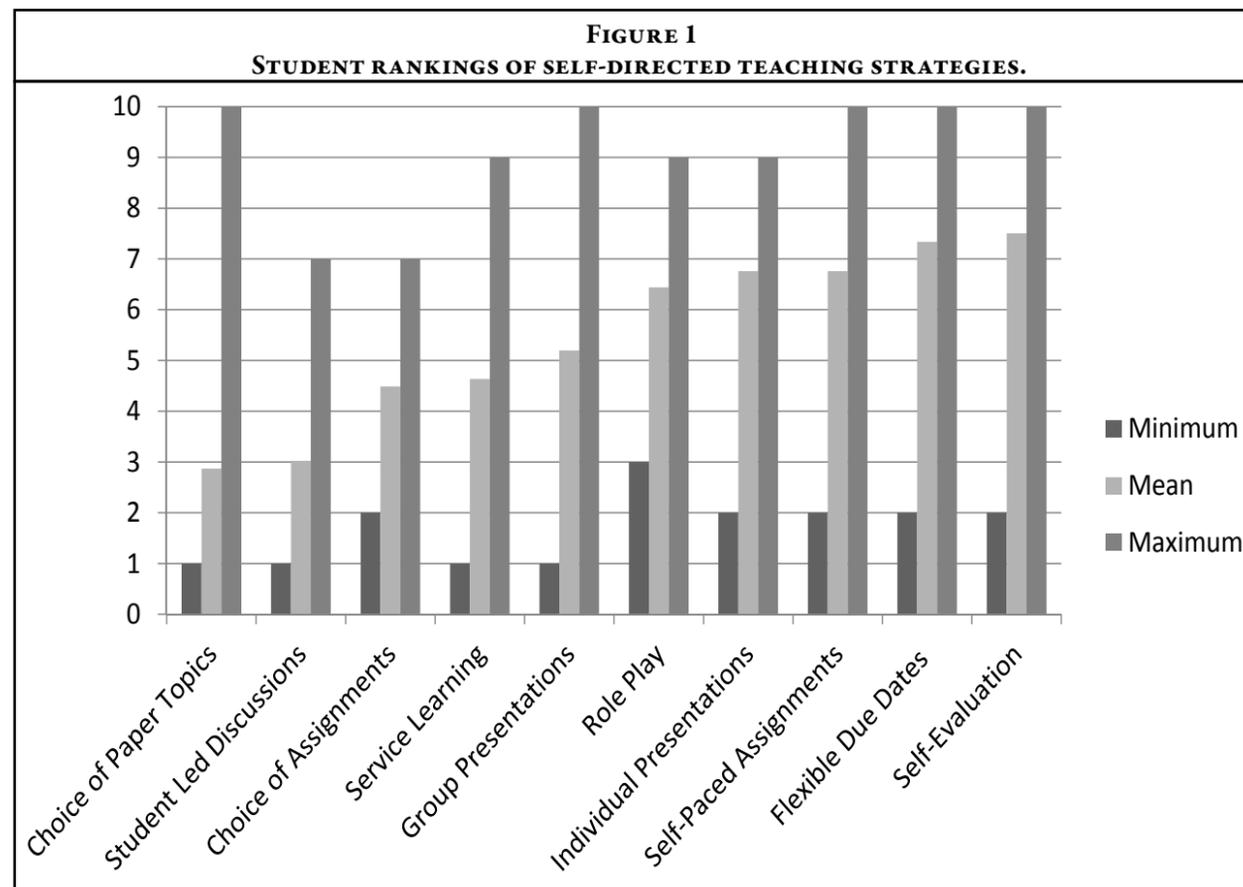
Discussion

Upon examination of these results, it is obvious that none of the strategies ranked above 7.5. This might indicate that students' comfort level with self-directed learning in general is not valued highly. The highest ranking strategy, self-evaluation, indicates students like being given back their work and determining for themselves where it can be improved. Flexible due dates rank high possibly because students can choose any day during the week in which to submit work. This fits into their busy adult lives and responsibilities.

It is apparent that students are not comfortable choosing their own paper topics and do not like leading the discussions for themselves. There may be many possible explanations for this. They may not want any possibility to exist for picking a topic that is not directly relative, or the teacher disapproves of. They do not like leading the discussions perhaps because they feel as though they glean more from the discussion when the teacher is directly involved.

This is supported by the following narrative responses (Table 3) to the highest and lowest ranked strategies in the survey:

The overall results of this investigation into my teaching philosophy caused me to really consider adjustments. It appears that students, even when are comfortable with certain self-directed strategies, are not overwhelmingly so. Also, given the narrative comments, it seems as though students need more direction and mistake the freedom given by the professor as a weakness, lack of engagement, lack of preparation, or lack of organization.



Strategy	Response
Self-Evaluation	"I like it when the professor gives back my assignment and asks me to think about how I can improve it. He lets us resubmit it instead of giving a bad grade which cannot be changed."
Flexible Due Dates	"I like being able to submit my work anytime during the week it is due. Sometimes when other things are going on, it makes life a lot easier."
Choice of Paper Topics	"I wish the professor would assign us a topic, or at least give a list of topics to choose from. When I am picking the topic, I worry that I will write a 10 page paper that will totally miss the mark".
Student Led Discussions	"The professor is not engaged in the discussions. I feel like most of what is said in the discussion is pointless. I want to hear what the teacher has to say."
General	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> "I feel that the teacher is unorganized and not prepared because we to decide all this for ourselves." "So much of the course is student-led, I feel that the teacher is not engaged in the course." "I feel like we are teaching ourselves. The teacher only gets involved if we are doing something wrong or when grading" "Not having consistent due dates throughout the semester make the course difficult to keep up with."

Recommendations

Many considerations must be taken into account when considering adopting a teaching strategy based on self-directed learning. First, it cannot be assumed that all adult learners are autonomous. Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) cite Knowles as expressing, "in some situations, adults may need to be at least 'temporarily dependent' in learning situations" (p. 123). Second, a teaching philosophy should probably be based on various education philosophies so that learners are accommodated no matter what level of self-directedness they have achieved. Third, it is important to articulate your teaching philosophy to your students in order to avoid misconceptions such as was my case. My teaching philosophy based on self-directedness left students feeling I was not engaged in or prepared for the courses.

Finally, one must consider ways in which shifting a teaching philosophy based on personal values and preferences can be accomplished while maintaining student confidence and professional competence. Future research should be conducted which examines educators' experiences, conflicts, and failures with their teaching philosophies so that we can better prepare future educators in developing a teaching philosophy.

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