

Learner Defined Curriculum: Heutagogy and Action Learning in Vocational Training

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Abstract

This paper describes the application of learner-centred learning techniques in the conduct of short to medium term training programs in organisations. The approach is underpinned by action learning and heutagogy or self-determined learning. It involves the full engagement of participants in developing, delivering and ensuring the flexibility and relevance of the curriculum. The theoretical basis for the approach is discussed in detail as are the techniques involved in conducting the training, it's implications and reactions of participants. Some readers may need to take very slow, deep breaths while reading this paper.

Keywords

Heugagogy; learner-centred learning; action learning

The Guru Within

For several years now I have been experimenting with how to make learning more learner-centred. This has involved a number of contexts including higher education, e-learning, and vocational education and training. I'd like to recognise Mr Cook, my primary school teacher for bringing me to this point. I now know that Mr Cook in 1960 was way ahead of his time and provided the opportunity for a bunch of excitable ten year olds to engage with their learning in a meaningful way. I never remember him giving a lecture. It was all about self-directed learning and letting our natural instincts for exploration and inquisitiveness have full rein. He was a great believer in the imagination and creativity. He was a pioneer of learner-centred learning.

This paper, however, concerns my own experiments with learner-centred learning in short training programs that are usually conducted in organisations to meet some specific training or organisational needs.

My experiments have been of the action learning kind and influenced by people such as Revans (1982) and Dick (2000). Maybe my research efforts could loosely be called action research, if indeed there is a distinction between it and action learning that is worth making. Certainly I have tried to inject some rigor into the process so that it has been more than trial and error. The experiments have been participative and the co-researchers have been the participants in my training programs who are constantly asked for and provide feedback during the process. There has also been dialogue with my colleagues and, in particular, spirited discussions with those who have had to co-facilitate training with me and who sense the anarchy inherent in some of the approaches I have wanted to use. It has not always been easy or even possible to convince CEOs and managers of organisations who wanted to hire me that we should do something a little different, even risky perhaps.

I am acutely aware that there is nothing much under the sun that is original and, to some extent, this is one of the guiding principles of learner-centred learning. The learner-centred techniques I have been using are based on the work of Alan Davies who was challenging traditional approaches to learning in the early 70s, based on the tenets of Systems Thinking (Davies, 1977; 1978). His method was to undertake a shortened Search Conference method with participants undertaking courses in which they would identify their learning needs and how they might meet them, rather than simply engage with pre-determined content in the time-honoured custom. I'll talk more about what Davies did a little later in the paper. However, in a recent personal communication Davies (2011) told me that, his approach created considerable angst among other educators and administrators who thought it much too anarchic. Participants, after initial anxiety, loved the process and the outcomes were excellent.

In the early 1990s Davies used the same approach in a doctoral program in which he taught research methods using the same technique. The learners found the method to be highly effective as well as extremely motivating (personal communication with the participants, 2011). As Davies pointed out (personal communication, 2011) the candidates knew more about research methods than he did, could read the required texts without his assistance and what they needed was his assistance in developing context, the focus of their PhD, and how to negotiate the doctoral process.

It is possible that others have been doing similarly innovate things that is either unrecorded or is in the 'grey' literature. However, my observation of training programs (and education in general) is that the teacher-centric approach is preferred to one that is learner-centric.

The learner-centric approach to training I have been using is underpinned by a relatively new concept called heutagogy. The origins of heutagogy have been covered elsewhere in detail (e.g. Hase & Kenyon, 2000; Kenyon & Hase, 2004; Hase, 2009; Kenyon & Hase, 2010). However, in short, it is informed by a large body of knowledge and some clever ideas such as: constructivism (e.g. Friere, 1972; 1995); reflexivity and double loop learning (Argyris & Schon, 1996); systems thinking (Emery & Trist, 1965); capability (Stephenson, 1996; Stephenson & Weil, 1992); and complexity theory (e.g. Doolittle, 2000; Waldrop, 1992). There have also been a number of educationalists who draw on complexity theory, have challenged some prevailing views about learning (Davis et al, 2000; Doll, 1989; Phelps, Hase & Ellis, 2005; Sumara & Davis, 1997).

Heutagogy refers to self-determined learning. Thus, the learner learns at a time determined by the learner, not by the teacher. It suggests that learning is an extremely complex process that occurs within the learner, is unobserved and is not tied in some magical way to the curriculum. Learning is associated with making new linkages in the brain involving ideas, emotions, and experience that leads to new understanding about self or the world. Thus, learning occurs in random and chaotic ways and is a response to personal need and, often, occurs to resolve some ambiguity.

In defining self-determined learning we made an important distinction between knowledge and skills, and learning. The acquisition of knowledge and skills does not necessarily constitute learning. The latter occurs when the learner connects the knowledge or skill to previous experience, integrates it fully in terms of value, and is

able to actively use it in meaningful and even novel ways. It is more than simply reproducing behaviour.

For example, a person undertakes a safety training program in which the importance of wearing a hard hat, safety glasses, steel capped boots, overalls that cover the whole body and gloves when on a worksite is explained. The training might even involve highly emotive experiences such as watching oil-rigs blow up or mines collapse. Various competency assessments demonstrate that the person is competent at replicating the behaviour. However, at home the person happily uses the lawnmower and the whipper snipper in the hot sun in bare feet, and no hat or shirt. They can be seen up a tree chopping limbs with a chain saw with no safety equipment whatsoever. Learning has clearly not occurred but they are competent in a single context!

More importantly, when I come across new knowledge (or a skill) it is likely to have effects beyond creating a simple change in behaviour. It may link with previous experience in quite unpredictable (to the teacher in particular) ways, solve a long lasting dilemma, connect previously unconnected ideas, and create the 'Ah, Ah' experience. Suddenly, the needs of the learner might change and new directions sought to now address new questions, new dilemmas. It is this latter notion that is central to the learner-centred experiments described in this paper.

Let me allay concerns at this point that I am not suggesting we throw the baby out with the bathwater. Competencies (knowledge and skills) are essential to civilisation. I am suggesting that there is a need for something more and it is here that the notion of capability has been influential (Stephenson, 1996; Stephenson & Weil, 1992). Competence concerns the past and is the ability to replicate a behaviour. Capability is the capacity to use that competence in novel circumstances, which demands more complex cognition that is tied to experience, self-efficacy, adaptability, interaction with others, emotional stability, and the ability to solve problems. It is important to be competent but learning goes beyond this but it is often at that point that a good deal of training and education stops.

Fostering capability and heutagogy is more in tune with the needs of the world in which we live. It is a world characterised by complexity and dynamism and which has the following implications: (summarised from Phelps, Hase & Ellis, 2005):

- systems are open and non-linear
- systems are affected by their environment (and visa versa) in complex ways
- environment systems are not in equilibrium but are constantly adapting to changes
- these changes are unpredictable and non-linear but are self-generating and self-maintaining (autopoiesis)
- the system is greater than the sum of its parts, and hence, we cannot understand a system by only considering its parts
- outcomes are dependent on initial conditions that may be unknowable and, therefore, attempts at prediction are often futile (the butterfly effect)
- adaptation and then stability (bifurcation) occur as a result of stress on the system
- big events may have small consequences and small events may have large consequences
- change is natural and evolutionary.

When Chris Kenyon and I wrote the first paper on heutagogy (Hase & Kenyon, 2000) we did so because we felt that education practice in universities was not keeping pace with these environmental realities. Since that first paper there has been a considerable growth of interest in heutagogy in the higher education and the vocational and education training sectors (e.g., Albon, 2006; Bhoyrub, et al, 2010; Chapnick & Melloy, 2005; Eberle & Childress, 2007; McAuliffe et al, 2008). It seemed a natural progression to apply some of its principles to the idea of training: the topic of this paper.

Curriculum with a Twist

There are a number of implications of heutagogy for designing the educational or training experience (for a detailed account of these see Kenyon & Hase, 2010; Hase, 2009; Tay & Hase, 2004). In summary these include: flexible and negotiated assessment (see also, Eberle & Childress, 2007) having the learner generate contextually relevant content (see also Whitworth, 2008); true collaboration regarding content and process between teacher and learner (see also Bhoyrub, et al, 2010); the involvement of the environment in the learning; spontaneous and organic learning experiences (see Chapnick & Melloy, 2005; and, flexible curricula.

Although most of these issues can be challenging to any formal educational organization (Kenyon & Hase, 2010), it is the notion of the flexible and negotiated curriculum that might pose the biggest problem. The idea of a flexible curriculum is not a new idea and was suggested by complexity theorists such as Doll (1989) who criticized the fixed and linear curriculum as a modernist symptom. Heutagogy advocates the idea of an open and negotiated curriculum based on the conceptualization of learning described above: that the learner's understanding is a moving feast and unpredictable (complex and emergent). Clearly, especially in the competency world, there is a need for some givens that are essential in terms of content, context and process. However, there needs to be considerable room for extension.

There are a number of ways of overcoming this type of dilemma in any educational setting. However, I'll confine this discussion to the training program that might take place over half-a-day to several days either sequentially or spread out over several weeks: the typical organizational training program that trainers run all the time.

Since it is often the main sticking point in trying to get people to think about the heutagogical curriculum, let's deal with the knowledge aspect of things first. The current technologies available mean that the knowledge that participants need can be presented outside the training room on the organizational intranet or the Internet. Instructional design technology for remote learning has come a long way since the 1970s when distance education first started to find its feet. It is not difficult these days to develop exciting, interactive, and learner-relevant packages that use various media for getting the message across. Sometimes it may be enough for participants to look at a couple of documents and a video.

My preference is for participants to engage with content prior to the face-to-face sessions. This means negotiating with the CEO or manager in charge of the training to ensure that this happens and is seen as an integral part of the program. Explaining that

this is also a cost saving measure assists with acceptance. One strategy I have found useful is encourage participants to engage on-line and be involved in their management of the content. Experience in managing e-learning is useful here because it requires: a good deal of persistent communication; clear instructions; material that is easy to read and understand; easy to manage technology; and the ability to motivate. Sometimes participants (for whatever reason) access content after or between the face-to-face sessions and this can work just as well. In fact, ambiguity can be extremely motivating if not too excessive.

The main point about knowledge, and skill for that matter, is that you have no idea about what the participants know and can do. This approach means that the participant can engage freely at a level that is appropriate for them: it is learner directed. Moreover, the design can also incorporate the opportunity for the participant to develop context that is appropriate for them. They can find their own case histories, tell their own stories and find resources that make sense to them, and submit them to the site. In his approach, Davies (1977; 1979) also provided 'non-negotiable' content although this was presented in a workshop format but was restricted to less than two-thirds or so of the total program. Whatever the approach used, the key is to be less infatuated with content, at least until you have met the participants and understand their actual needs.

Let's also address the problem of competency assessment, which could potentially get in the way of using more learner-centric approach since it requires a defined output. The assessment tools, expected behaviours, expected outcomes or whatever the assessment might involve, needs to be made available to participants in advance. They can be invited to examine the assessment items and determine the extent to which they already have expertise or where they need to focus their attention. This is not an alien concept given that most competency-based programs provide the opportunity for assessment of prior learning. In this sense the assessment tool becomes an instrument of learner-centric learning.

At the workshop and after the ice-breaker and getting to know you session I warn participants that this experience will be a little different. Sometimes I talk about gurus and my deep distrust of anyone who thinks that they have the answers to life, the universe, anything. The participants are already formed into groups as I have already set-up the room in a cabaret style format with tables of around six to eight people. Symmetry is not one of my strong points so odd numbers work well for me. More obsessive colleagues might be uncomfortable with that and prefer the number eight! A flip chart and plenty of colored pens are located at each table. Using this sort of room layout 'sets the scene' for involvement, action, participation and moves the eyes from the front. In the same way a screen, projector, table and whiteboard out the front sets the scene for a teacher-centric experience. Expectancy theory is a very important psychological phenomenon and sometimes underrated by educators, in my view.

The next step that I use is to quickly do an overview of the stated objectives, expected outcomes and general content of the program. I then ask the groups to address the following questions *in terms of the current workshop topic*:

- What do you think are the reasons for this workshop? Why are you here?

- What is the nature of the current workplace environment and what do you need to know and do in order to address issues, concerns, problems and to be more effective?
- What is the nature of the external environment to the workplace and what do you need to know and do in order to be more effective?
- What are your current strengths and weaknesses in relation to this topic?
- What are your war stories in relation to this topic?
- What would you personally like to learn in this workshop?

Responses are written on flip chart paper and read out by a member of each group. A time limit is applied to this feedback to prevent an inordinate amount of time being spent on the process. If time is a problem there is no reason why this process cannot be undertaken using email or a chat room (better) prior to the face-to-face encounter.

Once we have this information the workshop can be designed either with the group or during the ensuing coffee break. If the workshop is being conducted over a number of days (more than one) then I often discuss with the group the possibility of using additional resources. These might include people, papers or even places to visit.

Consistent with this approach and with heutagogy, I try to organize programs that are being conducted over more than one day to have a break in between the workshops of over a week or more. This means people can try out new things in their workplace and to think more about context in the real light of day. In fact, I am inclined to try and negotiate any potential learning experience to be conducted over several sessions with gaps in between even for a short program. Another, and probably better, way of engaging participants in developing learning is through individual coaching sessions following the initial workshop.

Techniques that enable in-vivo practice, monitoring, feedback, reflection and further development is in keeping with both action learning and evidence-based change methodologies such as cognitive-behavioural psychology, for example. Needless to say there is an opportunity at subsequent workshops to redesign the curriculum. In fact, throughout the program the curriculum needs to be seen as fluid and open to negotiation.

The approach used by Davies (1977; 1979) was much more structured and extensive although he was concerned with larger and longer programs. However, the principle of having participants actively engaged in developing the curriculum was the same.

The response by participants has been largely very positive once initial anxieties have been overcome. These fears are usually about the sense of lack of structure, which some personality types find disconcerting. Most anxiety is shown by CEOs and managers while negotiating the process prior to signing the contract. Most participants state that they find the process: engaging and motivating; that it provides an opportunity for dealing with real, rather than assumed, problems; flexible by providing an opportunity to follow areas of real interest and need as they become apparent during the program; relevant; and empowering.

One of my key observations is that managers or CEOs sometimes see the need for

training in a particular area but the participants may not share the same perception. The training need may be linked to systems issues or may be far more complex than initially imagined. The approach I have described means that issues of relevance and scope can be cleared up very early. The motivational advantages of making sure content, competence, context and capability are aligned with the individual's perception of what she or he needs are obvious.

There are a number of implications for the facilitator. Clearly a thorough understanding of one's subject area and access to resources is essential. The latter is vital since the facilitator will not be able to answer every question or negotiate every problem in this type of experience and the ability to work with the participant to solve the problem is critical. Facilitators need to be skilled in how to deconstruct problems, analyse them, search for solutions and work out how to apply them, while working with the participants. In this sense the process is Socratic rather than directive. It is not enough to give trite answers to problems. Rather it is exploratory in an effort to seek options and possibilities on which the participant can reflect and then make relevant choices.

Death by Powerpoint is not an option. However, I make sure I have lots of video clips, experiential exercises, diagrams, stories, metaphors, models, summaries of theories and so on that I can pull out of the hat at a moment's notice. The process might be unstructured but it is not necessarily messy. Hopefully it raises more questions than answers in the minds of participants. If it does that then it has indeed done its job.

Conclusion

Hopefully this paper has provided some food for thought and maybe some innovative thinking about fostering learning. It sometimes frightens me to observe that the essence of how we understand teaching has probably not changed much since the nineteenth century. What we now know about how humans learn, the brain, and human behaviour should point us towards thinking more about learner-centred learning. We need to seek the guru within the learner rather than the teacher. This points to a whole new set of skills for teachers/facilitators/educators that involve working with learners to work through and solve problems, finding resources, being empathic, listening and questioning, collaborating with the learner, and inquiry that are found more in the domain of psychotherapy.

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