The Pedagogy of Learner Agency

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Lifelong Learning   Social Justice   Pedagogy of Agency   pedagogy of oppression   Heutagogy   Neuroscience

In this chapter, we will describe the concept of agency and why it is vitally important to learning both from an educational context and from the point of view of the social good. This is a timely discussion given the problems we have in a world that has difficulty separating fact from fiction and in interpreting information, and in a world where lifelong learning is a critical skill. We then discuss heutagogy (self-determined learning) aligning it with the concept of learner agency and positioning heutagogy as a pedagogy of agency.

Introduction

The power of education extends beyond the development of skills we need for economic success. It can contribute to nation-building and reconciliation.
— Nelson Mandela, 1997

This book consists of descriptions of how educators from across the world have sought to increase learner agency in their practice in formal and informal settings. Most of them describe how they have empowered their learners by applying the principles of heutagogy or self-determined learning, which is directly underpinned by the notion of human agency and, more specifically, learner agency. In Chapter 2 of this book we will look at the principles and practice of heutagogy, the theories on which it is built, and the considerable literature that has arisen since the first paper described it in 2000 (Hase & Kenyon, 2000).

Our focus in this book is, clearly, on educational practice. So, we thought that it might be important to discuss, in this chapter, what we see as the much broader significance of enhancing learner agency to society in general or as Dewey (1927) described as the 'Great Community'. We look at how our choice, as educators, in our practice and how wider educatonal policy can make a difference not only to the lives of people but also the greater good in preparing citizens for the challenges of the 21st century.

Oppression and emancipation in education

In the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (1970) describes how education can be used as a means to oppress the individual voice in society. In its simplest sense, this oppression starts with the system and the teacher – by virtue of the curriculum having power over the dispensation of knowledge, what is to be allowed to be taught, and what pearls might be thrown before the masses. At a time when there were few libraries (at least that the public could access) and

no Internet, the control over content was strictly in the hands of the teacher. A pedagogy of oppression has also required that the student is told what and how to think with respect to values, attitudes, and beliefs, the very heart of what determines the uniqueness of the individual.

Freire (1970) also points out that when the student is a passive recipient of education with no say in process or content, then agency is removed. This is central to the notion of oppression. At the very least, education can be a conservative enterprise that is more concerned with channelling the status quo than a creative, liberal enterprise likely to foster change. With the advent of mass education, education was purposed to feed factories with skilled labour during the industrial revolution, and this idea of education has not changed much since that time. At its worst, education can be used to foster totalitarian regimes, entrench a lifetime of dogma from which a person might never escape, and threaten the notion of a civil society by entrenching notions such as apartheid, racism, and human rights. It is no wonder that there is considerable political will in controlling education in every country in the world. A thinking, discerning population is a dangerous thing to those who would seek to oppress the masses.

Education can also be emancipatory. Education can free people and enable them to make sense of their world in their own terms rather than as directed by others. It can be used to foster agency in which the individual is able to construct his or her own meaning through experience as Freire (1970), Vygotsky (1978), Piaget (1971), and Dewey (1938) imagined. There is vast literature that supports the notion that education can be a powerful force for change (e.g., Schuller et al, 2004; Welch et al, 2017) and can make a difference not just to the lives of individuals, but also to societies and communities. An educational system that promotes agency and uses a learner-centred pedagogy such as self-determined learning both facilitates emancipation and fosters change.[1] In addition, by promoting agency, we enable the capacity of learners to contribute and engage within their social and cultural contexts (Archer, 2000).

In 2011, with Hase's paper on heutagogy and action learning and in 2012, with Blaschke's paper on lifelong learning, we began to see a shift in thinking towards how heutagogy can impact social issues through a change in educational pedagogy.

Constructivism has been one of the major theories underpinning heutagogy (e.g., Hase & Kenyon, 2000, 2007) from the start; however, the notion of agency didn't appear in the literature on heutagogy until 2014 (Hase, 2014). Even then, its extension to learner agency has always been the principal focus (e.g. Blaschke &Hase, 2019; Hase, 2016), given our interest in the educational context and in shifting from traditional pedagogy to heutagogy. Recently, and ambitiously perhaps, discussions about heutagogy have included the notion of free will and learner wandering (Glassner &Back, 2020; Shpeizer & Glassner, 2020). It is likely that agency and heutagogy is more closely related to Kant's notion of autonomy, in which the individual is seen as a rational being, capable of accepting responsibility for her or his decisions, practical and moral (Sensen, 2013).

South Africa is a prime example of educational oppression. Despite the massive political changes that have occurred since apartheid, learners continue to struggle with the idea of learner agency, with the freedom to express one's agency provoking a whole new process of re-learning after decades of control. However, there are indications that this may be slowly changing (Inefuku, 2017; Msila, 2014; Msila & Setlhako, 2012). Stewart saw the same phenomenon in the early 2000s when visiting the Czech Republic. Even though it had been many years since the country had left the Soviet Union, agency in general, and particularly in education, was not easily allowed or expressed.

Heutagogy allows learners to experience agency and as a result be freed from the stigma of oppression – if learners and educators are willing to embrace agency. This willingness to engage in agency places learners outside of their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), requiring them to move away from oppression and toward individual responsibility and self-regulation of their learning. In writing about the learner experience of 'doing' heutagogy for the first time, Barbara Brandt (2013) shares how not having close direction or a formula for learning and instead having the freedom to chart her own learning course was extremely challenging. However, once she became more self-determined in her learning, Brandt found it even more challenging to return to teacher-centred learning.

Oppression doesn't have to be violent. It can be a subtle, quiet voice, appearing in the guise of a gently paternalistic friend, one who is there to guide us and to ensure we stay systematically on track and don't begin exploring the "wrong" ideas. We become passive, accepting, and unquestioning. From an educational perspective, the teacher "teaches", serving as a funnel that pours knowledge into the minds of learners. By enabling agency, however, we invoke the learner ability to accept responsibility, take control of and make choices in learning, and to see how those choices impact the world. Learner agency means making sense of the world for oneself by actively engaging with resources and experience and taking responsibility of learning. We'll now turn to the topic of agency and how heutagogy reveals itself as the pedagogy of agency through its principles and application.

Heutagogy as the pedagogy of agency

According to Bandura (2009), human agency is, "the human capability to exert influence over one's functioning and the course of events by one's actions" (p. 8). Thus, human action is intentional, rather than the result of fate or other external influences. The importance of this definition is that it is not self-evident. That is, the population is divided as to whether individual agency exists or not. There are those who believe that people do not have agency and that external influence is always at play, or that humans are born into their social and economic position, for example, with natural leaders and natural followers. From an educational point of view, there is a common-held belief that it is up to others (the educators) to make sense of the world for the learner and that knowledge is tightly held in the hands of the educator. *It is the pedagogy of the oppressed.* It is a belief that belongs to an era when information and knowledge was difficult to obtain, and codification was left in the hands of those who had access to that information and knowledge – initially religion and later the educational system. Freedom from this pedagogy of oppression thus requires a *pedagogy of agency*.

In their first paper on heutagogy, Hase and Kenyon (2000) address the philosophical debate that underpins the notion of agency and propose an approach that embraces learner agency:

Our educational systems have traditionally been based on Lockean assumptions which assume that the individual mind is a clean slate at birth, the world is a buzzing confusion, and that concepts and causal relations are inferred from associations of stimuli (Emery, 1974). In this paradigm learning has to be organised by others who make the appropriate associations and generalisations on behalf of the learner. Thus, random individual experiences are taken to be totally inadequate as sources of knowledge, the educational process needs disciplined students, and literacy is seen to precede knowledge acquisition. Success is based on attending to narrow stimuli presented by a teacher, an ability to remember that which is not understood, and repeated rehearsal (Emery, 1974, p.2). An alternate view is proposed by Heider and assumes that people can make sense of the world and generalise from their perceptions, can conceptualise, and can perceive invariance (Emery, 1974). Thus, people have the potential to learn continuously and in real time by interacting with their environment, they learn through their lifespan, can be led to ideas rather than be force fed the wisdom of others, and thereby they enhance their creativity, and re-learn how to learn.

If one takes the view that humans do not have agency, then it is going to be difficult to adopt a learning pedagogy that is learner-centred. If humans do not have agency, it is the teacher and the educational system that will dominate the learning experience. In a pedagogy of agency, however, the learner is at the centre of the learning experience and is given full responsibility for his or her learning, deciding what will be learned and how, which is in its essence the definition of *heutagogy*.

Heutagogy is the study of self-determined learning and applies a holistic approach to developing learner capabilities with the learner serving as, "the major agent in their own learning, which occurs, as a result of personal experience" (Hase and Kenyon, 2007, p. 112). Heutagogy presupposes agency and, more specifically learner agency, which is the capacity of learners to take responsibility for and to direct and determine their own learning paths (Blaschke & Hase, 2019; Hase, 2014, 2016). According to heutagogy, the learner learns at a time determined by the learner, not by the teacher. Heutagogy "…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." (Hase, 2011, p. 2).

The principles of heutagogy were built upon theories that advocate learner agency through learner-centred learning. These theories include capability (Stephenson, 1996; Stephenson & Weil, 1992), self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977, 2001), systems thinking (Emery &Trist, 1965), double loop and organisational learning (Argyris & Schön, 1996), andragogy (Knowles, 1975), learner managed learning (Graves, 1993; Long, 1990), action learning (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1998), and work-based learning (Gattegno, 1996; Hase, 1998). By giving the learner choice in determining his or her learning path, heutagogy supports the development of the learner's self-efficacy and capability through exploration and problem-solving, as well as promotes their ability to think and reflect critically and to learn autonomously.

Non-linear learning, another central principle to heutagogy, further enables agency in the learning process. Hase and Kenyon (2000) noted that the time was right to shift from a teacher-centred approach to a learner centred approach because of the liberation of information through the Internet. This was a little generous because there were many educators, the originators of heutagogy who, were embracing the ideas of Rogers and phenomenology (1961) and constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978) long before the Internet and that were concerned with what became known as learner-managed learning (Graves, 1993; Long, 1990). Connectivism (Siemens, 2004) and rhizomatic learning (Cormier, 2008) are more recent developments that share some of the assumptions of the heutagogic approach (see Chapter 3). Anderson (2010) describes these as net-aware pedagogies that take advantage of the affordances of online environments. As we shall see in Chapter 2, mobile and other communications technology have been eagerly embraced as a means to enabling agency among learners in terms of accessing information and in the learning process.

All new theories are built on the shoulders of giants and heutagogy is no exception. Thus, heutagogy has drawn from a number of theories of learning, all of which embrace the idea of human agency, in some form or other. We hope we have done the originators of these theories justice in attempting to bring them together in developing a pedagogy of agency.

Conclusion

If we are to avert the dangers of a pedagogy of oppression for learners and for society in general, it is of critical importance that we support and promote learner agency within our 'classrooms', no matter their form. In this chapter, we have proposed heutagogy as a pedagogy of agency, one which promotes independent thinking and learning and emancipates our learners from passive consumption – and acceptance – of information and ideologies. As a pedagogy of agency, heutagogy not only gives learners an opportunity to regain their voices within education, but also enables them to become innovative, creative, and autonomous thinkers and change makers in society as a whole. Examples in this book demonstrate the opportunities for realising agency in a variety of educational contexts.

We conclude with a paragraph from Blaschke and Hase (2015) – a call for action and change by adopting self-determined learning within our current educational systems:

Change is no longer an exception in the current world we inhabit. It is the normal state and is discontinuous. The ability to learn, for both individuals and institutions, is critical to survival. While it has always been so, adaptation in the past could comfortably take place over a long period of time. Now, that is no longer possible. And we have the tools to be able to learn quickly and effectively: whenever and wherever we are. What needs to happen now is a concomitant shift in our thinking about educational and training systems that keeps pace with both the need to learn effectively and the technology that enables it. This change in our cognitive schema about how we learn needs to become based on the readily available science that tells us clearly about how people learn best rather than outdated models that were built for the industrial revolution. Learners, learning practitioners, policy makers and politicians, and managers of organizations need to be prepared to use this science and to adjust their thinking about learning in the twenty-first century. Heutagogy, or self-determined learning, provides them with a framework to think about learning in a revolutionary way (p 75).

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[1] The political dimension of this concept will not be discussed but will be left as the elephant in the room, that is, the difference in the viewing of agency between those who populate the right side of politics compared to those on the left. There is no doubt that our position here as advocates of agency, and opposed to oppression, may be seen as coming from the left.