

Of Education
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OMDE 610 Assignment 2

Introduction

I have a passion for what I define as the process of adult education. Specifically, I enjoy the challenges inherent in working with non-traditional students who live in today's digital world of continual change. As someone who supports the practice of distance education (DE), my approach to the various forms of education including, but not limited to, face-to-face instruction, asynchronous and synchronous online education and hybrid or blended courses, is constructivist with an emphasis on self-directed and transformative learning. Because there is little debate that technology has created a digitally complex environment that is continuously shifting, I recognize that change is not only inevitable but also incessant. Thus, I believe that educators bear a responsibility for preparing their students to become autonomous learners who learn to be comfortable directing their own learning paths in this changing environment where information is the commodity and technology the means of transmission.

Bates & Poole (2003) in *Effective Teaching with Technology in Higher Education*, state that "learning is about adapting to change, and teaching must emphasize the process of change. Teachers thus need to be facilitators of learning, helping students learn *how* to learn" (p.43). Constructivism, unlike Behaviorism and Cognitivism, does not expect learners to remain inside a deterministic box (Bates & Poole, 2003, pp. 33-34). Instead, constructivism focuses on the social construction of knowledge and the various types of interaction that can be used to guide learners toward constructing their own understanding of information. To conclude,

"the important epistemological assumption of constructivism is that meaning is a function of how the individual creates meaning from his or her experiences. We all conceive of the external reality somewhat differently, based on our unique set of experiences with the world and our beliefs about them" (Jonassen, 1991, p.10)

As a change champion in the field of adult education, this definition of teaching and learning best describes my educational philosophy. As our reality changes and as we, as learners, grow and mature our knowledge, or what we think we know, will be informed and expanded based on our experiences. Because our construction of information is based on our perception of reality, there may be a bias toward certain ideas, concepts, theories and ways of doing things. The idea of bias is, therefore, briefly discussed in the next section.

Online Teaching and Learning Framework

With the introduction of the semantic web and the impact that the digital age has had on everything from raising children to training pilots (see http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&rlz=1G1GGLQ_ENUS287&q=impact+digital+age), self-directed learning (SDL) is a critical component of my philosophy of education (Merriam, 2001, pp. 6-9). SDL is also an element of learning that has the potential to benefit from an environment that, in essence, reads your mind (Anderson, 2004, p. 23).

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Another important factor in my preferred framework is transformational learning. Mezirow's definition, as described by Pohland & Bova (2000), is an excellent description of the theory and its benefits:

“Transformational learning seeks to free the individual from the chains of bias through the process of ‘perspective transformation’; i.e., ‘the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world’ (Mezirow, 1991: 167)” (p.139).

Our beliefs and experiences create both conscious and unconscious bias in learners of all ages. Transformational learning seeks to mitigate that deficiency by confronting bias as a part of the educational process.

Constructivism, therefore, is a framework that encompasses the idea that the learner is central to any discussion of education and that instruction should ultimately encourage autonomous learning and seek to transform each student's understanding of information. Ally (2004) provides a succinct summation, which follows:

“Constructivists see learners as being active rather than passive. Knowledge is not received from the outside or from someone else; rather, it is the individual learner's interpretation and processing of what is received through the senses that creates knowledge. The learner is the center of the learning, with the instructor playing an advising and facilitating role.”

As a teacher, then, my goals include motivating students to think critically through the use of facilitation and encouraging autonomous learning so that learning does not cease at the conclusion of a course or class.

Personal Strengths and Weaknesses

As a change champion, my strengths are empathy and diplomacy. Those who support and encourage change must be able to identify when a group of people, whether they are teachers or students, are ready to move toward change. In the area of education, there is even greater emphasis on the need to understand the change audience and to encourage receptivity because traditional face-to-face teaching and learning are ingrained in the collective psyche as the only appropriate response to education. Even those who support DE have to guard against seeking to prove the value of DE by comparing it to the face-to-face experience.

Being able to effectively communicate with stakeholders, grassroots supporters of DE, those who are neutral and those actually opposed to DE and to bridge the distance among and between the various groups will be a critical role as DE is introduced and advanced in both corporate and educational environments. This is a role that I excel at and one that I have engaged in over the past fifteen years in both a hospital education environment and a corporate education environment.

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The weaknesses that I identify are learning to balance pedagogically supported DE initiatives with the use of technology and not to displace face-to-face instruction with DE if the educational objectives would be better served in a traditional brick and mortar environment. In other words, my partiality toward DE should not be allowed to trump pedagogy and my predilection for technology should not incorporate technology for the sake of technology.

As a student, my strength is autonomous learning. I am much more comfortable learning on my own as opposed to learning with social interaction. However, what I have found through experience is that I do learn more by gaining a broader perspective on various topics through interaction with my peers. Thus, autonomous learning is both my strength and my weakness. As a student I have to consciously choose to participate in group discussions and to take the risk of exposing my knowledge or lack thereof to other students and my instructor as a means of expanding my understanding of concepts and theories.

Conclusion

Moore & Kearsley (2005) support my belief that, “distance education is about change” (p. 19). Educators serve a wider purpose than simply imparting new information. The constructivist framework understands that premise, promotes SDL and transformative learning, and appreciates that “although technology should not drive our teaching, technology does drive change” and change requires equipping learners to learn without boundaries (Bates & Poole, 2003, p. 282). Learning does not terminate at the conclusion of a discussion or lecture, but is informed by that interaction. A constructivist framework for education creates a foundation for learning that promotes the potential for learning to persist long after a course is over because the student has been given the necessary tools to initiate interaction with content and other members of the learning community.

I believe that learning is an iterative process. In a constructivist framework, revisiting material and reapplying information in different contexts creates opportunities for new understanding. Adult learners want to take advantage of their experiences as they seek to know and understand the connection between what they are learning and how they can use their expanding understanding. Constructivism with its emphasis on the construction of knowledge is, therefore, the framework that I prefer and the theory that challenges me to seek new ways of seeing, teaching and understanding.

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