

Self-directed Learning versus Learning in the Interests of Public Safety: A Dilemma in Adult Education?

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In adult education, there can sometimes be a dilemma between notions of learner self-direction and learning that is important for public safety. The dilemma posed is one not well resolved by education theory. Although a few theorists have broadly recognised the tension, they tend to offer little in the way of guidance towards its resolution, particularly in cases such as where the views of older adults of their learning, and those of educationists do not intersect. Nevertheless, some writers have suggested that it might be a helpful resolution of the dilemma if learning is set in contexts that are already familiar to learners, and if learners are encouraged to discuss their learning with others.

Self-directed learning, adult education, public safety

INTRODUCTION

This paper arose out of a research study conducted by the author, involving surveying various perceptions of elderly motorists' learning needs. During its planning stages, while grounding the study in relevant education theory, some interesting questions were raised regarding the perceptions adults might hold on their own learning needs, compared to the views of educationists. This is particularly the case where adults' views of their learning are inconsistent with the interests of public safety, such as sometimes happens in the case of the older car driver.

LEARNER SELF-DIRECTION vs PUBLIC SAFETY INTERESTS

For most older adults, taking note of information is an important part of their lives, particularly with respect to social interaction, day to day living and health matters. In a broad sense, this information constitutes a curriculum, albeit a largely self-determined one. Based on the 1991 *United Nations Principles for Older Persons*, there has been a global promotion (e.g. by the International Federation of Ageing) of the right of older adults to self-determine their destinies in the range of human experiences, including learning. However, such a view of learning tends to be inconsistent with any notion of forms of compulsory or socially directed learning for this age group. This is even where such learning may be deemed necessary to preserve the interests of public safety.

Consequently, there can sometimes be a dilemma between learning that has an important place in terms of public safety interest, and notions of learner self-directedness in relation to meeting older people's learning needs. On the one hand, there are powerful public safety interests in kinds of learning that are essential to the safety and welfare of older people and the community at large. On the other hand, there is the strong tradition of adults being allowed to choose what they learn, when and how.

A DILEMMA IN ADULT EDUCATION THEORY

Unfortunately, education theorists generally tend to shy away from in-depth discussion of forms of learning for adults that society considers to be vital in the interests of public safety (such as road safety). This is because adult learning is so commonly conceptualised in terms of the self-directed learning ethos. The dilemma posed is, as yet, one not well resolved by adult education theory. A few education theorists have at least broadly recognised the tension, but offer little in the way of guidance towards its resolution.

Candy (1991) noted that the eighteenth century writer, Edward Gibbon, who wrote of the transition from teacher-directed learning early in life to self-directed learning thereafter, obviously understood the concept of self-directed learning. However, it is likely both these forms of learning have been practised, if not conceptualised as such, since antiquity. While in modern times the two forms are considered in much education theory (e.g. Knowles 1975; Brookfield 1990; Candy 1991) to co-exist to varying degrees throughout the lifespan, there are nevertheless some unresolved areas of tension, such as learning considered to be essential in the interests of public safety.

In recognising the tension, Griffin (1983) has pointed out that attempts to integrate initial (compulsory) education and education for the remainder of the lifespan have resulted in an unbalanced education policy debate. He discusses the culture of individualism, so prized in Western society that it has pervaded typical conceptualisations of adult education:

The 'individualism' of adult education only arises in societies relative to a socially-determined notion of 'individualism' itself. In Western industrialized societies, individualism has a cultural distinctiveness....(Griffin, 1983, p.93)

Apart from this issue of individualism inherent in adult education, is the extent to which adult education could also be considered in the context of social intervention. Griffin (1983) proposes that this be the subject of debate:

The issue of... whether and to what degree adult education could or should be considered a form of social intervention, or the issue of whether or not it could or should constitute a form of social control are issues which presuppose an ideological context in which they are meaningful issues which it is worthwhile to argue about. These are [the] issues, whether adult education is in essence a 'liberal' or 'liberating' enterprise, or whether or not it is distinguishable from... social development education.... (p.93)

Griffin (1983) goes on to explain that these seemingly conflicting issues should only be considered in their historical, cultural and political context. The situation for older learners is a pertinent case. They are at a time in their lives that most cultures and societies in the world associate with respected wisdom and an earned right to self-directed learning pathways. Forms of compulsory or socially prescribed learning are considered inconsistent with this ethos of the older person.

As another perspective on the dilemma, Candy (1991) distinguished between a form of socially-constructed public knowledge that involves acceptance of consensual norms governing expected behaviours, and individually-constructed, private knowledge which includes insights and understandings of the self as a learner, often in specific situations. The constructivist view of learning is consistent with this individually-constructed, private knowledge. It considers knowledge acquisition to be the individual's self-directed building of patterns or configurations designed to make intuitive sense out of experiences, both past and present (Darling-Hammond and Snyder 1992). Older learners may perform this building quite well, but sometimes to the exclusion

of knowledge patterns and configurations objectively identified in scientific research into their needs. Therein is the curriculum tension between knowledge constructed by the individual older learner and knowledge determined by society in the interests of public safety.

Brookfield (1983) was also aware of the dilemma. He noted that a considerable number of curriculum theorists from the mid 1960s onwards made a distinction for adult learning between the natural societal setting and the formalised instructional setting. One such writer, Lawson (1975, p.59) posited:

The distinction has been made between student-centred conceptions of education which emphasise personal values and standards, and those conceptions in which the central characteristic is the transmission of knowledge by a teacher who represents a point of reference beyond the learner.

However, Brookfield (1983) noted that writers like Lawson were somewhat dismissive of student-centred learning methods, as they argued that learning of any substance can only occur when a teacher engineers the learning environment, approach and content. Brookfield concluded (1983, p.13),

The implication ... is clear enough: adult learners themselves do not possess sufficient skills and judgment to conduct their own learning effectively....

In terms of public safety interests, Brookfield may have uttered a partial truth. Some older car drivers, for example, lack sufficient insight into the potential dangers they pose for themselves and others on the road. Such older drivers would be unlikely themselves to choose to learn about how cognitive and sensory abilities can decline with age and, more particularly, how this might apply in their case.

Brookfield (1983) sensed that the distinction between the two forms of learning that he discussed is perhaps more diffuse than may first appear. He suggested that, even within forms of self-directed learning, the individual might well make a 'deliberate, intentional' choice to pursue skills and knowledge in formalised or traditional instructional settings, even where self-directed learning options have been made available. In contrast, formalised instruction might well take place in natural societal settings, such as community centres, or other locations where older adults might meet in facilitated discussion groups or to hear guest speakers. Brookfield (1993) later pointed out that educators who honour people's self-direction in this way, should not feel they are "...abandoning their convictions and purposes as educators, in a mistaken act of pedagogic abnegation." In fact, facilitator-led discussion groups can be semi-structured ways of learning that many older people find conducive for providing the social support necessary when making decisions concerning physical and emotional fitness issues (Yassuda, Wilson and von Mering 1997).

Brockett and Hiemstra (1991) also perceived the dilemma in terms of two streams lying within self-directed learning. One stream is characteristic of the teaching-learning situation, the other is characteristics of the learner him or herself. Obviously, highly motivated persons can go a long way in determining their own learning directions, content and approaches. However, the learning activity will be measurably facilitated if the teaching-learning environment is made conducive to such self-direction. Older drivers, for example, by and large consider themselves to be very much in control of their learning directions. However, in so far as encouraging older drivers to self-regulate their driving, to perhaps cease altogether, the success of educational initiatives is very much dependent on an individual older driver's sense of personal responsibility in relation to the broader social context. Brookfield (1995, p.154) described this situation as:

A view of learning which views adults as self-contained, volitional beings scurrying around engaged in individual projects is one that works against cooperative and collective impulses. Citing self-direction, adults can deny the importance of collective action, common interests and their basic interdependence in favour of an obsessive focus on the self.

With respect to the notion of personal responsibility in self-directed learning, Candy (1991), Brookfield (1990) and Brockett and Hiemstra (1991) all suggested that, if adult learners tend to be self-directed to differing degrees, they may well be self-directed to different degrees across various learning situations and individuals. Yet, Candy also cautioned:

the extent to which skills and insights gained in one [self-directed learning] context can be transferred to another is somewhat restricted.... (1991, p.305)

Thus, while some older drivers can self-direct their learning towards meeting their own driving needs within the limits of road safety, others it seems have great difficulty (or unwillingness) in doing so. Such dissonance might also occur within individuals as well as across them. An example might be the case of an older driver who willingly abides by the rules of speed limit compliance, say, but who believes available knowledge about declining sensory capabilities with age does not apply to him or her, or who does not accept the recommendation of a doctor to restrict their driving in some way.

The dissonance might be related to the tendency (noted by Spigner-Littles and Anderson 1999) for older people to be emotionally attached to the beliefs, knowledge, attitudes, values and world views that they have developed over many years. Even when faced with soundly-based information that contradicts long held beliefs, older learners are often more likely to reject or attempt to explain away such new information than to acknowledge the part they played in it. A pertinent example might be the case of older drivers discounting some news that their involvement in a car crash has been deemed by the police to be due to sensory decline.

TOWARDS RESOLVING THE DILEMMA

Darling-Hammond and Snyder (1992) seem to have progressed the dilemma and its varying perspectives to pose a prime question to be asked of educationists: How does one determine what structure(s) should inform instruction where the learner's constructions of reality, and the educationist's views of learning intersect? Some theorists (such as Brockett and Hiemstra 1991) suggest that resolving a dilemma such as this should simply be a matter of reconciling situational context with individual stakeholder preferences. Unfortunately, this may not be as straightforward a matter as such rhetoric makes it seem because, as the example of older driver learning has illustrated, the views of the learners and the educationists may *not* intersect at all.

Nevertheless, moving towards resolving the dilemma, some early work by Ausubel (1969), later supported by Brookfield (1990), suggested that the learner's selective perception (such as may be acquired through self-directed learning) could be targeted on the relevant aspects of content to be learned, if the content is framed in terms already familiar to the learner. In 1993, Brookfield expanded on this view more forcefully (p.3),

If there is one thing we have learned from activist adult educators like Horton and Freire it is that we must start (though not stay) where people are; that is we must bring them to an uncomfortable and often unsought confrontation with inequitous political realities ... by grounding this activity in terms and processes which look, feel, sound and smell close to home... if you have to make a choice between moving in the direction you want to move people, and working with them where they are, you always choose to work with them where they are.

Thus, in order to facilitate learning that is essential in the interests of public safety (as a political reality), it is necessary to start, as a hackneyed educational dictum puts it, 'where the learner is at'. In the case of older car drivers' learning needs, for example, it is known that older drivers express much more interest in driving management and maintaining their mobility than driving cessation in the interests of public safety (Yassuda et al. 1997). Therefore, if the main context of learning in the interests of public safety is embedded in supporting the learner's current situation, then reactions by the learner might not be as fearful or as hostile as they can be. Spigner-Littles and Anderson (1999) reported that learning among older adults is most effectively accomplished not only when older learners are allowed to have some control over their learning, but also when new information is seen to connect to, and build upon, prior knowledge and actual life experiences. In addition, there is evidence from health promotion research to suggest that if older people feel in control of their life circumstances, and are allowed to share in making decisions that affect them (including their learning), their health and wellbeing can be affected positively (Marmot 1998).

Additionally towards a resolution of the dilemma, Candy helpfully asserted (1991, p.302) (as did Spigner-Littles and Anderson 1999):

... in order both to learn something and to verify that it has been learned, the learner must engage in dialogue and interaction with others in the community of knowledge users.

The implication for those involved in providing learning opportunities for older adults about public safety matters, is that such learning should not only encourage self-direction, but also provide for a necessary interaction between provider and learner, and between learners, if the learning is to be at all successful. In other words, when the interests of the (self-directed) learner and the interests of public safety do not intersect, one feasible solution to the dilemma might lie in promotion of dialogues with others to explore various perspectives on what has been learned, and what remains to be learned.

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