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Investing in Teachers to Invest in Themselves

Greg Cummings

Abstract

This article examines the characteristics of self-directed learning as they apply to the Award in Mentoring (AIM), a school-based professional development program with teachers as adult learners. A short introduction to self-directed learning is presented followed by a look at the design of AIM and how AIM addresses some self-directed learning pitfalls. A practitioner profile of an AIM recipient is presented to exemplify how AIM is a self-directed learning program, and positive outcomes are noted. The article concludes by considering how AIM, a teacher professional development program, addresses the "spirit" of self-directed learning.

Professional Development for Teachers as Adult Learners

Teachers set learning environments for their students, design learning activities for them, and evaluate the outcomes. In order to establish a cohesive work environment, professional development programs for teachers should reflect this paradigm.

Teachers, however, are not children or adolescents. They are adult learners, and professional development programs for teachers should, therefore, address the characteristics of adult learning. One characteristic of adult learning is self-directed learning, and one of the early perspectives on self-directed learning, proposed in 1975 by Malcolm Knowles, characterized adult learners doing for themselves what they do for their students: "climate setting, engaging in learning activities, and evaluating learning outcomes" (pp. 34-37).

Self-Directed Learning as Professional Development Program

Since 1997 one school has offered the Award in Mentoring (AIM), a professional development program which financially rewards teachers to treat themselves as adult learners, according to the characteristics proposed by Knowles. When the Award in Mentoring program was founded, it was thought that teacher recipients would rely on mentors to help them enact their award proposals. It soon became apparent, however, that mentors would play a very small role. Indeed, when AIM was analyzed in 2007, it was discovered that it was not a design for a mentor program, but rather that it was a design for a self-directed learning program. Qualitative research, which involved interviewing AIM recipients, supported this.

Self-Directed Learning Characteristics and AIM Characteristics

Knowles lists three issues concerning self-directed learning, all of which AIM circumvents to one degree or another:

1. Knowles stated that students in regular self-directed learning programs would be concerned that they "get the required content to pass their exams, get certified, obtain licenses, get accepted into other institutions, or get jobs" (Knowles, 1975, pp. 37, 38). AIM recipients, in contrast, determine their own content. There are no exams, certifications, licenses or employment opportunities although some recipients have developed or furthered their avocational interests as a result of their AIM work. Evidence of this interest can be seen in the practitioner profile of a middle school technology teacher, presented at the end of this article.

2. Knowles also noted that self-directed learners may be concerned with the grades they will receive or the status of their promotions upon completion of their self-directed learning projects. AIM assigned no grades, and promotions play no part. Each adult self-directed learner evaluates his/her learning. The profile of the middle school technology teacher also supports this, and it points to the value of an in-depth self-evaluation.

3. Knowles also stated that self-directed learning "is a process structure; whereas they (the students) have been used to a content structure" (Knowles, 1975, p. 37). He saw as necessary the role of a facilitator to guide self-directed learners through this foreign-to-them process structure. Knowles assured self-directed learners that a facilitator should be in charge of the self-directed learning process (p. 37).

The design of AIM calls for no outside facilitator; instead, it asks each recipient to be his/her own facilitator. The adult self-directed learners on AIM operate within a structure in which they determine both process and the resulting ever-changing content. This is evident in the upcoming narrative of the middle school teacher. It is clear from this and the other AIM narratives that the AIM recipients embraced this need to be constantly flexible.

In abrogating the role of the facilitator, the AIM design heeds Brookfield's admonition on the role of the facilitator in a self-directed learning experience: "Unless learners are told that self-directed learning does not mean that they are free to pursue any and every activity in whatever way they choose but that it involves an active, interventionist role on the part of the facilitator, then those learners can legitimately claim that the facilitator is contradicting the spirit and principles of self-directed learning when he or she challenges the value or appropriateness of an activity proposed by a learner" (Brookfield, 1986, p. 86).

The design of AIM requires that the learner also be the facilitator. In doing so, AIM addresses Knowles' concern and addresses Brookfield's charge. In these two ways, AIM addresses the true "spirit" of self-directed learning.

Exemplification

In 2007 and 2008 six recipients of AIM agreed to a series of increasingly formal interviews. Final interviews were audio taped, transcribed, and analyzed. The transcriptions were then fashioned into practitioner profiles.

The following profile presents the voice of a middle school computer and technology teacher, who used his AIM award money to return to Ecuador, where he had been a Peace Corps volunteer 10 years earlier:

> And so, I arrived in Ecuador on my AIM grant, prepared to fulfill my AIM proposal, the creation of a video documentary which would share some of the stories of native Ecuadorians. My original vision was just to have the stories

told and recorded in Spanish or Quichua, then translated into English. I planned to have video images of the rainforest and life in the rainforest with an audio track of the rain forest as background.

Once I arrived in Ecuador with my wife and children, however, I realized that I needed to refine my proposal. For one thing, for example, before I got down there I didn't even know what the stories would be. I planned for everything to just unfold.

When I arrived at his village, I listened to the stories told by my mentor and old Peace Corps friend Delfin, and the other villagers that we went to see. I recorded these stories on audio and video and went to Delfin's cabin at night to listen to the stories.

One night, as I was reviewing the stories I had collected that day, I suddenly realized that many of these stories were about twins. So I asked Delfin, "Are lots of these stories on twins?"

And he said, "Yeah. There are probably ten or so."

And then it dawned on me: "Wow. Now I have a theme to go with. Now I have a much richer content. Now I can concentrate on that. Twins."

And then, it just unfolded that in the village we discovered a seven year old Quichua boy who was, for all intents and purposes, the twin of my own seven year old daughter. The boy had long hair, like my daughter. Both children have dark skin. And they fit into the roles of the twins in the stories.

And so Delfin and I choreographed and scripted the actions for my seven year old daughter and this seven year old Quichua boy in the village who, for all intents and purposes, was my daughter's twin. And so my daughter and the seven year old Quichua boy acted out the parts of these legendary twins in the Ecuadorian rainforest. Delfin and I directed them where to walk and how to talk and where to present themselves on the film to go along with the villagers' stories. All of this gave great form to my original vision. I became a film-maker.

Like I always say, when you get into the middle of a project you have to be willing to keep an open mind. You have to be willing to change your plan if something occurs that changes your original vision. Because the change could actually improve it or enhance it. And an open mind was definitely what I needed on the next leg of my AIM journey.

I wanted to collect more stories. In order to get more stories, though, I had to make a major decision. We were all called to visit storytellers in another village, the village of Delfin's father. Delfin's father, because of the wisdom that he'd obtained or the life that he'd led, had become the shaman of that village.

A major rainstorm had just ended, however, and the river we had to cross to get to the village was flash-flooded, making passage, at best, difficult. The canoe ride to get over to his home looked to be pretty damn frightening. I didn't know what to expect. I had to ask myself: How important were these new stories to me? To my AIM proposal? I had a vision, and I had taken the initial steps on the road to that vision. But, was getting new stories actually worth putting my life at risk? It was total risk-taking.

I stopped at the river bank. I had to say to myself, "Okay. I need to be a little spontaneous here. I have to be a little more daring. I have to try something, and then try again if that doesn't work out."

I decided to cross the river. And so I went. And there we were-six of us in a dug out tree trunk canoe, trying to get across this river that had just expanded from the rains. I had left my wife and children safely on the bank of the river. I had a two hundred dollar laptop on me and a fifteen hundred dollar video camera in my bag.

I swear, I thought we were going to topple into that river, and I had this bag wrapped around my shoulder with my raincoat on top of it. And I'm thinking, "Okay, if this topples, and I'm under water, the weight of this computer and the camera is probably going to pull me under this fast-moving muddy water, and I will have to get my raincoat off in order to get the camera bag off my shoulder, and all of this will have had to happen in a very short amount of time in very rough waters."

Eventually, though, we did make it across the river. But, before I could collect the stories, Delfin had to prepare his father for what we were going to do. Delfin's father had never seen a video camera, for example. I didn't want to intimidate him and frighten him with all of my equipment. It was good enough of him to present himself and his stories to me. It's certainly something he'd never done before. I think at first they were more fearful and nervous. Camera shy. It had been a real struggle to reach Delfin's father, but it was such a treat for him to present himself and these stories. I tried my best to keep everything discreet. I placed my camera to the side as I communicated with him. I set it to the side, so that it was just me talking with him. I put my camera to the side, out of his vision.

And so Delfin's father and an elderly woman in the village shared their stories and legends with us. And when they realized what I was doing, they said that they were extremely grateful. That what they had just said and shared had been recorded for eternity, perhaps. That what they were doing was extremely valuable for their own people.

And we eventually made it back across the river, now shallower, to Delfin's village. And as we were getting in our van to leave Delfin's village and Ecuador, an elderly woman came out of her home. She slowly made her way to our van. She was older and wasn't all that mobile. She looked at me, at my wife and my daughters, my friend Ed who helped me film, his wife, our van driver, and his daughter. With tears in her eyes, the elderly woman shook all of our hands. And she thanked us for what we were doing. Before we left, other villagers told me that their stories, this bit of their culture, was being lost. They all told me that they saw my work as something that would hopefully help them to maintain that bit of their culture that was important to them. For their own children.

The depth and breadth of their responses really struck me. It reminded me of what Delfin had told me in 1993 in the Peace Corps. But this time it was the entire village thanking me. This time it was his father.

I fulfilled my AIM proposal. In fulfilling my proposal, however, I was unprepared for the depth of feeling of the Ecuadorian people. I was unprepared for my own depth of feeling.

This award has given me a new career. Delfin and I are working on a book. We need to get these stories written and translated into other languages. That very tangible goal is a result of AIM. And I want to do more. I want to record more of the villagers' stories. I want to film more of them and give more opportunity to people in other villages to share their stories. I think that's something worth doing.

And the award has really affected my teaching. Every project that my kids work on opens new doors for them. They are now guided and facilitated. I teach them new skills which allow them to use video as a tool to develop their own ideas, like I did. Every group of students that takes my video production class sees my Ecuadorian video. Every semester. When I introduce their video assignment, I start by showing them mine. Just as I created the idea for my AIM video project, my students have to create proposals for their own video projects. And we take ownership in our ideas. And when you have ownership, you feel more obligation to

reach your goal.

Every kid, no matter what their technical skills are, starts at a place and then travels to a new place with video or computers. And so there's that individual path that the kids take. The Award in Mentoring supported me. I support my students. We help each other along.

AIM was, in a way, professional. The sharing of Delfin's culture was, I guess, in a way, more spiritual. There was something in meeting Delfin and really learning to appreciate, respect, and love his culture another world away that, for me, was life-altering.

Conclusion

The narrative of this middle school technology teacher is indicative of the narratives of the other AIM recipients interviewed. He set his own climate, designed and engaged in his own learning activities, and evaluated his own learning outcomes. He so embraced the need to be flexible that the line between his process and the content became indistinct. His product not only reflected his process, his product *was* his process. In this way, the teacher, encouraged to treat himself as an adult learner, himself became the process-as-product. He became, for his students, an exemplar of the self-directed learner. Indeed, even though he had a "mentor", the teacher acted as his own facilitator, reflecting what Brookfield called the "spirit" of self-directed learning. Importantly for this teacher, this experience was "life-altering". These are the teachers we should want in our classrooms.

References

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