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Subject: heutagogy v constructivism -- is it a dichotomy? Author: Burnham, Colleen

I took a grad class called "Teaching College Students" a few years ago for which the one grade producing event was to research and plan a new course. I already had a course in mind -- I revamped an old animal-use ethics laboratory - but realized, as a psych major, I'd never really looked at the ed lit. I "re-discovered" Mr. Dewey, and had a wonderful time "discussing" the Mr.'s Dewey and Skinner in a 35 page paper :-)

The gist of my discovery (via the research for the paper) was that a heutagogical methodology seems to be the answer to adult and non-traditional education, especially in the context of online learning where there may be "traditionals" mixed in.

That discovery came from studying the old lit. The new lit likes to talk about constructivism and androgogy. Heutagogy is really a combination of the two, "based upon the concept of truly self-determined learning" (wikipedia), it incorporates both past experience and contributory learning. As an older, and constantly in the process of retraining student, I find myself balking at the "easy terminology" of "constructivism" - especially as I find myself preferring online education [as a student].

I don't think faculty are necessarily aware of the differences/philosophies in teaching styles/methodologies. But at the same time, I am but a lowly state-schooled BA'd MBA student who happens to be responsible for all of the faculty development at my institution. And I have yet to hit upon a way to model the heutagogical method in such a way that I'm not lecturing them. I'm going to continue to "think on it", with the plan to present a plan to you guys by the end of the week :-)

Have you come up with a plan Colleen?

Actually... I think I have :-)

I don't think my wondering about *constructivism* and *heutogogy* in the context of this particular "classroom experience" is random. I suspect, rather, that we are each - individually and as a group -- demonstrating our own understanding of the two philosophies even as we participate in this course. It's recognizing (even if at a less-than-conscious level) those varying degrees of "performance indicators" that has tossed the two terms back into my vocabulary :-) I think the most effective way to come to understand of the synergy of constructivism and heutagogy is to participate in a safe, online environment. (In fact, I *think* the first "guys" to use the terms together were associated with the incorporation of workplace retraining for non-traditional suddenly-out-of-work students in Ireland. I'll give them credit if my plan works ;-)

Constructivist theory is based in the realization that students have *different learning styles*. We all accept that – it's practically a universal truth at this point. Interestingly, we still do not develop course expectations using the premise of person-specific learning styles. We still plan to incorporate discussion boards for those who are afraid to speak in class, and f2f discussions for those who like to talk; essay exams for those who are able to express themselves on paper, and multiple choice for those are unable to do so; asynchronous for the students who like to study at night, and synchronous for the ones who need to be inside an immediate, live conversation; etc. We don't seem to *really* go into course (or workshop) planning with an *outcome expectation* that can take on *any form* regarding the learning process. (The classic example of applied constructivist theory is when we encourage our kids to read anything, "even if it's only a toothpaste tube" ☺)

Heutagogical methodology requires participation on the part of the student. A common misconception is that it is a "form" of pedagogy; it is actually nearly a polar opposite. Pedagogy is the practice of *telling the students* exactly what they need to know – think of the word *pedantic*: "*academic: marked by a narrow focus on or display of learning especially its trivial aspects*" (wordnet.princeton.edu/perl/webwn). Pedagogy is an easy-to-comply with theory and philosophy. We know what they need to learn, we write up a syllabus with those objectives on it, and we define the grade-producing events based on those objectives. It's inherently positively reinforcing for the teacher primarily because the teacher generally addresses only those topics about which s/he knows.

While pedagogy is *teacher-directed*, heutagogy is *reciprocal*. *Constructivism allows for the reciprocity*.

It is – of course –necessary for the course designer to determine learning objectives for a particular course of study; it always seems as necessary to have grade-producing events. However, it is *not* necessarily appropriate for all students to accomplish and demonstrate their learning in exactly the same ways. Built into the heutagogical methodology is the additional premise that learning is not finite – we learn every single moment of the day: every event is not only a learning *opportunity*, but a *bonafide learning moment*. *The act of learning is a learning experience* in and of itself.

There is one more premise that one must accept to use a heutagogical approach: even given identical educational and life experiences, two students will draw on different referents as they continue to learn. This concept manifests itself in age, sex, gender, socio-

economic status, hair color – in every which-way one can imagine. We are all different; we all see the world with our own eyes; we all interpret the information we are “inputting” based on the “stuff that’s already up there”.

Okay. I can hear myself getting up on my soapbox and *lecturing* – the plan is to *not* lecture ☺

The best way to understand the value of contributory, reciprocal, variety of learning is to participate in an environment made up of a heterogeneous collection of learners. What better place than in an online course designed to elicit appropriate storytelling, real-life examples, “hard teaching” (e.g., “these are the facts”), facilitation, and conversation about the topic of teaching methodologies? I’m guessing that each one of us *knows exactly how we learn best*, and knowing that about ourselves, we generalize (project) that onto our “audiences”. The trick to understanding the efficacy of a constructivist, heutagogical philosophy of teaching is to experience what feels good to our selves, *and* to others. As humans, we *are* able to learn this vicariously *if* we are aware of the phenomenon. For example, when I watched our traditional males in that other course I took, I could “feel” their learning styles; I could sense that my esoteric storytelling meant nothing to them. At the same time, they were able to figure out that I like a good story – in fact, I *need* a good story in order to put a “learning objective” into a context that I can actually learn the particular information. Their responses shaped to a form that I could understand, and my responses became more “regular” to them. It’s not always enough, though, to just watch – we won’t necessarily grab the “right” information just by watching. In my example, I happen to be interested in the philosophies - so I *was* watching for “the lesson”. The ability to watch came from my *prior experience* with the “lit”. I couldn’t have “spontaneously” *applied* the identification. (Does that make sense?)

When I imagine talking with a particular several faculty members, the picture includes “harrumphs” and “but, what abouts?”, along with “that look” that the “old pedants” are so practiced at handy out to their students. But when I imagine those same people offered the opportunity to *experience* their own and others’ learning styles together, I like to think they’ll come away with at least a functional understanding of the paradigm without “benefit” of having to listen to me “harp” ☺.