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Person-Centered Approaches: Providing Social and Emotional Support for Adult Learners

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Abstract

This chapter includes an overview of how instructors can establish and maintain working relationships with students and facilitate working relationships between students. The concept of person-centered learning will be explored from a theoretical standpoint, and then discussed in the context of adult learners in contemporary society. Applications in face-to-face instructional settings and online learning environments will also be examined. The benefits of person-centered learning will be listed, including more advanced critical thinking, a greater sense of personal agency

and responsibility for learning, and motivation for self-directed learning. Finally, best practices for promoting person-centered learning will be offered.

Overview

Over the past several decades, college teaching has transitioned from an instructor-focused to a student-focused learning environment. The objective of the instructor-focused learning environment is to transfer knowledge from a master to a novice. In this environment, the instructor primarily provides lectures to students with the goal of sharing information through direct transfer. In contrast, a student-focused learning environment is characterized by active student participation in the learning process and a focus on the unique phenomenological (or, idiosyncratic) understandings of students during the learning process. This new approach to learning requires the instructor to transition from the role of relaying information to facilitating experiences. This shift from modern conventional pedagogy to postmodern, constructivist andragogy is observable in learning environments. Including students in decision making related to the learning process, providing the opportunity for creativity and innovation, facilitating collaboration among peers and their instructor, and engaging students in out-of-class learning followed by prompts for self-reflection are all strategies of postmodern, constructivist andragogy. In the postmodern learning environment, the relationship between instructor/student and student/student takes on central importance.

Review of the Literature

The person-centered approach to adult learning is influenced by several prominent figures from the field of psychology, most notably Carl Rogers and Albert Bandura. The following literature review describes the development of person-centered learning theory and the establishment of a nurturing atmosphere and its impacts on self-directed and collaborative learning and cognitive development.

Importance of Social and Emotional Support in the Classroom

The establishment of a socially and emotionally supportive learning environment is necessary for the facilitation of learning. Over the last several decades, adult development theorists have focused on issues both inside and outside of academics that influence adult learners. For example, Bandura (1986) introduced the concept of *triadic reciprocal causation*, explaining that there are interacting forces between behavior, the environment, and personal factors, and that these forces affect learning. Additionally, Bandura described *self-efficacy* and revealed that some factors—mastery, modeling, social persuasion, and affective arousal—can influence a person's perception of his or her abilities in any given area (Bandura, 1997).

Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory continues to influence researchers who are interested in understanding the ways in which social learning affects teacher self-efficacy (Mintzes, Marcum, Messerschmidt-Yates, & Mark, 2013) and the ways in which social learning can be integrated into virtual learning environments (Greener, 2009).

In today's classroom, whether face-to-face or virtual, the need for a sense of belonging continues, even though the nature of the learning and teaching relationship is changing (Greener, 2009). In his person-centered approach to psychotherapy, Rogers (1961) described unconditional positive regard as a central component of his theory; he believed that for a client to move toward psychological maturity, the client must experience the therapist as warm, positive, and accepting. In his later work, Rogers (1983) described a model of interpersonal relationships in teaching using his notion of "facilitative conditions of empathy, congruence, and positive regard" (p. 200). Just like with Bandura's work (1986, 1997), Rogers's work (1961, 1983) continues to influence contemporary thinkers. For example, Merriam and Caffarella (1999) equated Rogers's notion of client-centered therapy with student-centered learning. In both situations, the facilitator (either instructor or therapist) is concerned with learning that leads to personal growth. This type of learning places primary emphasis on the *process* of learning, above the *content* of what is to be learned.

Self-directed Learning

Merriam and Caffarella (1999) claimed that being self-directed in learning is a natural part of life for adults. For this to occur, the establishment of a safe classroom environment is critical. This environment supports both the group's learning needs and the individual learner's needs, and is the ground from which self-directed learning can take place. Once the "ground" has been established, the adult learner may become actively involved in the construction of new knowledge. Self-directed learning is not passive learning; it is a process within which the learner plans, carries out, and evaluates learning (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Current research supports the idea of self-directed learning as an important focal area in adult education. For example, Conradie (2014) described a transferring of responsibility for the planning of learning—from the facilitator to the student—that takes place in the modern learning environment. As students assume more and more responsibility for their learning, facilitators are called to provide opportunities for collaborative learning that will serve to inform and support the construction of new knowledge.

Collaborative Learning

In addition to the importance of a safe classroom environment for self-directed learning, a safe environment will allow students to work together as they construct knowledge. Moate and Cox (2015) stated that providing opportunities for active participation in the classroom may affect student learning and development. First, by creating a safe space, facilitators of learning are reducing the inherent power imbalance that exists in the traditional classroom. This shift away from a hierarchical structure allows students to take ownership in their learning, and to teach their peers what they've learned. Second, collaborative learning in the adult classroom may promote a deep, reflective approach to learning. Deep learning (as opposed to surface learning) occurs whenever facilitators have designed learning activities and assessments that require students to take on active roles in the creation of knowledge (Jayashree & Mitra, 2012). Students become more accountable for their learning whenever provided opportunities for collaboration, and collaboration encourages conceptualization and problem solving.

Integration into the Student Experience

When construction of knowledge is placed centrally in the classroom, students are afforded the opportunity to struggle with their peers. Within the group, the learner is tasked with building upon prior knowledge, constructing shared meaning, and defending his or her beliefs. Constructivist thinkers have espoused the cognitive benefits of social learning for decades (Piaget, 1976), and current thinkers continue to explore the cognitive benefits of learning in collaboration. For example, Furr and Carroll (2003) described the benefits of collaborative or experiential learning for counselors in training, noting that experiential activities swayed cognitive development. More recently, researchers have discovered that argumentation and problem solving as collaborative skills are particularly important for higher-level cognitive development in online learning environments (Shukor, Tasir, Van der Meijden, & Harun, 2014). Social and emotional support in the classroom benefits students' cognitive development, provides opportunities for collaboration and self-directed learning, and promotes a sense of belonging, all of which will affect student success.

Proven Practices, Examples, and Results

In 1968, Paulo Freire wrote a famous text on pedagogy entitled, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire (1968) identified several problematic components of formal educational practices such as lectures. In modernist classrooms, student learning is understood to occur when the instructor directly transfers knowledge to the student. Freire (1968) called this the banking model of education. In this model, the institution of learning is the conceptual equivalent of a bank, and the instructor is the conceptual equivalent of a cash machine. In other words, the student need only approach the institution and pay for knowledge, for it to be dispersed proportionately.

Freire (1968) argued that such a conceptualization of education was outdated and inconsistent with how learning occurs. Learning is the product of student engagement with content, and can differ between students. In a classroom setting, student learning will differ within classrooms and between classrooms *even when the same content is being taught*. The postmodern classroom is founded on the principle of constructivism, which

allows students to engage with material and form their own conclusions. Lectures, while useful, must be paired with experiential exercises such as discussions, role playing, and other creative activities to foster student engagement in the learning process. In other words, the banking model does not resonate with how learning occurs. If a student approaches an institution and pays for knowledge, different students will receive not only different amounts but also different currencies and different understandings of what their payout means!

So how do we motivate students to become self-directed learners? The person-centered approach to education can be helpful in this regard. Person-centered approaches to instruction in face-to-face classrooms and online classrooms are now reviewed.

Face-to-Face Classrooms

The layout of the classroom is important in the facilitation of self-directed learning. Many classrooms feature all of the chairs facing front, for students to face the lecturer to provide the lesson. In person-centered classrooms, the room is set up to facilitate either large group or small group discussions, with students facing others and their instructor. For large group discussions, the most helpful table and chair configurations include variations of circles and semicircles. The "round" nature of seating provides students with more opportunity to interact. For small group discussions, the room could be divided into "pods," for pairs of students to sit facing each other (at least four students to a table) at various placements around the room. This structure again facilitates student dialogue and discussion.

Once the room has been arranged properly, the facilitator must seek to enhance student motivation toward self-direction. Following the person-centered model, the principles of congruence, unconditional positive regard, and accurate empathic understanding must be demonstrated by the facilitator for self-directed learning to occur.

Congruence (or genuineness) in the classroom is also known as authenticity. When the facilitator is congruent, it provides students with a model for how to be authentic with themselves and approach the material without a need to impress the facilitator or other students. It also enhances motivation by strengthening the relationship between the facilitator and the student. Congruence is demonstrated when the facilitator feels a certain emotion, and the facilitator voices the emotion out loud when appropriate. When the facilitator expresses emotions at appropriate times, they appear more human and "real" to students. In return, students feel more connected with their facilitator. Likewise, instructors appear more approachable when they acknowledge mistakes rather than appearing defensive. Another example includes acknowledging the lack of knowledge when feeling stumped by a student question, rather than pretending to know and promising to investigate further outside of class (or asking the student to research the question and bring an answer to class). This modeling establishes trust and safety, as students learn that it is acceptable to not know everything.

Unconditional positive regard in the classroom occurs when the facilitator expresses an appreciation ("prizing") of students, regardless of the quality of their work or their behavior. When students feel respected and valued, they contribute more to the classroom and their learning experience. Yet, unconditional positive regard is not an easy concept to apply in classrooms. For example, it is not uncommon for students to arrive late to class, to turn in assignments late or incomplete, or to turn in substandard work. In such cases, Rogers (1983) discussed the need for the facilitator to communicate acceptance and to value the person while also encouraging him or her to change problematic behavior. This dialectic allows the facilitator to express appreciation for the student (e.g., "I'm glad you made it to class; your presence in here is valued"), while also identifying problematic behavior that needs to change ("it would help your classmates if you could arrive on time because we miss your valued input and thoughts on this topic").

When facilitators must confront students, it is suggested that the best setting for this is a one-on-one meeting outside of class, so the student does not feel shamed in front of his or her peers. Likewise, the facilitator's tone during this meeting should be kind, and demonstrate a genuine concern and care for the student. The best outcome of such a meeting is for the student to feel respected and valued. When facilitators approach meetings in this manner, students feel that they are "worth" enough for their instructor to provide this feedback to them. This approach enhances trust and safety, which increases the student's comfort and engagement in the learning environment and provides the conditions for self-directed learning to occur.

Accurate empathic understanding is again a challenging skill to demonstrate in classroom settings. When the facilitator understands the student at a deep level, it leads to deep reflections on the student's experience, which can motivate self-directed learning. As an example, imagine a highly self-directed student who asks multiple questions about the same topic during the same class session. After a while, these questions keep the class stuck on the same concept during the lecture, when the class needs to move on. The facilitator has noticed over the course of several class sessions that the student asks questions perpetually when feeling anxious about the content. The facilitator intuitively senses that the student may fear "falling behind" and being unable to catch up. Meeting with the student at the break, the facilitator wonders if the student indeed feels this way, and asks how best to help. The student appreciates the concern. After problem solving, the student is willing to write down questions about content that he or she still does not understand, after asking a question in class, to share with the facilitator at the next break. Following this meeting, this self-directed student remains engaged in class, since his or her skill in asking questions has been reinforced by the instructor (at appropriate times), and the student knows the questions will be answered eventually.

Online Classrooms

The concepts of congruence, unconditional positive regard, and genuineness can be used by facilitators of online courses. Online learning often contains both synchronous (real-time) and asynchronous (time-lag) communication. Differing student issues can arise depending on the communication type. Synchronous communication most often occurs with video interface programs that allow users to see each other and talk in real time. These video meetings are subject to similar issues as face-to-face communication. For example, acknowledging mistakes and lack of knowledge (congruence) and demonstrating unconditional positive regard and accurate empathic understanding are important when communicating in real time. However, asynchronous communication requires a different skill set, as the facilitator and learners communicate via written means rather than face-to-face dialogue.

One of the most-used communication platforms for asynchronous communication is the discussion board, where learners post responses to question prompts and to other students' posts about the topic being discussed. Facilitators of discussion boards must also learn to reinforce self-redirected learning by fostering safety and trust. For example, students should know that they will feel respected and valued, regardless of their behaviors or posted content.

Sometimes student disputes will arise in a discussion board exercise. The facilitator's job is to encourage students to work through the dispute using synchronous communication, and to attend the meeting, acting as a mediator if needed. The facilitator should demonstrate respect for each student, and approach the conflict as an opportunity for growth. Allowing students to work through conflicts using synchronous communication encourages self-directed learning, and the facilitator's presence as a potential mediator provides the necessary safety for learners to engage in the conflict-resolution exercise.

Lessons Learned

Student motivation toward self-directed learning is greatly enhanced by collaboration; this is particularly true for facilitator-learner relationships. One method of enhancing collaboration for both face-to-face and online classrooms is to allot one class period per course for students to select the course topic to be explored that meets their interests. While this requires additional work by the facilitator, it encourages self-direction and often results in students taking ownership of their learning.

Face-to-Face Classrooms

One of the benefits to face-to-face classrooms is the ability for students to engage in group work or project-based learning. Group work enhances self-directed learning by providing opportunities for direct task engagement through learners working together on a project with less input from the facilitator than occurs during direct instruction, such as lectures. During group work, students also learn the critical skill of how to work in teams to accomplish a significant task. Since most work environments require teamwork, learning this skill in the classroom setting can be beneficial as a training exercise.

Group work is most successful when the facilitator structures the activity in a way that not only identifies the task to be completed but also provides expectations for team member interactions. Providing guidelines on team member interactions is important because students often have negative experiences with group work, from the lack of structure provided. Identifying expectations for how to collaborate in groups provides learners with the trust that their peers will be similarly invested in the learning task. This commitment provides learners with enough confidence to take the risk of engaging fully in the team process, by trusting one another with the delegation of tasks. Without trust, the group task will be less successful due to unequal task delegating, resulting in low student engagement in the learning process by at least one member of the group.

Online Classrooms

Collaboration in online environments is often more challenging to facilitate, though is possible through the use of both synchronous and asynchronous communication. Group work and project-based learning can still occur if students are required to communicate as a team through online mediums. Online collaboration is perhaps most easily facilitated through online web-based synchronous meetings. Asynchronous communication does not lend itself easily to collaborative exercises, though can still occur if students are provided with guidelines for teamwork and agree to communicate through mediums such as discussion boards and e-mail. As with face-to-face discussions, parameters and guidelines for group member interactions and collaboration can be useful to establish safety and trust in the group process. This enhances self-directed learning, as students collaboratively participate in direct task engagement with their instructor either absent or in a supportive role.

Conclusion

Person-centered approaches to education aim to help learners discover and value themselves as people beyond the mere learning of knowledge and skills. Whether in a face-to-face classroom or an online

learning environment, facilitators of learning can establish a socially and emotionally supportive learning environment with the use of congruence, unconditional positive regard, and genuineness. These characteristics set the stage for facilitators of learning to encourage collaboration and self-directed learning, which are critical in the workforce.

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