Getting Started

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Abstract

This short paper outlines one approach to introducing Self-Determined Learning (heutagogy) to people. The approach has been tested and worked successfully. Options for variations in the approach are offered.

Introduction

So, you think Self-Determined Learning (known as Heutagogy) has a lot to offer. You have an understanding of how it can be used, and you can explain the neurological bases that underpin its practice. And you want to introduce a group – students, colleagues, family perhaps – to this way of learning. How do you start?

Well, you could sit down with one of the recent books, ‘Experiences in Self-determined Learning (Blaschke, Kenyon & Hase, 2014) or ‘Self-determined Learning’ (Hase & Kenyon, 2013) and cull from them ideas about what Heutagogy offers and how it is practiced. You could then explain the topic to your group and hope that you can somehow engender in them a level of enthusiasm for the approach. This might work, but possibly not very well, particularly if you have a critical audience who are perhaps uncomfortable with the unknown and with change. Also, by ‘teaching’ about Heutagogy, wouldn’t you perhaps be going against its principles? Wouldn’t you rather want your audience to learn for themselves, and wouldn’t you want them to be enthused by their learning experience?

You decide on a time and place to introduce Heutagogy. Firstly, how do you then create an emotional climate such that people will have a joy in their new learning experience, and want to learn more? Secondly, if you are working with a group of people, how do you get everyone to have similar levels of positive emotions? And finally, if you can achieve this, how do you then provide some guidance for your learners?

Using Experientials

Let’s start with the first question. Your audience are going to learn more and have their emotional levels raised if you put them in an unusual situation where they have to use their bodies and their brains to tackle a task. There are any number of ‘experientials’ that can create the sort of learning environment that you need. Your choice will be determined by the size of your group, your assessment of their desire to learn, and the amount of time you have available. Two experientials that are easy to conduct are “The Rope Loop” and “Safe Cutting”. In the former, people are blindfolded and placed in various points around a rope. They are then told to form a square with the rope. In “Safe Cutting” groups of four or five people, all but one blindfolded, learn to direct one of the group to cutting a short piece of twine. More
preparation is needed for a different experiential “Night Flying” in which groups of four or more build a ‘plane’ from provided materials and then ‘fly’ (blindfold) the plane around a short obstacle course. These three experientials have the benefit of taking 15-30 minutes to conduct, and are capable of being used indoors or outside. Perhaps the most powerful experiential is “Deedeekun” which is used around the world. This one involves two groups building a tower of LEGO blocks. Although it sounds simple, the exercise is designed to create a number of positive and less-positive emotions, as well as providing a learning experience. “Deedeekun” is best conducted indoors and takes up to 45 minutes (Kenyon, 2013).

At the end of whichever experiential was chosen, participants discuss what happened during the exercise, what they were thinking, what they felt at various times, what they did in terms of reaching the goal of the experiential, and how they learned. This discussion provides the answer to the second question about commonality of positive emotions. By sharing their experiences, group members reveal themselves and learn about the other group members. Everyone will share the feeling of success when they have achieved the aim of the experiential.

Taking, hopefully, this mood of joy and achievement along, you can now ask everyone to think about one thing that they learned that was really important to them: it could be from any point in their lives, just something that brought them pleasure and a sense of achievement. Next, everyone is asked to write down a few points about how that special learning experience took place. After ten minutes or so, in their groups, people share these significant learning experiences. You can then invite people to share their experiences, and you can summarise what is said on a whiteboard or screen. The most common themes that emerge at this stage are:

- The learning started with a very strong desire to learn a particular skill or specific information. Sometimes there was a clear reason for the desire, but also sometimes it seemed to be just something that the learner simply wanted.
- It was important to find out how to achieve the learning – who could help, where could I go, what else would I have to do?
- No matter what the obstacles were, there was excitement during the learning
- There was a great feeling of satisfaction when the goal was achieved.
- People became more confident about their learning abilities and wanted to learn more.

You might now assess the mood of your group and decide whether or not you want to explain that what they have just talked about are the essentials of self-determined learning (and expand as you see relevant), and then end your session.

**Gaining Commitment**

However, if you have the time and want to maintain the momentum, the next step could be to ask everyone to take a few minutes (probably 10) to write down the following:

- The thing I really want to learn about is ….
- I would like to learn this by …
- The person(s) who could help me with my learning is/are…
• What I need so I can start my learning are …
• I can get the resources I need by …
• I will start my learning on …
• I will be happy with what I have learned when …

You can have sheets prepared with these printed questions (and space for answers) or you can project them on a screen.

When you judge that sufficient time has been allowed, everyone is asked to share their answers with other members of their small group (up to six people, otherwise this part of the session may drag and momentum be lost). Group members can comment on what is revealed and make suggestions to each other for other ideas on achieving the desired learning.

If you feel the mood of everyone is appropriate, you can ask for people to volunteer their answers to the questions. This may have the beneficial effect of further embedding the commitment to begin the desired learning.

If you have not done so already, you can talk about the principles of heutagogy. Finally, you can remind people of the energy and positive feelings they have experienced during this session, indicating that this approach to learning can be very successful. If appropriate, you can invite comments as to how participants could see the approach being adopted in their work or their classes.

Conclusion

Good luck with your work

Information on using experientials can be obtained by emailing chriskenyon136@gmail.com

References

