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Engaged Learning: Enabling Self-Authorship and Effective Practice

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Abstract

There is now broad consensus that higher education must extend beyond content-based knowledge to encompass intellectual and practical skills, personal and social responsibility, and integrative learning. The college learning outcomes needed for success in 21st century life include critical thinking, a coherent sense of self, intercultural maturity, civic engagement, and the capacity for mutual relationships. Yet, research suggests that college students are struggling to achieve these outcomes in part because skills needed to succeed in college are not those needed to succeed upon graduation. One reason for this gap is that these college learning outcomes require complex developmental capacities or “self-authorship” that higher education is not currently designed to promote.

Keywords

Self-Authorship, Learning, Engaged Learning

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David C. Hodge, Marcia B. Baxter Magolda, and Carolyn A. Haynes

There is now broad consensus that higher education must extend beyond content-based knowledge to encompass intellectual and practical skills, personal and social responsibility, and integrative learning. The college learning outcomes needed for success in 21st century life include critical thinking, a coherent sense of self, intercultural maturity, civic engagement, and the capacity for mutual relationships. Yet, research suggests that college students are struggling to achieve these outcomes in part because skills needed to succeed in college are not those needed to succeed upon graduation. One reason for this gap is that these college learning outcomes require complex developmental capacities or “self-authorship” that higher education is not currently designed to promote.

Self-Authorship and Learning

Adolescents typically depend on authority figures to determine what to believe, how to view themselves, and how to act in relationships. The transition to adulthood comes with the expectation that individuals shift the source of their beliefs, identity, and social relations from the external world to the internal voice. Self-authorship—or the capacity to listen to, cultivate, and trust the internal voice to guide one’s life—represents the culmination of this shift.

The transformation from authority dependence to self-authorship requires questioning trusted authority and leaving the safety of comfortable ways of seeing the world to explore multiple perspectives and construct one’s own beliefs, values, and vision. *Engaged learning* balances these challenges with the necessary support to successfully guide students through this transformation to self-authorship. Engaged learning requires that we move from an *instructional paradigm* that emphasizes telling students what they need to know, to a *discovery paradigm* that encourages students to seek and discover new knowledge by exploring authentic questions and problems.

An Educational Philosophy to Promote Self-Authorship

The key tenets of our intentional educational philosophy are:

- Guide students to develop an internally defined and integrated belief system and identity, which prepares them personally and intellectually for lifelong learning;
- Actively engage students in discovering new knowledge in a sequenced, developmentally appropriate way to enable them to critically evaluate evidence, make informed judgments and act ethically;
- Create a vibrant campus learning community that blends curricular and co-curricular learning opportunities and capitalizes on all constituents’ (faculty, staff, and students) role in promoting students’ learning.

A Three-Tiered Comprehensive Developmentally Sequenced Curriculum

Combining good practices and a developmental framework, engaged learning helps students develop self-authorship by providing cumulative learning outcomes, an intentionally sequenced set of learning experiences, and ongoing reflection to achieve purposeful integration of learning. Our three-tier model illustrates learning partnerships in which educators offer appropriate levels of challenge with support for students who rely on external formulas (Tier 1), who are working through balancing external authority and their own voices (Tier 2), or who are beginning to self-author their lives (Tier 3). Specifically, our model articulates student traits, educator role and expectations, desired learning outcomes, and best practices.

These types of learning partnerships require student learning throughout all curricular and co-curricular settings. The *Engaged University* will produce graduates who are not only well educated, but who also have the confidence and ability to perform at high levels as lifelong learners. To achieve this success, higher education will need to systematically transform infrastructures, policies and the expectations of administrators, faculty, staff, students and parents for the college learning experience.

Selected Readings

Baxter Magolda, M. B. (2004). Self-authorship as the common goal of 21st century education. In M. B. Baxter Magolda & P. M. King (Eds.), *Learning partnerships: Theory and models of practice to educate for self-authorship* (pp. 1-35). Sterling, VA: Stylus.

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www.units.muohio.edu/EngagedLearning