

Enabling Self-Directed Learning through Journaling

BY DEBORAH BROWNSTEIN



Self-directed learning experiences in college provide scaffolding to support the transition students make from their role as learners in classrooms to their role as learners in the workplace. In my discipline of marketing, textbooks cannot keep up with the pace of change in the field of practice. *The Old Rules of Marketing Are Dead* (2011) is not just a title of a book by author Timothy Pearson, it's a call to action to invent new best practices in a relentless pursuit to add value. If Daniel Pink (2009) is correct, it is not only the discipline of marketing that is so challenged. He writes, "The definitional tasks of the twenty-first century [are] solving complex problems" (p. 111). What is required, Pink advocates, is "an inquiring mind and the willingness to experiment one's way to a fresh solution" (p. 111). As educators, how do we prepare our undergraduates when the body of knowledge in their chosen field is in a state of continuous transformation? To stay abreast, we, as educators, continue to cultivate and enhance our content expertise. At the same time, a collateral goal becomes the design of learning experiences that teach students how to become self-directed learners. The first purpose of this paper is to consider the fundamental beliefs that nourish initiatives to enable self-directed learning. Suggestions for designing self-directed learning experiences are pre-

sented and considered in the context of an initiative to integrate self-direction in an upper-level undergraduate business course using one venerable teaching tool, the learning journal.

Fundamental Beliefs that Nourish Self-directed Learning

In his book *Drive* (2009) Daniel Pink's comprehensive review of research leads him to what he calls the "three nutrients" of self-directed behavior: autonomy, mastery, and purpose (p. 80). Addressing parents, educators, and business leaders alike, Pink challenges his readers to examine their own beliefs about learning. "Science demonstrates," he concludes, "that once people learn the fundamental practices and attitudes—and can exercise them in supportive settings—motivation and . . . performance soars" (p. 79). Consideration of each of the three nutrients brings to light old habits and mindsets—our own and those of our students—that can change when we, as educators, set our intention to promote self-directed learning. If we are to, in Pink's words, "craft a new operating system" in our face-to-face or online classrooms, we begin by examining beliefs about motivation and learning (p. 81).

Autonomy

"Autonomy," writes Pink, "is different from independence. It's not the rugged, go-it-alone, rely-on-nobody individualism of the American cowboy. It means acting with choice—which means we can be both autonomous and happily interdependent with others" (p. 90). He continues:

"According to a cluster of recent behavioral science studies, autonomous motivation promotes greater conceptual understand, better grades, enhanced persistence at school and in sporting activities, higher productivity, less burn-out, and greater levels of psychological well-being" (pp. 90–91).

Sheena Iyengar agrees. In her book *The Art of Choosing* (2010), she weaves together evidence, from studies of panthers in cages to humans at work, to show the universal need for autonomy. Giving people a choice, even a shift in the perception of having a choice, leads to positive outcomes in health and well-being (pp. 16–19). More than a decade earlier, Alfie Kohn reached a similar conclusion and presented his compelling case in *Punished by Rewards* (1993). He writes, "[M]ore and more researchers have come to recognize that we are beings who possess natural curiosity about ourselves and our environment, who search for and overcome challenges, who try to master skills and attain compe-

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tence, and who seek to reach new levels of complexity in what we learn and do" (p. 25).

It is time to question old beliefs that to learn, people need to be spurred, compelled, or commanded to do so. It is time to awaken the innate capacity for autonomy and self-direction in our students.

Mastery

Autonomy leads to engagement, and engagement leads to mastery. Pink's definition of *mastery* is "the desire to get better and better at something that matters" (p. 111). As educators, we can design courses and assignments that leave room for autonomy. But that may not be enough. Mastery is hard work, requiring effort and deliberate practice. To meet the challenge of mastery, the work of psychologist Carol Dweck (2006) suggests that we need to cultivate a growth mindset in ourselves and in our students. People who have a growth mindset believe that intelligence is not a fixed trait but a capacity that can be developed. With a growth mindset, learners welcome challenges and apply effort in the face of obstacles. They accept critical feedback and are not intimidated by the success of others. In contrast, people with a fixed mindset believe intelligence is a trait; you have it or you don't. For students who believe they are the smart ones, having to apply effort is a sign of inadequacy, so they avoid situations that demand effort. For students who believe they aren't smart, there is no payoff for applying effort, so they don't (Dweck, pp. 42–43). Dweck has shown that a person can change his or her mindset (pp. 209–239). Learners can recognize the warning signs of a fixed mindset; by challenging the underlying belief that intelligence is a fixed trait, the choice for growth is made. Teachers and parents can help learners cultivate a growth mindset. When a student does engage in self-directed learning, it is best to acknowledge effort but reserve praise for specific noteworthy performance and deliver feedback in private. To praise a student for "being smart" undermines effort (Dweck, pp. 71–74). As educators, we can be role models of the growth mindset and we can see in all students their capacity to grow their talents and intelligence. By our behavior, we can acknowledge effort and support mastery to nourish self-directed learning.

Purpose

Autonomy and mastery are essential to self-direction, but Pink believes it is *purpose* that "provides the context for its two mates [autonomy and mastery]" (p. 133). Pink reflects that "the most deeply motivated people—not to mention those who are most productive and satisfied—hitch their desires to a cause larger

than themselves” (p. 133). A rise in volunteerism and a shift toward “purpose maximization” among the aging baby boomers and among members of generation Y, the millennials, and the echo boomers are evidence of a shift in values (Pink, p. 134–136). In *Spend Shift* (2011), John Gerzema and Michael D’Antonio report that “proof of [a] values revolution emerges in the Brand Asset Valuator data ... the surge in positive values actually began to appear in our data almost twenty years ago” (p. xviii). Their data indicate that “awakened by the economic crisis, people are returning to old-fashioned values—optimism, self-reliance, practicality, hard work, thrift, community, honesty, kindness—and they are applying these ideals in their relationships and their careers, and in their consumption habits as well” (p. xix). Our students seek to become contributors and to enjoy a meaningful life, not simply to fill jobs. We, as educators, can honor these deeper motivates and encourage our students to engage in self-directed learning for the purpose of discovering “the cause larger than themselves” to which they will hitch their desires. When we set our intentions to respect the needs our students have for autonomy, mastery, and purpose, the learning environment we cocreate supports self-directed learning.

The Learning Journal Experience

Undergraduate business students with a major concentration in marketing at Plymouth State University are required to take a course in marketing management in their senior year. Most take the course in their final semester at a time when they are actively engaged in a job search. Seniors approaching graduation and facing the job market do not always feel confidence in their abilities to meet the challenges ahead. Many ask, “Am I ready? Do I know enough? What exactly have I mastered? What do I need to learn next? How do I learn on my own?” With questions such as these on their minds and with awareness that the days of textbooks and teacher-directed exercises are about to end, students are ready to cultivate habits of self-directed learning. By explicitly designing a component of the marketing course to support self-directed learning, I hoped to provide an opportunity to practice skills and cultivate habits that would provide scaffolding for the transition between school-life and work-life to support life-long learning needs.

I chose to design a learning journal experience for the course. Journaling is recognized as a method of “reflective learning” (Student Achievement Team, 2007). The journal writer makes a

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regular practice of capturing his or her thinking about ideas and experiences found meaningful and relevant; in so doing, the individual’s understanding grows. “Journaling can render ... sensemaking explicit,” write Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer in *The Progress Principle* (2011, p. 188).

In the marketing course described above, students make regular entries

in an online journal for the entire semester. The objective of the exercise is made transparent to students; journal writing is introduced as an opportunity to practice skills of self-directed learning needed for continued professional development in their work lives. Students are provided with guidelines for journaling. Class time is given to sharing student experiences with the journaling process itself; students learn from each other how to use the process to become more effective self-directed learners. At the course website, one page is called The Library. Students find links to materials on course topics that they can go to at any time. While every assignment has required reading and a learning journal entry is encouraged for every assignment, the required source material is only the starting point for reflection. Students are encouraged to follow a thread of inquiry triggered by the source material. “Initial entries” on a topic may be followed up with “reflective entries” at any time over the semester. Very importantly, while assignments direct students to use specific sources, they exercise autonomy to harvest from source material whatever helps to build their skill set. The entries students write are to be meaningful and relevant to them.

In the first days of the semester, students are challenged to become increasingly aware of the discipline-specific knowledge they accumulated in their years of study. They complete a prior knowledge exercise and are introduced to Roger Martin’s model of a “personal knowledge system,” with its three components of stance, tools, and experience (2009, pp. 151–178). Over the semester, students use their learning journal as a place to reflect on the knowledge they have acquired already and the new knowledge they are gaining.

“Learn” is an active verb, and educators set course objectives aiming for learning outcomes across a range of learning levels. Bloom’s taxonomy of learning objectives provides one such framework for identifying learning levels (Clemson University Reference Materials, n.d.). Students are introduced to Bloom’s taxonomy. With some practice, students are able to distinguish among knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis,

synthesis, and evaluation. Using Bloom's framework, they are encouraged to monitor their own learning. For example, they are able to recognize that at the knowledge level, they are striving to build vocabulary. They are able to recognize when they are gaining insights by synthesizing ideas from multiple sources. Source material may trigger questions that call for analysis, and the search for answers leads to additional source material. Students are encouraged to challenge themselves to engage source material at deeper and deeper levels, while no stigma is attached to the foundational, knowledge-generating work of building vocabulary and mastering schematics for organizing information. Periodically, students are required to engage in self-assessments of their journal entries. They are encouraged to content analyze their entries to observe the levels of learning demonstrated. Even in a 15-week semester, students are able to observe how their understanding has matured and what new conceptual tools have entered their knowledge system.

Selecting source material is a critical step in the design of self-directed learning experiences. Trade books, published research, articles in the business press, blogs, and Technology, Education, Design (TED) talks are among the source materials that introduce students to the unresolved issues in their discipline and the cutting-edge theories and best practices that are evolving. These are among the resources they will go to as they continue their professional development. A criterion for selecting source material comes from Pink's account of the research findings of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi: "The relationship between what a person has to do and what he could do is such that a challenge isn't too easy, nor too difficult" (p. 115). When the source material we set out at the trailhead of journaling satisfies that criteria, the opportunity for self-directed learning is great. To enable mastery, there must be something to master.

As source material triggers in students a need to know more, they choose to follow a trail of ideas into new territory. Journal entries that recount the trail of ideas are encouraged. Students in marketing management were challenged in their reading of Roger Martin's *The Design of Business* (2009). To master this book, they had to discern the differences between reliable and valid outcomes of decision making, they grappled with understanding what it means to be a design thinker, and they began to recognize in themselves and in others a bias for reliability that inhibits design thinking and undermines innovation. Entries provide evidence of the satisfaction students experience from gaining understanding through the active engagement of challenging source material and the pursuit of knowledge that is perceived as relevant to one's own interests.

Mastery's cousin is curiosity. Mastery is fueled by inquiry, which is fueled by curiosity, and yet, freedom to inquire and the skill of asking meaningful questions are in short supply in many organizations (Ryan, 1995). Ryan relates her own hesitation to question: "I suspect the amount of time I have spent in expert models of instruction (such as schools and training programs) has ingrained a belief that 'right' answers reside outside myself. This belief can render me powerless in these moments of truth. The time I have spent being judged for asking questions and the pain I have inflicted in blaming myself and others when ready answers are not available has buried the spirit of curiosity and the inherent potential for learning in me and perhaps many other people" (p. 284).

Many can appreciate Ryan's experience; it resonates with our own. Ryan's essay is one of the assigned readings about which students write a journal entry. One day in class, a dialogue on the journaling process revealed the anxiety a student was experiencing. She described her difficulty in writing a journal entry on assigned source material after she had posted her pre-work for class discussion on the same topic. She explained that the pre-work question to which she responded so tainted her own thinking that she was unable to arrive at a "good" question to reflect on in her journal entry. The pre-work question and the desire to ask the "good" question had shut down her curiosity. It was suggested that she try writing her journal entry before looking at the pre-work question. I suspect other factors may have contributed to her distress; one of these may have been the expectation that she would be judged on the quality of the questions she raised in her journal entry. At the outset of the journaling project, it was clearly stated that the content of entries would not be graded; this statement may not have been believed by this distressed student. The dialogue in class that day had a significant impact on me. It heightened my intention to monitor my feedback on journal entries. My method is to reply as if in conversation about one insight or one statement or one question in an entry; by engaging an idea, I hope to arouse curiosity that may lead to further self-directed learning. I strive to earn the trust of students so that they exercise their autonomy to harvest any idea that is meaningful to them and to follow its trail wherever it leads. For educators, it takes time, patience, and consistency to earn the trust of our students. But trust is essential to establish a safe environment for self-directed learning. In time, students learn that their journal is a safe place to express curiosity, to question, and to play with partiallyformed, emerging ideas.

Conclusion

This initiative to use journaling as a self-directed learning experience is one example of experimenting one's way to a fresh

solution addressing the challenge of preparing our undergraduates to transition from college life to work life. It is a privilege to look in on the learning journals of our students. A great deal of what an educator learns by reading student entries feeds back into the redesign of learning experiences. Respect for autonomy, mastery, and purpose is the tripart foundation for an environment that nourishes self-direction. In designing experiences, raising awareness of students' personal knowledge systems, encouraging high-level learning, and promoting increased questioning and self-monitoring can create opportunities for self-directed learning.

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