



Inspiring Community College Educators to Promote Student Self-Directedness: A Philosophy of Educating

The 2020 academic year brought teaching and learning experiences that will profoundly impact which instructional modes students prefer. Students worldwide have been learning in various instructional modes, ranging from the traditional face-to-face setting, to a hybrid or blended approach, to entirely online, synchronous or asynchronous. The past academic year has inspired me to develop new innovative pursuits, such as promoting self-directed learning through autonomy-supportive actions of engagement. If there has ever been a time in the history of education that we have needed technological and instructional innovation, that time is now.

My Inspiration

I received a Ph.D. in Educational Psychology from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, in 2019. My work focused on learning support mathematics with an emphasis on student-centered learning. Through my research, I realized that a significant hindrance to student success was psychologically related. I believed that if I could help students recognize these psychological barriers to success and create a pathway that helped them build confidence in their abilities, it would yield positive learning outcomes. During my graduate education, I began researching Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which asserts that all individuals have a natural desire to strive for a sense of autonomy (a need to feel free and self-directed), competence (a need to feel capable of performing), and relatedness (a need to feel a sense of connection or belonging). In SDT, these traits are the basic psychological needs to thrive and grow in unique social settings such as the workplace, home, or a learning community. Through SDT, I developed an applicable theoretical framework that became the lens through which I implemented and assessed the effectiveness of instructional practices in student-directed learning spaces.

Giving Students What They Don't Know They Need

A student who responded to an open-ended statement included in my dissertation research stated the following: *"I was homeschooled during my elementary years and then attended an online international high school.*

Because of these experiences, I know that I excel in a self-motivated environment where I may work alone a lot of the time and problem solve until I need help. It isn't that I won't ask for help from my instructors, it is simply that I am quite comfortable working in an environment where I guide the "ship," so to speak."

This statement encapsulates the qualities of student self-directedness and determination that all students should have when transitioning to postsecondary education and represents the fundamental essence of SDT. When students learn in autonomy-supportive educational settings, it provides opportunities to engage in activities that support their need to be self-directed. This experience helps students build confidence in their abilities and potentially experience a meaningful connection with peers along the way. Our students can develop the skill sets needed to be successful college students. However, the question remains: Are we willing to continue to move beyond our comfort zones to expand our instructional practices to implement innovative learning ideas that allow students to develop the motivation and confidence to be captains of their own ships?

Developing a Structured, Well-Implemented Process (SWIP)

Before transitioning to remote learning mid-semester last spring, I worked towards restructuring how I delivered course content. My objective was to create learning spaces where students had the opportunity to engage in autonomous learning experiences. I had previously completed Desire2Learn levels one and two training in 2016. The purpose was to expand my instructional practices to develop and deliver effective online instruction to maximize the interpersonal connections that would take place within the learning environment.

In applying SDT, students have the choice to be independent or dependent in the learning space. In other words, a self-directed student can choose to work alone, while others may rely upon their peers or instructor for support. Developing a user-friendly online learning environment that includes other educational technologies, in conjunction with providing needed autonomy support functions such as a SWIP, helps to break down barriers and build students' self-confidence. I am convinced that when students initiate the learning process for themselves, over time, it will give them a

sense of purpose and motivation to “guide the ship” and measure up to the instructor’s expectations. When it was time to transition to remote learning, it was evident that adopting an asynchronous instructional model – where students had control over the learning process, with deadlines and autonomy-support – was better suited to support my students’ self-directness.

Applicable Commitments to Positive Student Engagement and Support

In addition to using a SWIP, students need emotional support to help them realize that they have the power to achieve their highest potential. If students have a vision of success, the belief that it will come to pass, and the means to enact it, they will more likely achieve the desired outcome. In the news section of our learning management system Brightspace, I post inspirational information and self-reflective questions. If students prefer, they can submit responses to the posed questions. I use the information to enhance the learning experience. One of these inspirational messages is below:

If you can dream it or think it, then you have envisioned it. If you have envisioned it, then you can expect it to be true. If you expect it to be true, then you must enact it to realize the desired outcome.

- How do you envision success happening in the course?
- What will help you maintain a positive mindset in the face of your challenges?
- How can I support your vision of success in the course?

The interpersonal interactions that students experience with you are influential. Students continuously perceive what kind of teacher we are. They feed off the words we speak and our actions. They want to know they can trust us with their vulnerabilities, that we are devoted to the cause of helping them succeed, and that we are willing to be a reliable source of support. Our positive actions and reactions can have a profound effect on student learning. As an educator, what commitments are you willing to bring to the learning experience? The following is a list of asynchronous learning commitments to student engagement and support that I have found useful.

Engagement

- Send out weekly notifications to join optional virtual meetings for assistance.
- Send out complimentary messages of encouragement at least once a week through the

learning management system or in a mass email.

- End messages by encouraging students to reach out.
- Commit to reaching out to students who miss due dates to offer support.
- Commit to a quick response to students’ questions and concerns.
- Commit to instructor facilitation of learning.

Autonomy Support

- Promote students’ need to be self-directed and confident – the need to belong will innately occur.
- Provide continuous positive reinforcements.
- Acknowledge signs of improvement and mastery.
- Encourage students’ efforts and praise their abilities when they complete quality work.
- Provide examples of great work to be modeled.
- Encourage one-on-one meetings for assistance.
- Be mindful of the energy you bring to the learning experience. Be motivational and inspirational and avoid controlling or demanding language.

Conclusion

We are continuous learners. No one mode of instruction defines our success as educators. We must push beyond our comfort zones to become the educators we aspire to be. To succumb to fear is a missed opportunity. Through continued professional development and willingness to adopt innovative ideas, we overcome our fears and do not miss opportunities to improve. We must embrace the fact that learning takes place when students are actively engaged in the process. While we do not know what external factors may lie ahead, we will rise to the occasion to provide students with an education that inspires them to persevere and not give in to their fears. If there is a lesson to be learned from this academic year, let it be that we are capable when we are willing.

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