

Promoting Self-Authorship to Promote Liberal Education

Marcia B. Baxter Magolda, Miami University¹

Abstract

Contemporary college learning outcomes such as critical thinking and intercultural maturity require transformative learning. Self-authorship—the capacity to internally generate one’s beliefs, values, identity, and relationships—is a necessary foundation for transformational learning. This essay describes the evolution of self-authorship and the conditions that promote it based on a 22-year study of adult learning and development. Learning partnerships model how to promote self-authorship and enable learners to take charge of their learning.

The Association of American Colleges and Universities’ Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) project (AAC&U, 2007) describes knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world, intellectual and practical skills (e.g., inquiry and analysis, critical and creative thinking), personal and social responsibility (e.g., intercultural knowledge and competence, ethical reasoning and action), and integrative learning as college outcomes necessary for success in today’s complex world. A similar list of liberal arts outcomes emerged from an extensive review of literature to guide the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education (www.liberalarts.wabash.edu/nationalstudy), which was designed to discover student experiences that affect growth relating to seven liberal arts outcomes: integration of learning, inclination to inquire and lifelong learning, effective reasoning and problem solving, moral character, intercultural effectiveness, leadership, and well-being (King, Kendall Brown, Lindsay & VanHecke, 2007). The outcomes described by *Learning Reconsidered* (Keeling, 2004) resonate with these liberal arts outcomes and emphasize the developmental cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal foundations necessary to achieve them.

The unique contribution of *Learning Reconsidered* is its emphasis, grounded in longstanding student development research, on the developmental capacities necessary to achieve learning outcomes. For example, critical thinking is a commonly desired learning outcome. Educators want learners to know not only how to acquire information but to analyze it, evaluate its validity, and make judgments about how to use it in practice or in constructing new knowledge. Thus critical thinking extends beyond informational learning to transformational learning (Kegan, 2000). Mezirow portrays transformative learning as

the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action. (2000, pp. 7-8)

He further notes that transformative learning addresses “how we learn to negotiate and act on our own purposes, values, feelings, and meanings rather than those we have uncritically assimilated

¹Marcia Baxter Magolda is Distinguished Professor of Educational Leadership at Miami University (Ohio). She is author of seven books on college student and adult learning and development.

from others” (2000, p. 8). My 22-year longitudinal study of young adults’ learning and development demonstrates that transformative learning required a shift from uncritical acceptance of external authority to critical analysis grounded in internal authority. This internal capacity to define one’s beliefs, identity, and social relations is called self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Kegan, 1994). I and other scholars have argued elsewhere that self-authorship should be the goal of higher education (Baxter Magolda, 2004b; Meszaros, 2007). Promoting self-authorship enables learners to learn *how* to learn and think for themselves rather than *what* to learn. In this essay I explain why self-authorship is the central foundation for complex learning outcomes, how the learning partnerships model (which emerged from over 1000 longitudinal interviews) guided educators in promoting self-authorship, and why faculty and student affairs educators are ethically obligated to work together to promote self-authorship and learning.

Self-Authorship as the Foundation of Learning

Following my longitudinal participants from age 18 to 40 revealed three major phases in the journey toward self-authorship and their implications for the kind of learning that is possible (Baxter Magolda, 1992, 2001, 2008, in press). Most entered college *following external formulas*—that is, assimilating uncritically beliefs and values from external sources. Initially they focused on memorizing academic knowledge because they assumed it was certain. They excelled in informational learning but were at a loss when asked to evaluate or use information. Encountering uncertainty in college prompted participants to shift to learning processes authority figures used for handling ambiguity. It was not until participants were asked to think for themselves, typically after college, that they began to consider their own role and responsibility in deciding what to believe or how to use knowledge. As Anne, one participant, shared, “I wish teachers wouldn’t do so many multiple-choice questions and have some more thinking type things because life is not multiple choice” (Baxter Magolda, 2001, p. 193).

Being asked to think pushed participants into the *crossroads* phase, where they struggled to bring their own internal voices into conversation with the external voices on which they had always relied. For the majority of my participants this phase occurred after college when their external formulas proved insufficient to make the decisions demanded of them daily at work and at home. Employers demanded that they research questions autonomously, address the benefits and limitations of courses of action, provide evidence for decisions, and take responsibility for the consequences of decisions. Success in personal life required bringing their internal needs into relationships and family roles. Success in graduate or professional school necessitated thinking for themselves and articulating their perspectives. Participants who were able to work through the tension of the crossroads to cultivate their internal authority were better able to think critically, reason effectively, and articulate their values and beliefs. Those who were still relying on external formulas struggled in work, school, and personal contexts.

Those who were able to bring their internal voices to the foreground to coordinate external influence became self-authoring. They were able critically to analyze and evaluate information and expectations from external sources, compare perspectives with their internally generated beliefs, cope with ambiguity, and choose wise courses of action. Because they trusted their own internal voices, they were able to disagree respectfully with colleagues to arrive at better decisions, participate authentically in interactions with diverse others, and become lifelong learners. No longer fearing others’ reactions, they were better able to learn from divergent perspectives and constantly revise their thinking. Self-authoring participants succeeded in work and personal contexts and exhibited learning outcomes we prescribe for college graduates.

The Learning Partnerships Model

Following these participants through college, graduate and professional schools, and employment for over twenty years yielded the key characteristics of environments that promoted their learning and the self-authorship that supported it. Across numerous contexts and diverse personal characteristics, six dynamics emerged that together promote learning and self-authorship. These six dynamics make up the learning partnerships model (LPM; Baxter Magolda, 2004a). The model reinforces the longstanding principle of challenge and support and emphasizes the freedom and responsibility of the learner in the partnership. Learning partners supported participants in developing self-authorship in three ways:

- Respecting their thoughts and feelings, thus affirming the value of their voices,
- Helping them view their experiences as opportunities for learning and growth, and
- Collaborating with them to analyze their own problems, engaging in mutual learning with them. (Baxter Magolda, in press)

These supportive functions strengthened participants' internal voices. Learning partners also challenged participants to develop self-authorship in three ways:

- Drawing participants' attention to the complexity of their work and life decisions, and discouraging simplistic solutions,
- Encouraging participants to develop their personal authority by listening to their own voices in determining how to live their lives, and
- Encouraging participants to share authority and expertise, and work interdependently with others to solve mutual problems. (Baxter Magolda, in press)

Interacting with learners in these ways enabled learners to see the complexity of knowledge, recognize that they needed to bring their own internal voices to knowledge construction, and see the importance of interdependent collaboration with others to make wise decisions and create new knowledge. Although some learning partnerships did occur during college, the majority occurred in post college settings. As Anne noted earlier, this left graduates unprepared for the demands of adult life.

The LPM has been used successfully in multiple contexts to support the journey toward self-authorship prior to graduation. A four-year developmentally sequenced writing curriculum yielded senior theses that reflected awareness of the limitations of particular approaches, understanding of how different disciplines would approach the problem, and comparison of assumptions across disciplines (Haynes, 2004). A multicultural education course in a community college helped students become aware of White privilege and begin to see how culture is constructed (Hornak & Ortiz, 2004). A four-course general education sequence in earth sustainability yielded tolerance for ambiguity, sensitivity to bias and ethical issues, integration of content to life, and increased recognition of assumptions and arguments (Bekken & Marie, 2007). An academic advising retention program helped students see knowledge as uncertain and envision their role in making decisions based on their goals and values (Pizzolato & Ozaki, 2007). An urban leadership internship program prompted participants to interact effectively with diverse others and envision their responsibility to larger society (Egart & Healy, 2004). Similarly, a cultural immersion program in El Salvador helped participants gain intercultural maturity and self-authorship (Yonkers Talz, 2004). Students in a residential environment using the community

standards model reported being more comfortable making their own decisions, standing up for their beliefs, appreciating difference, and objecting to behaviors they thought were wrong (Piper & Buckley, 2004). In addition to enabling students to achieve these valuable learning outcomes, the LPM guided reorganization of faculty development at Virginia Tech (Wildman, 2004) and the student affairs division at University of Nevada, Las Vegas (Mills & Strong, 2004).

The LPM enables self-authorship, thus eliminating the concern that learners are coerced into particular beliefs or into thinking in particular ways. The six components of the LPM support engaged learning in which learners actively explore and make meaning of new knowledge. Given its strong empirical base, it is the foundation for the reform of an honors program (Taylor & Haynes, 2008) and the overall undergraduate curriculum at Miami University (Hodge, Baxter Magolda, & Haynes, 2009). These efforts aim to “Guide students to develop an internally defined and integrated belief system and identity, which prepares them personally and intellectually for lifelong learning” (Hodge, Baxter Magolda, & Haynes, p. 9, 2009).

Educators’ Roles and Ethical Obligations

The learning partnerships model gives learners control of and responsibility for their educational journeys. I have used a tandem bicycle metaphor to argue that educators should take the back seat to provide guidance, leaving the front captain’s seat to the learner to direct the journey. Transformative learning and the shift from authority-dependence to internal authority requires many learning partners. Faculty play the primary role of guiding learners in learning the knowledge bases of their respective disciplines, how to use this knowledge wisely and how to extend the knowledge of the discipline. However, because it is clear that internal authority requires trusting one’s internal voice, developing a secure sense of identity is crucial to both thinking critically and exchanging multiple perspectives in the learning process. Student affairs educators play the primary role of helping learners clarify and internally generate their identities and develop the capacity for authentic interdependent relationships with diverse others. Student affairs educators have the advantage of working with learners in contexts where learners are making substantive decisions about their relationships, career aspirations, ways to work and live with others, and personal values.

The debate over who is in charge of student learning—faculty or student affairs professionals—is misguided. Learners are in charge of their learning and need to be guided into this role to counteract the authority-dependence created in most contemporary secondary schooling. Faculty are experts in their disciplines and in the meaning making processes of their disciplines. Although most faculty do not receive preparation in how students learn and develop, modeling the meaning making processes of their disciplines and allowing students to practice them can promote academic learning. Student affairs educators are experts in student intellectual, intrapersonal, and social development because this research is a mainstay in most master’s and doctoral programs in student affairs. Thus they are experts in how to enable learners to generate and value their own thinking, think in more complex ways, deepen their understanding of their identities, and learn to interact productively with diverse others. Because all of these skills and capacities are central to success in adult life, educators have an ethical responsibility to provide learners with a holistic educational experience. The historical separation of curriculum and cocurriculum parses the dimensions of learning into separate components. As a colleague and I have asked in arguing for integrating these dimensions: “When institutions promise to educate the ‘whole student,’ as many do, is this a continuing invitation to separate academic learning from social and interpersonal learning, or should we consider changing the game plan?” (Wildman & Baxter Magolda, p. 2, 2008). Clearly our answer is to change the game plan. This change means shifting away from who is best qualified to guide student learning toward what role might all

campus constituents play in helping learners guide their own learning. The latter constitutes an ethical approach to college educating.

References

- Association of American Colleges & Universities. (2007). *College learning for the new global century*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges & Universities.
- Baxter Magolda, M. B. (1992). *Knowing and reasoning in college: Gender-related patterns in students' intellectual development*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Baxter Magolda, M. B. (2001). *Making their own way: Narratives for transforming higher education to promote self-development*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- Baxter Magolda, M. B. (2004a). Learning partnerships model: A framework for promoting self-authorship. In M. B. Baxter Magolda & P. M. King (Eds.), *Learning partnerships: Theory and models of practice to educate for self-authorship* (pp. 37-62). Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- Baxter Magolda, M. B. (2004b). 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.
- Baxter Magolda, M. B. (2008). Three elements of self-authorship. *Journal of College Student Development*, 49(4), 269-284.
- Baxter Magolda, M. B. (in press). *Authoring your life: Developing an internal voice to navigate life's challenges*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- Bekken, B. M., & Marie, J. (2007). Making self-authorship a goal of core curricula: The Earth Sustainability Pilot Project. In P. S. Meszaros (Ed.), *Self-Authorship: Advancing students' intellectual growth, New Directions for Teaching and Learning* (Vol. 109, pp. 53-67). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Egart, K., & Healy, M. (2004). An urban leadership internship program: Implementing learning partnerships "unplugged" from campus structures. In M. B. Baxter Magolda & P. M. King (Eds.), *Learning partnerships: Theory and models of practice to educate for self-authorship* (pp. 125-149). Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- Haynes, C. (2004). Promoting self-authorship through an interdisciplinary writing curriculum. In M. B. Baxter Magolda & P. M. King (Eds.), *Learning partnerships: Theory and models of practice to educate for self-authorship* (pp. 63-90). Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- Hodge, D. C., Baxter Magolda, M. B., & Haynes, C. A. (2009). *Engaged learning: Enabling self-authorship and effective practice*. Paper presented at the Conference on Liberal Education and Effective Practice, Clark University.
- Hornak, A., & Ortiz, A. M. (2004). Creating a context to promote diversity education and self-authorship among community college students. In M. B. Baxter Magolda & P. M. King (Eds.), *Learning partnerships: Theory and models of practice to educate for self-authorship* (pp. 91-123). Sterling, VA: Stylus.
-

- Keeling, R. P. (Ed.). (2004). *Learning reconsidered: A campus-wide focus on the student experience*. Washington, DC: National Association of Student Personnel Administrators and American College Personnel Association.
- Kegan, R. (1994). *In over our heads: The mental demands of modern life*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Kegan, R. (2000). What "form" transforms? A constructive-developmental approach to transformative learning. In J. Mezirow (Ed.), *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress* (pp. 35-69). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- King, P. M., Kendall Brown, M., Lindsay, N. K., & VanHecke, J. R. (2007). Liberal arts student learning outcomes: An integrated approach. *About Campus: Enriching the Student Learning Experience*, 12(4), 2-9.
- Meszaros, P. S. (Ed.). (2007). *Self-Authorship: Advancing students' intellectual growth, New Directions for Teaching and Learning* (Vol. 109). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mezirow, J. (Ed.). (2000). *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mills, R., & Strong, K. L. (2004). Organizing for learning in a division of student affairs. In M. B. Baxter Magolda & P. M. King (Eds.), *Learning partnerships: Theory and models of practice to educator for self-authorship* (pp. 269-302). Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- Piper, T. D., & Buckley, J. A. (2004). Community standards model: Developing learning partnerships in campus housing. In M. B. Baxter Magolda & P. M. King (Eds.), *Learning partnerships: Theory and models of practice to educate for self-authorship* (pp. 185-212). Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- Pizzolato, J. E., & Ozaki, C. C. (2007). Moving toward self-authorship: Investigating outcomes of learning partnerships. *Journal of College Student Development*, 48(2), 196-214.
- Taylor, K. B., & Haynes, C. (2008). A framework for intentionally fostering student learning. *About Campus: Enriching the Student Learning Experience*, 13(5), 2-11.
- Wildman, T. M. (2004). The learning partnerships model: Framing faculty and institutional development. In M. B. Baxter Magolda & P. M. King (Eds.), *Learning partnerships: Theory and models of practice to educate for self-authorship* (pp. 245-268). Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- Wildman, T. M., & Baxter Magolda, M. B. (2008). *Bridging learning and development*. Paper presented at the Association for the Study of Higher Education, Jacksonville, FL.
- Yonkers Talz, K. (2004). A learning partnership: U. S. college students and the poor in El Salvador. In M. B. Baxter Magolda & P. M. King (Eds.), *Learning partnerships: Theory and models to educate for self-authorship* (pp. 151-184). Sterling, VA: Stylus.
-