

Personal Statement

This document was written during the three-week orientation for the Master in Adult Education program at St. Francis Xavier University. In it I provide reasons for taking this course as well as questions about the traditional, teacher-centered approach to education I'd learned about and practised, and whether a more student-centered one would prove more effective and enriching for the student. It is in writing this statement that I eventually came to explore self-directed learning, an approach which has been the focus of my work since starting this degree.

As I progressed in the Bachelor of Education program I was enrolled in I concluded that traditional education had to be serious and formal in order to be legitimate and true. This understanding quelled my motivation to question or challenge this traditional approach and, indeed, my motivation toward and interest in learning.

There were, however, courses or individuals throughout my university career that inspired me to take a more active stance. They were the professors who engaged me to be more self-initiating, more questioning of the facts before me. The smaller populated seminars where my presentations were videotaped and critiqued on everything from the lesson plan I conducted to the questioning techniques I employed to the irksome habits I displayed; all were thoroughly analyzed and commented on, yet in an environment of non-judgement. It was a refreshing change. It felt liberating to be a part of that analytical process: to be given the permission to make mistakes and acknowledged as worthy for having done so. Similarly, classes in which the professor would lecture extensively about a particular subject matter, then invite the class to discuss it, enticing even the usually quiet students to participate, were affirming. And the students usually did participate, simply because they had been acknowledged. It was this acknowledgement, this invitation to join in, that opened up the student's mind and heart to expression. As a teacher, these experiences inspired me to find ways to engage students – particularly adult students because their learning habits have already been ingrained and are in need of re-focusing – to re-claim a whole brain approach to problem solving.

After graduating from the Faculty of Education, at the University of Winnipeg, I embarked on a three-year contract as an Assistant English teacher in Hyogo, Japan. I taught at Sumoto Senior High School where I had the opportunity to introduce a more student-centered approach to teaching ESL learners. Much of the challenge revolved around the issue of encouraging students to express themselves verbally more readily. Pedagogically, the traditional Japanese classroom was orientated to be teacher centered with students primarily listening, taking notes, responding to fill-in-the-blanks questions in their readers, and regurgitating what the teacher had to say.

My response to this was to introduce students to English language activities that were more game-like in their formatting so as to help ease in the transition from a passive to a more active approach. Students reacted immediately, sensing the difference between approaches. I often utilized listening activities more often. These took the form of dictations or listening to musical passages, whilst filling in the blanks. We would then engage in vocabulary development and discussion of the meaning of such passages. Everything was a natural progression from the previous and since much of the materials used were created specifically with the students in mind, the students could relate to much of it easily, which provided them with the motive to participate. In time, their speaking and pronunciation skills improved and a more natural usage of the English language – both in written and verbal expression – developed.

Another, more formal approach to language teaching that proved successful and also fulfilled a certain nostalgia for traditionalism, was to teach the grammar of the language being learned, as a comparison and contrast to the grammar of one's own language. As a teacher of the Japanese Language upon my return to Canada, I did just that: teaching English grammar so that students would find learning the Japanese grammar easier to relate to. Of course, the two languages are not that similar; however, there are enough similarities that can facilitate comprehension of the Japanese language's structure and grammar.

As my teaching experience evolved, I came to focus on ESL, where I taught various levels at the University of Manitoba and the University of Winnipeg. Subjects included Reading and Writing, Business English, TOEFL/TOEIC, and Formal Listening and Speaking. With many of these subjects, I have tried to take a student-centred and interactive approach, encouraging students to express themselves to the extent that they felt comfortable. The students I have taught to date have been international students from Asia (Japan, Korea, China, Thailand, Taiwan, the Philippines) and Latin America. Since students from many of these cultures come from traditional, teacher-centered classroom approaches, there exists the delicate balance between considering cultural differences in classroom etiquette, conduct, and interaction and introducing students to a new approach,.

In order to introduce a more interactive classroom approach, therefore, various resources including prescribed texts, audio/video recordings of documentaries, newspapers, and journals have been utilized. Exposing students to live lectures on various topics as Health, Writing a Resume, Obesity, Sexuality Education and Aboriginal Issues have also been effective in that they focus on current events and, therefore, possess a high level of immediacy and relevance in students' lives. Such lessons provide an incentive for participation. Opportunities to develop their linguistic skills in vocabulary acquisition and listening and speaking are, therefore, more likely, since such an approach incorporates right-brain usage with left-brain function.

Such an approach was taken into consideration when I, with some help from a colleague, developed a curriculum for the course I am teaching. It is a course on formal listening and speaking for students preparing to enter degree credit programs at the University of Winnipeg and which encompasses, along with developing students' listening and speaking skills, a note-taking component, which students may then apply during the live lecture series.

In the twelve years that I have been working in the field of literacy and language acquisition, I have become interested in assessing whether learning as a whole may be measured relative to individual instructor style and how much learning can be attributed to instruction as opposed to a student's autonomous initiative; the question I have now focuses on how much autonomous learning plays in successful learning.

Part of what fulfills me as a teacher is the discernible progress that students make from the time they start a course that I am teaching to the time they finish. The distinction between the ranges in vocabulary-and sentence structure-usage, particularly in verbal communication, is intriguing. How does this happen? Is there a difference, between individuals in the time that it takes for basic language acquisition? Is it simply a matter of motivation? If so, what motivates one to learn? What are the mechanisms that allow one to learn? Does external instruction play a great role in whether one learns or not?

Specifically, I would like to focus on the area of self-directed learning, which is a more independent, critically-thinking approach to learning as well as to education. It is an interest in discovering approaches or methodologies that encourage students to learn on their own, and to enjoy the learning process. In so being, self-directed learning presumes that learning can be achieved through self-motivation. I am uncertain as to how to assess such an approach since learning something new involves complex interaction of personal and social factors.

It is the fascination with how one is motivated to learn that is my focus in future career development. To seek out how to 'adjust' a teaching approach to facilitate motivation for learning and in so being, hopefully, attain a level of humanism in teaching methodology and approach.

Reading List

1. Hartmann, Pamela & Blass, Laurie (2000). *Quest: listening and speaking in the academic world (Book 3)*. McGraw-Hill Higher Education.
2. Rooks, George M.(1999). *Paragraph power: communicating ideas through paragraphs (2nd Edition)*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall Regents.
3. Tomalin, Barry & Stempleski, Susan (1993). *Cultural awareness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
4. White, Goodith (1998). *Listening* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
5. Derrick, Marcia Gail & Carr, Paul Brian (2003). Facilitating and understanding autonomy in adult learners. *New Horizons in Adult Education*. Available: <http://www.nova.edu/~aed/horizons/volume17no2.pdf>.