Notes from Student-Faculty-Staff Conversation on Learner Autonomy or Self-Directed Learning in Graduate Students

April 9, 2009 Center for Teaching Learning and Technology (Instructional Resource Commons) 9:30 – 11:00 am

Introductions/ Acknowledgements by Dr. Patricia Jarvis, Psychology

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Event sponsored by: Dr. Kathleen McKinney, Cross Chair, Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL)

Event Leader: Dr. Patricia Jarvis, SoTL Scholar. Illinois State University

The following issues were discussed:

What is Learner Autonomy or Self-Directed Learning in Graduate Students?

- Learning outside of the borders of a class, major, dept, or university

- Taking ownership of learning

- Independently working

- Seeking help if needed; no fear in doing so

- Intrinsically motivated – learning because they genuinely want to learn

- Achieving purely for the sake of achievement

- Referred to the Illinois State University mission statement in which it says "promoting lifelong learners"

What do highly autonomous graduate students look like?

- Proficient in scheduling and time management

- Pro-active in seeking out faculty if needed

- Pro-active in attending additional enrichment opportunities (lectures, meetings, volunteering)

- Performing beyond what is necessary as far as course work

- Taking advantage of resources prepared and presented to them by faculty and staff

- Self reflective and self motivated in learning

- Not being fearful of pursuing more knowledge if there is a misunderstanding

- Applying knowledge to "the bigger picture" outside the classroom walls

- Possess a certain confidence; post undergraduate work is building on a knowledge foundation already in place

How do they act?

- Able to learn from their mistakes; aware of what can be done differently next time

- Prepared for class

- Willing and eager to participate

- Able to adapt to the culture and academic environment of the department they are studying in

- Posses excellent problem solving skills

- May read for pleasure or enrichment, as well as doing crossword puzzles or other leisurely intellectual activities

- Open minded

- Less judgmental

- Accept diversity

- Perhaps there are some negative traits

    - Less collaborative during group work

    - Always questioning in the pursuit of knowledge; how much is too much?

    - Too many questions is not self-reliant learning; becomes dependent on others for answers

    - Not always able to commit or decide

What are the motivations of autonomous learners?

- Intrinsic as opposed to extrinsic motives

- Mastery over performance goals

- Curiosity

- Creativity

- Thinking outside the box

- Taking risks

- Ever presently mindful of all of the knowledge out there

- Seeking different perspectives; not daunted by the 'nay-sayers'

Do graduate students, faculty members and staff agree on these ideas?

- Faculty and staff want students to succeed

- Syllabus and coursework can be collaborative between student and instructor

    - In some cases students are able to choose assignments

    - Instructors can keep an open mind while conversing with students about their concerns/complaints

- Instructors clearly communicating expectations (usually in writing)

- Students agreeing with and understanding expectations

- Perhaps certain class structures work

    - PowerPoint lectures on readings already assigned can discourage the autonomous learner

    - This demonstrates a distrust from the professor and assumes that students did not understand material or did not even read material

    - The autonomous learner would seek out assistance if there was a misunderstanding

    - Class discussions and discussion questions help to bring out what has been learned through readings

- Encourage a shared responsibility between students and instructors

    - Share the same goals of success

    - Instructors expect students to contribute to the best of their abilities

    - Students expect instructors to present material to the best of their abilities

- Autonomous learners do not expect librarians and instructors to do research for them

    - Asking for help is the 'autonomous' thing to do; however librarians and instructors draw the line at some point

    - It is a disservice to the learner if the work is done for you

- Instructors model autonomous behaviors

- Following the guidelines set leaves no room for misunderstanding as far as what assistance is expected

- There are times where it may be easier for librarian or instructor to complete research for the student, however this does not scaffold necessary skills

What discourages autonomous learning?

- Instructors with negative behaviors i.e. cancelling class, attitude during classes and little interaction with students

- Unrealistically high expectations from the instructor

- Non willing, non accommodating and non receptive instructors

- Control is not in the student's hands; this is not motivating to the autonomous learner

- Contextual factors such as temperature in the classroom, technical malfunctions and low class attendance

- Lack of flexibility when it comes to coursework

- Lack of positive reinforcement

- Passive learning environments i.e. long lectures where instructor talks the entire time

What promotes learner autonomy?

- Verbal acknowledgement to those who have helped you in your learning

- Appreciation by the instructor of students' achievements

- The ability to give your instructor honest feedback about assignments

- Freedom to contribute during class and to the course and coursework

- Instructors who create an entertaining and appealing learning environment

- Instructors who make students aware of all of the learning opportunities i.e. lectures, symposiums, guests speakers, etc.

- Instructors who provide additional readings, extra assignments and allow students to achieve outside the borders of the class

Concluding Remarks and Handout from Learner Autonomy Web site distributed