

Don't Give Me a Fish; Teach Me How to Fish: A Case Study of an International Adult Learner

The purpose of this paper is to critically reflect on the Learning Contract used in Directed Studies courses for graduate students. The author argues that Directed Studies classes may serve a dual purpose of both exploring students' learning patterns as adult learners and being a scholarly endeavor. This study is an auto-ethnographic account of the author's learning experience as an international adult learner during her first Directed Studies course in a doctoral program in the U.S. Auto-ethnography is defined as a form of self-narrative, a representation of the self in social context (Burdell & Swadener, 1999; Humphryes, 2005; Spry, 2001) and a research method that combines the personal with the social, cultural, and political (Ellis, 2004).

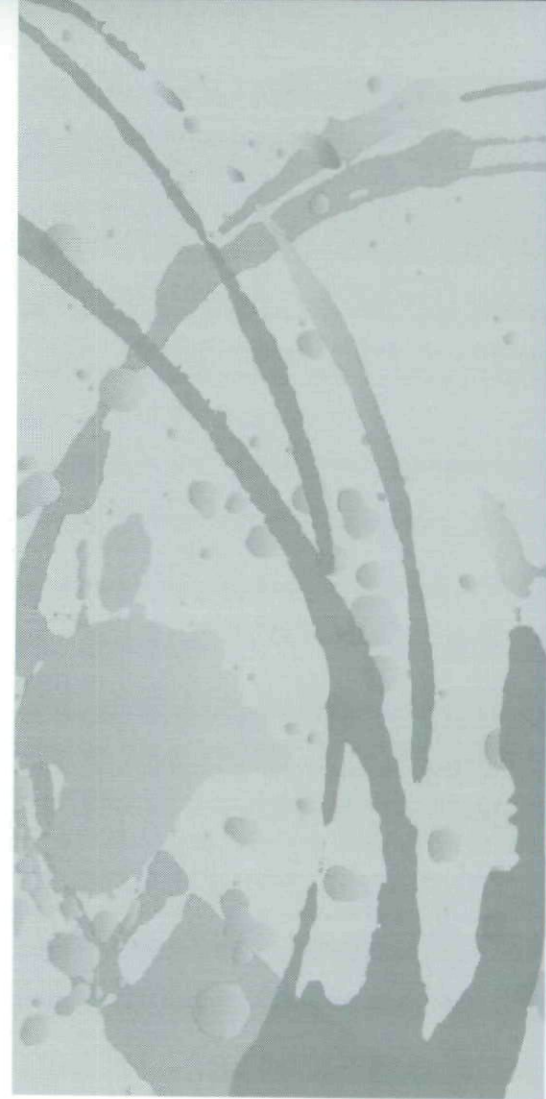
The author conducted a Directed Studies course with Professor Z (anonymous) as the faculty member. The author did not keep a journal or document this experience in any way; instead she used the flashback technique in literary writing. The flashback is a narrative technique, which illustrates past events related to the present to provide a back story in the form of scenes from the past (Bac & Young, 2008). It is a method to bring the reader into the life of the character/narrator.

What is a Learning Contract?

There is no one specific definition for Learning Contracts; rather, many

definitions apply to different contexts. Anderson, Boud, and Sampson (1996) define Learning Contract as, "a document used to assist in the planning of a learning project. It is a written agreement negotiated between a learner and a teacher, lecturer or advisor" (p. 2). A Learning Contract is also defined as, "an alternative way of structuring a learning experience: it replaces a content plan with a process plan" (quoted in Codde, 1996, p. 1). Mayville (1973) defines Learning Contract as, "a document drawn up by the student and a mentor or advisor that specifies what a student will learn in a given period of time and how" (p. 1) that learning will take place. A Learning Contract can be understood as an approach in teaching where students are viewed as lifelong learners. It aims to develop students' self-directedness and control of their own learning experience.

A Learning Contract is a plan for a learning process, rather than a learning content or outcome that is directed toward individual learners with a focus on their own learning needs. Anderson et al. (1996) found that Contract Learning can be utilized as a means to, "develop the existing skills and experiences of the learner, recognizing connections and sequences" (p. 10). They also provide an environment for active engagement where learners have more freedom to plan and organize their own learning experiences. Students take initiative for their own learning and explore



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their own potential, learning patterns, and develop their learning skills to achieve their learning objectives. Accordingly, the teacher's role is that of a facilitator who leads students through asking questions to stimulate them and help them make "informed choices" (Grasha, 1994).

Learning Perspectives

My learning experience has been shaped by two different perspectives: the Transmission Perspective and Constructivism. According to the Transmission Perspective, students receive knowledge in pre-determined structures that shape their ways of thinking and hinder their participation in their own learning. As such, individuals are, "converted...into students incapable of critical consciousness which would result their intervention in the world as transformers of that world" (Freire, 1970, p. 73). The Transmission Perspective focuses primarily on the content and teacher's delivery of the material (Pratt,

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1998), and links to a "surface and non-deep approach to learning" (Trigwell, Prosser, & Waterhouse, 1999). On the contrary, I was challenged and encouraged to think critically, analyze, discuss, and construct new knowledge through the constructivist approach. Constructivists believe that students need to discover, examine, construct, co-construct, and re-construct the new knowledge before applying it (Fisher & Churach, 1998; Good & Brophy, 2003; Windschitl, 2002). Anthony (1996) argues that learners are no more viewed as passive recipients of knowledge but rather as constructors of knowledge as, "learning is a process of knowledge construction," (p. 349) and "iterative acts of constructing and construing" to better understanding (Pratt, 2002, p. 110).

The Case Study: A Directed Studies Course

I first came across the term Learning Contract in an adult education course in 2009. The term made me ponder, "What does it mean? Do students and teachers sign a contract? What kind of contract? And why do they sign a contract?" Driven by curiosity and a love of learning, I searched for the term and learned that learning contracts have been applied in the U.S. and Western educational systems for decades. While reading a second book about

learning contracts, I suddenly stopped and asked myself: what is this deep interest all about? Learning contract was just a term that I came across in one of my readings. Why was it so influential? Why did it have such an impact on me? And why have I been searching and digging deep into it for days now?

I soon realized that I was not only driven by curiosity about the term, but also by an image persistently burrowing itself into my thoughts and occupying my mind. That image was of me standing with Professor Z, a year ago in the departmental corridor, discussing our agreement to sign a printed form for a Directed Studies class. The next day, Professor Z, the Department Head, and I all signed the form. Professor Z and I had to submit a co-authored manuscript for publication by the end of the semester. Now, I realize that the Directed Studies form was my first learning contract. What follows is an auto-ethnographic account of my learning experience in that Directed Studies course. I am presenting it in a narrative style as it helps to better express my actions-reactions through a pattern that provides the foundation for this study:

I sat at my desk at home reading the contract I had signed with Professor Z and the Department Head. As previously noted, I was supposed to submit a co-authored manuscript with Professor Z for publication by the end of the semester. I was worried. I had a short period of time and little experience. Though I had the problem statement and the research questions, I did not know where and how to start. "The library is always a good beginning," I said to myself and went to the library the next day.

By the end of the week, Professor Z and I had our first meeting. With a pile of books and articles, I entered the meeting room. As soon as I sat down, I started complaining about the complexity of the topic I selected to research. Professor Z listened to me carefully with no comments. I kept talking, explaining, discussing, arguing, suggesting, directing, and redirecting the monologue. When I stopped talking, Professor Z asked, "So, what are you going to do next?" I had no reply. Professor Z suggested we meet on a weekly basis rather than bi-weekly, as was stated in the contract. I left the meeting room with a question to ponder!

It was disappointing to leave the first meeting with a question rather than an answer. "Should I keep these references and go through them once again, or do I have to search for other references?" I asked myself. I went through the references once again. I could not connect. I decided to give the research a fresh start.

At our second meeting, I explained to Professor Z why and how I decided to change my references. Professor Z looked into the new books with no comment. We ended the meeting with neither questions nor answers. For a couple of weeks, I kept adding and removing references with Professor Z listening to my arguments. I was thinking of changing my topic. The third week, I searched new references and brought a new pile of books. I looked at them and said to myself, "My research is expanding. It is going beyond my university library and beyond books and articles. It is moving in a non-linear pattern."

My meetings with Professor Z started changing from monologues to dialogues. I re-presented, re-discussed, and re-brought new ideas and patterns to my own learning. When I came up with a new suggestion/dimension to move the study forward, Professor Z suggested further reading. I started making connections. A month later, I had my first research outline. While discussing it with Professor Z at our weekly meeting, I suddenly stopped talking. I thought for a moment and said, "I want to interview people." Professor Z immediately asked, "Why?" I replied that I needed to hear from others about their own experiences.

I generated my first list of structured questions for the interviews. On our next meeting, Professor Z asked me, "Do you know about IRB approval?" And I replied, "No, I have no idea." I left the meeting that day with a new task and numerous questions I generated for myself to ponder. The next month I had the IRB approval, a list of my interview questions, a consent form, flyer, contacts for interested participants, and a schedule for interviews. While conducting my interviews, I received a call for proposals for finished and/or in-progress works. Professor Z thought that my research fit within the conference theme and requirements, and encouraged me to work on a conference proposal and a PowerPoint presentation. By the end of the semester, I presented my research work at a regional conference with Professor Z in attendance.

Discussion

I never thought about how I learn and acquire new knowledge. It was only recently through a course in Adult Learning that I have come to recognize how I learn. Through that course, I learned about my own potential, learning process, and learning stages. It was an experience in self-exploration, "the adult orientation to learning is that of problem centeredness, that experience becomes a resource for learning, and that the essence of adulthood is to move toward being self directed" (Caffarella & O'Donnell, 1987, p. 199). As an adult learner, education for me has become a, "lifelong process of continuing inquiry and the development of skills needed for

self-directed inquiry" (Codde, 2006, p. 4).

Examining my Directed Studies course with a critical eye helped me learn about my potential and learning style. I analyzed my learning process, and discovered that I am a self-directed learner, ready to take initiative for my own learning, to formulate my own questions as guidance to acquire new knowledge. As a result, I found that I learn through the following seven stages: (a) interest is a major factor in my learning process, (b) motivation is a result of my striving for achievement, (c) self-challenge is a positive and healthy factor, (d) confusion is an indicator that learning is taking place, (e) a period of loss of self-confidence on the path is normal, (f) a strong intention to leave the project is a positive indicator that learning is happening, and finally (g) I get a clear picture and realize that I learned what I wanted to learn.

Through the constructivist approach in my Directed Studies course, I learned how to better learn, critically think, and make connections between previous and new knowledge and experiences. Windschitl (2002) argues that new ways of presenting and applying the act of teaching may include, for example, "co-constructing knowledge with students, acting as conceptual change agents, mentoring apprentices through the zone of proximal development, and supporting a community of learners" (p. 135). The Constructivist approach helped me discover my own potential and find that I am a better learner through critical thinking, searching, analyzing, and making connections.

Professor Z's role as a facilitator was based on my own need to know what to learn rather than what I ought to be taught. My learning experience became more active, vital, creative, and engaging under Professor Z's guidance. Ross-Gordon (2002) argues that, "facilitators of learning see themselves as resources for learning, rather than as didactic instructors who have all the answers" (p. 28). Instead of teaching through direct questions and answers, Professor's Z role was to encourage me to discover the knowledge I wanted, and find answers to my own questions. Fisher & Churach (1998) argue that, "to understand is to discover, or reconstruct by rediscovery" (p. 1). A facilitator must create and establish a learning climate that is attuned to learning where students plan for their learning and apply their own model/approach to process a learning experience conducive to them (Ross-Gordon, 2002).

I critically analyzed my learning process during my Directed Studies course and agree that "what adults learn on their own initiative, they learn more deeply and permanently than what they learn by being taught" (Knowles as quoted in Chiang, 1998, p.4). The self-directed course

facilitated learning about my learning pattern, the factors that influence it, and the stages I pass through while acquiring new knowledge.

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