# Chapter 18

# Reflections of Heutagogy and Learner Agency

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*This chapter consists of some of the feedback I have collected from my students and other teachers over 30 years as an educator of their experience of agentic learning and heutagogy. The comments are not categorised in any particular way and are left for the reader to draw their own conclusions. In some respects what you will read are a comment on an educational life that has been focused on learner agency.*

> Experience is, for me, the highest authority. The touchstone of validity is my own experience. No other person's ideas, and none of my own ideas, are as authoritative as my experience (Rogers, 1961).

## Introduction

Back in 2000 Stewart Hase and I (Hase and Kenyon, 2000) coined the word Heutagogy when we were applying a radically different

approach to learning, specifically in the context of postgraduate education. Since then, the approach has attracted much favourable support, and some criticism, around the world. What is it that captures the imagination and enthusiasm of thousands of people? Is it the theory, its ramifications for learning, and its related implementation steps?

Perhaps the main reason why heutagogy is receiving so much positive attention is because it seems to work, as can be seen from the comments below and the evidence described in this book. Learners in many countries, in private and public organisations, in schools, at work, in vocational education and training and universities are enthusiastic about their learning experiences. They seem to learn at a higher level than could be achieved through traditional teaching methods, and many are inspired to take their learning to a higher level. It is the outcomes of the heutagogical approach that engender the fervour amongst learners and their facilitators. This chapter looks at a selection of the comments from the users of heutagogy. You can make your own judgement and your own analysis of their meaning.

## Learner Behaviour

Individual learners have individual reactions to being asked to learn through a different approach. Reactions will depend on the personality of the learner, the way they are introduced to heutagogical learning, their relationship with fellow learners, their relationship with their facilitators, and the culture in which their learning has so far been taught or experienced. Parts of the individual's personality that have an impact include their degree of self-confidence, and their willingness to accept change. What we have is a multi-variant situation which precludes ready analysis: everyone experiences life and learning differently. However, it is possible to find a handful of behaviours which are more prominent than others, and these are interesting.

Learner behaviour can be looked at through the lens of the learners' self-reporting, or through the eyes and ears of the people who are facilitating the learning. We will look at the work of facilitators in the next section. Now let's look at what learners have experienced.

Over a number of years, I have collected a multitude of responses from learners about their experience with heutagogy. These learners have included business students, medical and nursing students, high school students, international students and learners in government organisations.

## Initial reactions when introduced to heutagogy

> When we were told that we had to learn with a new method I felt insecure. I wanted to know more. I needed to know why we had to learn differently.

> The lecturer explained that this would be a chance for us to decide for ourselves what we were going to learn. That was exciting. Definitely a challenge, but exciting.

> As an international student I felt that I had paid to be taught so I wanted to be taught properly. I was angry but could not tell my parents about it.

> I had heard about this heuty (sic) stuff from a friend who did it the previous year. I was keen to give it my best shot.

> At first you think "this can't be right". After all, everyone has learned from teachers for many centuries. But then when you see other students getting enthusiastic you have to think that maybe it could be interesting.

> I didn't like being taught in high school. But then I was asked if I wanted to do a special program where I could

choose what to learn. I couldn't believe it was real, but it was. It was (expletive) unbelievable.

I didn't really believe what we were told. How could we be trusted to study? There had to be a point in the course where eventually the teacher took over and taught us. How wrong I was.

I am older than the average student so I have travelled and learned lots of different things. What the lecturer was suggesting was that we try something new, something different. I was up for that, thank goodness.

In nursing you learn that there are always new things to learn, new equipment, new drugs, new procedures and so on. This was not just something new, but really a new way of learning. I felt a bit hesitant, naturally, but it seemed like a good idea.

As when facing a change to the way in which we have previously acted or thought, beginning to learn through a heutagogical approach presents a challenge. The range of responses range from students wanting to dive in and start learning, through those that have some concerns, and ending with those who appear to be in denial about the new approach. What helps students surmount this perceived hurdle is a clear and detailed explanation of the process, and an assurance that there will be a positive outcome.

The behaviour of some teenage boys who had been classified as 'problem learners' changed markedly when I gave them the opportunity to take part in a special program based around heutagogy. They not only took on responsibility for their own learning (with a hint of guidance) but displayed positive changes in behaviour. They became less aggressive, more communicative, and greater co-operators with their fellow students. By the end of the program the teenagers had developed an attitude that they all 'belonged' to the

learning group, and that they could all learn from each other. There was also a decrease in the use of less desirable language.

## Mid-study reactions

> I'm loving this way of learning. You wouldn't believe how much there is to learn. Honestly, I spend more time than expected doing my research etc, but it's great.

> There are three of us in our group. We started with a meeting once a week, but now we meet all the time. It's kind of casual, but we talk all the time. There's so much to discover. We learn ourselves and we learn from each other.

> This is hard work. I have to ask my lecturer for help every week. I don't think I'm achieving what is needed. I have to try harder because I want good marks for graduation.

> I'm a bit up and down. There's so much to learn, and that's great. But, I have to do a heap of work, more than I've ever done before. And you have to keep going back to see how what you've learned fits in with your actual topic.

> It feels like something in my brain got switched on. I get this learning. Why haven't we done this before?

> When I talk to my teacher about what I've been doing, she's really cool. She doesn't tell me what to do. She kind of asks me questions, and so I get more ideas about how to learn.

> It's very satisfying that I 'own' my learning. Others help me, but basically, what I do and how I do it is my

responsibility. Actually, it feels great to be in charge of my life.

It's taken me quite a while to get with the program. Now I'm running to catch up. There's stacks to learn. I get a buzz from my work.

Honestly, I got the shakes when we first started, I was worried. Now I know what I'm doing. I'm learning fast and my mind is wide awake. I wake up ready to do more research, even if it's before breakfast.

At the start of the course, I had so many things I wanted to investigate I kept changing ideas. Eventually I realised that what I actually wanted was an area of learning which was significant not only to me right now but would be a long-lasting interest.

There are perhaps some differences here in the comments between those in small groups and those learning individually, but any differences are very probably due to personality differences rather than to the value gained from the learning. What is common is the learner's ability to undertake their own learning, and to focus on what is important to them. And to learn with enthusiasm because they have responsibility and ownership for their learning. Reaching this stage of confidence takes time, different periods for different individuals, but it is an essential step in getting learners to develop their own ways of learning and being able to assess what is important for their individual learning.

## Reactions on study completion

If I think about it, it's a bit mixed. It was a lot of hard work, but that was my decision. Apart from learning in depth about (subject), I have come to understand the

way I learn. The result of that is I want to keep learning, but I need to get a job to support that. I don't think I will ever stop learning.

I did a long presentation to the class. Everyone clapped including the lecturer and that was fabulous – they said I'd done a great job and they meant it. It took up a lot of my time, but that was the way I learned. I'm happy that I learned, that I did a good job and that people appreciated what I'd done.

I have the feeling that I have only just begun a new journey into learning. During the reviews my lecturer helped a lot, not by telling me what to do, but by listening to what I was learning, and then asking questions. I realised that I needed more practical information rather than just the theory, so I went to (law) court to learn more. I would like my children to learn like this if they get the opportunity.

It was not hard at first for me, I am a pretty shy nerd and used to doing things myself. But then I found that I had to constantly interact with other people, both students and with people from whom I wanted to gain information. The frequent exchanges of ideas and progress reviews gave me the confidence to question myself as well as others. This way of learning has opened me up, and I feel good about working with others and going on to greater learning.

This course showed me that learning for yourself is more beneficial, in my experience, than being taught what somebody says you have to learn. It was a long semester but I learnt much more than I'd learnt in any previous semester. Not just about my topic but about how I learn,

and to me that is the best part.

Running workshops for people in my organisation was a routine sort of thing and not much of a challenge. Now I can see how to get people really engaged by giving them the opportunity to explore what is important to them. It may take more effort to run the new workshops but I am sure it will be worth the effort in terms of participants' learning and workshop outcomes.

Although I had lots of difficulties with the studying I was learning much better than I thought. Nobody explains that your brain is getting bigger, you just learn and learn. It will not be a good thing to go back and have to experience the usual teaching.

The main themes in post-study comments are the effort expended during the learning, the positive attitude to the learning process, and the gaining of insights into self and how as an individual they learn. Most learners who initially expressed doubts and concerns about the learning process eventually conceded that the approach was successful and that they had benefitted from the learning. The double-loop learning which is an essential element of heutagogy is illustrated in the way learners reviewed their learning and refined their approach to their topics. Given human nature, it is perhaps inevitable that some learners may wish to return to a formal teaching/learning situation, albeit having had their eyes open to a wider world of learning. However, the awakened desire to continue learning is expressed by many learners, and we have evidence of learners gaining masters and doctoral level qualifications, as well as others branching into other fields of interest and achieving senior positions in private and government organisations.

# Facilitator Experiences

Teachers and lecturers who decide to use a heutagogical approach with their students usually need first to gain approval from the institution within which they work. There might be some hesitation due to an institution's unfamiliarity with heutagogy, its reluctance to allow learning to stray from a set syllabus, or the need to preserve the institution's standing by insisting on a fully formulated assessment system of student achievement. Hopefully, this picture is changing as more institutions around the world adopt heutagogy as part of their teaching/learning modus operandi. Please note that heutagogy is viewed as only a part of the learning system because there will always be disciplines or units where adopting a heutagogical approach may simply not be feasible or practicable.

At the start of a course the facilitator needs to explain in detail how the learning will be undertaken, what the learners' responsibilities are, and what role he or she will play in assisting the learners. Learners embarking on a new course can be expected to have many questions and concerns, and it is important for a successful outcome that facilitators respond to these before setting the learners free to go their own way. Back (2020) describes the importance of this initial stage in his work with adult students in Israel.

During the learning program the facilitator will check progress with individuals or groups of students. The purpose of these reviews is to listen to learner's ideas and their planned progress, to provide encouragement, to ask provocative questions perhaps, but to avoid giving direct guidance. While face to face reviews are probably preferable, since the advent of MOOCs online learning has become increasingly common. Indeed, the worldwide impact of Covid19 resulted in online learning and the holding of learning reviews becoming the only choice for learners and facilitators. The situation may change once a vaccine has had universal application, but it seems likely that online learning and online interactions between facilitators

and learners will continue to be a significant element to the learning provided by institutions. Such online activity is the only option for distance learners, and there will continue to be many thousands of them around the world.

Assessment of learning may give rise to discussion. Can learners really be allowed to assess their performance; shouldn't the facilitator make the assessments? Moreover, can the assessment method be stipulated (some form of exam?), or should learners be able to choose their preferred method of assessment. Much will depend on the rules of the institution, but the most common methods seem to be a written paper (assessed by fellow learners and/or the facilitator), a presentation to a group (similarly assessed), or something innovative such as a play, a video, or a class workshop.

The role of a facilitator requires people who are not welded to the belief that they have spent years learning, that they perhaps have a status within society, and that their job is to pass on that learning to students. Facilitators, like their learners, need to be flexible both in their approach to providing courses and in the ways they assist and encourage their learners. And if their approach is successful, they too can expect to also be on the path of continual learning.

# Conclusion

Obtaining feedback from learners about their individual heutagogical learning experience is a critical factor in our being able to reflect on learning experiences; it is also essential information for learning facilitators who wish to provide appropriate guidance to the learners. This feedback is best obtained periodically from learners so that the approach can be adjusted to ensure that it is truly learner centred.

While this chapter has provided only a small sample of feedback it is meant to encourage the use of heutagogy and other methods that promote learner agency. It remains for other researchers to conduct
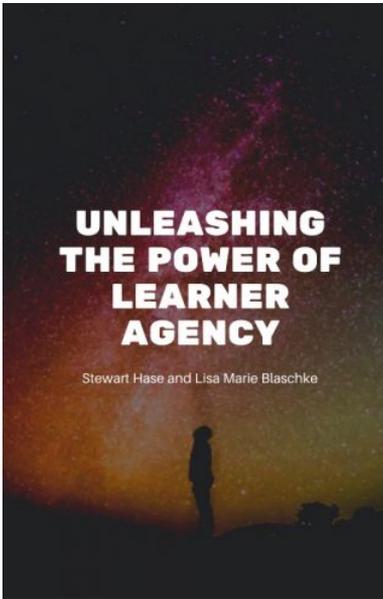
large scale studies to thoroughly evaluate heutagogy and provide evidence for its principles and practices.

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