Chapter 12

Learner Agency and Architectures of Participation

Nigel Ecclesfield, Vijaya Bhanu Kote, & Philip Ecclesfield

Participation | architectures of participation | early years education

Many writers have described and explored heutagogy in terms of discrete problematics such as the adoption of Web 2.0 technologies in lifelong learning, distance education (e.g. Blaschke, 2012) or from within higher education frameworks (Cochrane, 2020). This chapter explores the work of two teachers and their early years' learners who engage in the practices of heutagogy or self-determined learning, as described by Hase and Kenyon (2013) and explored in Blaschke, Kenyon and Hase (2014). The accounts of these two teachers demonstrate that self-determined learning should not be assumed to be the province of higher education (Ecclesfield & Garnett, 2020), nor can it be absorbed in practices such as instructional technologies. Rather, Vijaya Bhanu Kote and Philip Ecclesfield work in primary and early years settings with a focus on learning and learner agency. A short afterword looks at the issues surrounding their work and heutagogy in practice across all forms of educational provision.

Introduction

This chapter will present two accounts of work based in heutagogical principles from primary education in India and pre-school education in England as a way of illustrating self-determined learning from early stages of life, not as something to be activated later in life. These self-described accounts demonstrate ways in which teachers/practitioners can co-create architectures of participation that enable learner agency and encourage learners to contribute to the learning of their peers and teachers, promoting confidence and collaboration (Ecclesfield & Garnett, 2020).

Vijaya

I started teaching in 1998 in a Government School in a very remote village in Visakhapatnam District. Seeing the building, which was in a condition of dilapidation, seeing the needs of the villagers and the lack of awareness about education in village elders as well as in youngsters and children, I realised that it would be inappropriate to reveal my digital and wider educational aspirations at that time. I would just cook my dreams when I hit my bed and hope they would come true one day.

The early steps I was able to take resulted in improving the achievements and engagement of the learners and I could then start to instigate an awareness of learning in the village through a few limited activities. I organized meetings with parents and trained them how to help their kids learn on their own at home. I framed learning activities and asked students to deal with them individually and come up with their results. I started giving encouragement and improvement

gifts every month. These steps brought about improved engagement in the children, as well as helping to initiate family, home-based activities. Parents and the community started reaching out to me for suggestions regarding their children's education, as well as their own social and family concerns and their own learning needs.

I kept reading about how educational technology was developing around the world, and this reinforced my intention to use digital technologies with my learners and the wider community. In 2008, I finally purchased a desktop computer by saving money every month for two years from the meagre salary I received at that time. Working with the computer meant that the first of my dreams had come true and all my pre-cooked dreams of ten years returned with a vengeance. Our school did not have electricity connected in 2009, and I begged our Head Teacher to apply for it, as I was learning to use the computer at home and could see how an electricity supply would be essential to my projects.

We did manage to set up wired Internet connection from India's national ISP service, (BSNL) at our house, which was very close to the school building. I then started to make use of the Internet connection to search for related lesson ideas and materials for the syllabus at our primary school. It was a time of blind passion to learn for myself and to implement what I learned in my school and with local community. Maybe I was just like the kids "discovered" by Sri Sugata Mitra in his "Hole in the Wall" studies?

I managed to persuade my Head Teacher to let me work with children at home every Saturday. Not that he needed much persuasion as he was fully committed to the development of pupils, as it was a very remote and under-developed area we worked in and he accepted my rationale for this "extra-curricular work".

In the next stage, I promised to save money again and purchased a laptop, which I could carry to school to teach students. Thus, I would work at night after everyone slept at home, using my desktop to learn things, download videos and images from internet, save them on CD's, prepare documents, and try preparing presentations and so on. Each Saturday, I would bring my class kids home, get them to sit in front of the 19-inch screen, set up speakers, and play the lessons, and I kept welling up like a fountain whenever they clapped with joy at enjoying the new method of learning with digital technologies. This was the time I started to be aware of the idea of heutagogy, the third "gogy" of learning and teaching philosophy and practice.

A year passed, it was now 2010 and promises were kept. Our Head Teacher succeeded in getting electricity connected for the school, and I succeeded in buying a laptop. This was the revolution in a Harijanawada school, which was considered to be the most backward in our small town. Parents were now enthusiastic to know about what was happening at school.

Watching my posts on Facebook, my soulmate Madhuri Jonnalagadda offered to purchase a digital projector for the classroom. This was in 2013, and the first ever-digital classroom in a Government Primary school in Andhra Pradesh had started. It developed further when one of my friends, Madhav Reddy donated his desktop to the school. Students learned how to use the computer and by the end of the academic year, they word-processed their own notes and prepared presentations for their lessons. The use of a digital classroom enhanced the developments of learners, which included reductions in pupil absences, increased enthusiasm in class and affection for school in children and their parents. At the same time, my colleagues were engaged with their pupils in learning about heutagogy and applying their learning across the curriculum. This influenced my later decision to provide training in heutagogy only to teachers, with their pupils serving as learners to help teachers to adopt heutagogy.

The operation of the Digital classroom supplemented my experiments in heutagogical learning and started producing marvellous results. In 2015, the class V batch students (aged 10 years) achieved best results in our state assessment and the book written by 13 students named "Letha Akasalu (Tender Skies)" was released in 2015 in the Book Festival in Visakhapatnam. This book was written by the students to show how they have learned through heutagogy and the digital classroom.

I studied heutagogy more and tried to localize it and framed a method that would suit the environment I was working in. This gave good results. The same was suggested to me by Fred Garnett when I was authoring a module on heutagogy,

where I have emphasized localizing heutagogic methods and implementing them according to the circumstances of the environment the teacher works in.

I was transferred to another school in November 2015, and I saw the same situation again at a school whose circumstances were worse than that described above. We began working to change the scenario again, starting from scratch. The school had no electricity connection and no support infrastructure, and this school was in a very bad position in relation to all measures of learner engagement and achievement. Working together as staff, with well-wishers, friends, parents and the community, we renovated the school, had electricity connected, established two digital classrooms, worked hard to improve the infrastructure, and make the transformations needed to support learning. It was truly a community Architecture of Participation! (See Ecclesfield and Garnett, 2020).

My experiments were all the time encouraged and supported by my mentor Sri. Devineni Madhusudhana Rao. He is an educationist who supports poor students and schools with his funding, donating lot of books for educational purposes and keeps supporting teachers who work for the betterment of the students. He has supported me by providing resources, encouraging me to talk about heutagogy in the wider community and working with learners, while enabling me to work in schools where I trained both pupils and teachers together in heutagogy. It is a principle of my work that teachers are only trained with their pupils in shared events, as I believe that teachers learn most effectively with their pupils when engaged in self-determined learning as a group member and not divorced from their pupils as in traditional staff training.

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My work since 2017 has taken on both a national and international turn through contributions to conferences in Finland, India and New Zealand and in collaborative work within India, and with the UK developing the Heutagogy App with “Happy adda Studios” and working with Fred Garnett on “Wiki Quals” in Heutagogy for Teachers. We now have a community of teachers who are working on heutagogy and their projects will be internationally showcased in “Heutagogy for Teachers” as WikiQuals “sqolars” on 26th September 2020 (World Heutagogy Day 2020).

At school, we have now purchased new tablets and a laptop so that both children and their teacher can work on different tasks during a lesson and enhance self-determined learning technically as well as directly: face to face communication and the implementation of digital technology for learning, going hand in hand.

Postcripts-September 2020

In March 2020, we had to close our schools, due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. This was a great disappointment as the Heutagogy App was being run every day. March and April were to be the most crucial months for its use, but heutagogy, self-determined learning, saved my kids from isolation and the other negative effects of this terrible virus. Ours is a backward area, and none of the homes had computers or any digital equipment, but more than half of the parents had android mobile phones. This was a boon for us. Thus, we started using our school parents WhatsApp group (that was created for administrative and communication purposes at the start of 2020) for educational purposes now.

As soon as lockdown was imposed, we started a teaching bridge course through the WhatsApp group. I make regular video calls to students and their parents and talk to them about their progress on their ‘home’ work and help deal with their doubts. Students do the work and send the photographs of the work through WhatsApp. This has been a good experience, and I have discovered that I am more emotionally connected to the parents as well as students during COVID-19 lockdown.

This local experiment has worked well and was covered by local newspapers and BBC Telugu at New Delhi. The other students who did not have android mobiles and could not yet participate fully were not forgotten, but were given more general work through their more basic mobile phones. However, this cannot be personalized in the same ways we manage with the Android phones. Now, the government of Andhra Pradesh and the Education Department are providing lessons through Doordarshan (TV) every day. Students watch lessons on TV and do the work in their books provided. It has now become easy for us to guide them through our WhatsApp and mobile phone links. COVID-19 proved that heutagogy is the best method to provide “lockdown” learning when such a crisis occurs. Students are doing their work on their own.

While managing to support learning in a crisis, we are not standing still! We have now submitted a proposal to the commissioner of school Education, Andhra Pradesh to sanction a “Heutagogy School” as a pilot project and awaiting approval with our fingers crossed.

Phillip Ecclesfield: Self-determined learning in a pre-school setting

The key issues in embedding self-determined learning in the early years are, broadly, threefold. Firstly, educators are primarily introduced to teacher-led approaches and frameworks of learning and teaching that see early learners as needing to learn through direct educator input; secondly, the life experiences of learners are relatively limited (due to their young age, among other factors), although the capacity for learning in areas such as both gross and fine motor skills and vocabulary acquisition is great; and thirdly, for considerations of physical safety ensuring the protection of each early learner in potentially risky learning and play environments such as the setting described below, where self-determined learning meets limits that are imposed by the practitioner/ facilitator in the first instance, and insurers, inspection agencies and other invested bodies in the second instance.

It is worth noting, however, that developments in education from Scandinavian countries such as Denmark, and the rise of the *uderskole* (Bentsen & Jensen, 2012), outdoor classroom, methodology is filtering through to educators in the United Kingdom alongside such local developments as “forest schools”. Closer to home, the Scottish Government has also been pioneering outdoor learning approaches through their “Curriculum of Excellence through Outdoor Learning” (Learning & Teaching Scotland, 2010).

My context

Outdoor Owls operates in the early years sector (for children aged from 2-5 years). The learning environment that is used (for the majority of the day) is one acre (0.25 hectares) of open land on the edge of the River Thames. It contains a mixture of woodland and grassland, which early years learners can flow between freely, as they follow their interests during the day. Learners are supported by their educators/practitioners, who operate in a ratio of one member of staff to four children. This offers freedom of movement while ensuring learner safety and providing opportunities for engagement around, for example, observed and found flora and fauna.

We have some semi-permanent structures by way of a tipi and shed which are both specific in function during certain times of the day (for sleeping and for nappy changing), but also transient at other times depending on the requirements of the learners.

Our local community is that of South West London (Richmond on Thames). We have begun to create close ties with our local communities within walking distance of our learning environment, for purposes of providing new and varied learner experiences. These include care homes, libraries and historical buildings that provide engaging contexts for our learners within their home locale, as this broadens their knowledge and depth of understanding of the immediate world and community around them.

Our educators support the learning and development of the children in our care using child-led, play-based approaches to learning combined with tracking of wellbeing and involvement. In addition, each child's learning and development is monitored according to the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) curriculum which governs the operation of approved early years providers in England. A central part of this work is building relationships with learners, parents and other family members evidenced by the regular communication and sharing of video diaries between our practitioners and learners, with their families during the closure of our nursery during the COVID-19 lockdown.

'Disguised' under the term 'child-led', our approach to supporting the learning of the children at our setting is heutagogic. By this I mean that primarily the learning is from the learners themselves through their play, interactions with their peers and the educators that support them, and the engagement that they have with new experiences available to them, that they can choose to engage with at any level they desire, including no engagement at all. This heutagogic approach to learning in the early years has been present for a considerable time through various forms and theories: historically with Friedrich Froebel, the development of the Reggio Emilia approach, through to Dr David Whitebread, the first Professor of Play, and the work of the Lego Foundation.

Although heutagogy has been conceptualised in the early years, it has been directed at the self-determination of the educators, rather than that of the learners that they seek to support. The manner in which early years learners self-determine their own learning and development, however, is fundamental to the development of heutagogy because it shows the earliest signs of educator-learner interaction that promotes the learner's ability to learn for themselves, and engaging methods of learning. How this happens is through a combination of enabling environments and facilitation of play towards the advancement of learners' conceptualisation or practice of emergent skills.

Methods of planning retrospectively, provide a wider and deeper collaborative process between the learners and the educator. Retrospective planning involves the recording of the self-determined learning and play that the learners engage in each day and using that to organise resources and plan for activities that provide a continuity of learning as well as building next steps for the development of learning from the recorded activity. By engaging learners through play in this way, their learning progresses rapidly because they are interested in the activities they are taking part in (if they don't like it any longer then they find something new to do) while being nurtured with questioning and new ideas by the educators facilitating the play. As Vygotsky (1978) points out, a child's play allows them to exhibit behaviour beyond the expectations of their chronological age, which further facilitation can then support to bring on. Mitra (2019) makes similar points in demonstrating how in Self-Organised Learning Environments (SOLEs), children of school age can show attainment beyond their chronological ages.

As I am responsible for practitioner training, I work with my colleagues to promote their learning, adopting the same principles I adopt with learners. This involves identifying activities to meet their interests and aspirations, while taking account of the contextual issues framing their learning, which may include formal qualifications in early years education and statutory training in health and safety and first aid. In these qualifications, the principal issue for me is the relevance of the planned learning activities to the participants' needs and their congruence with the qualifications being pursued, or to the demonstration of skills required by statutory or licensing agencies. Within such contextual framing of training, it is essential that participants are enabled to negotiate learning activities and follow their own learning trajectories to allow them to experience self-determined learning for themselves. In addition they can appreciate the difference between the pedagogic approaches traditionally employed in early years and heutagogy with its promotion and development of learner agency in collaborative environments.

Conclusion

As will be apparent from these short accounts, both Vijaya and Phil are able to visualise their practice as learner-centric, while operating within formalised systems of assessment and accreditation that are intended to ensure attainment and maintain children's safety and achievement within their national educational systems. It is also apparent that their work exists in liminal spaces, both cognitively and geographically, that is, on Saturdays at Vijaya's house or in the open spaces where Phil and his colleagues work with children. Both Vijaya and Phil can be characterised as craft

professionals who are continuously developing their skills and practices through their engagement with learners and the wider community and, also, with organisational ecologies of learning and teaching. Their work is helping to challenge existing conventions that view learners and learning as incorporated in formal structures such as school buildings and the hierarchies that operate them and, also, state or national curricula which are subject to political direction and control. This brings us to architectures of participation, which can be seen as immanent in the accounts above and which we (the authors) will explore through our future collaborations.

Since 2007, both Fred Garnett and Nigel Ecclesfield have been developing evolving definitions of "architectures of participation" in their blog (http://architectureofparticipation.wordpress.com) and in a number of papers and other media. This is in contrast to O'Reilly's (2005) original use of the term when defining Web 2.0, which sees participants in terms of their provision of data for use by service providers in developing services in a business context such as Facebook. The most recent formulation of the term by Ecclesfield and Garnett (2020) can be found in their book and have published a detailed comparison of their ideas with O'Reilly's original conception in the Architecture of Participation Blog (http://architectureofparticipation.wordpress.com).

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