Assignment 2 – Theory of Practice

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The purpose of this paper is to reflect and synthesize learning theories covered in MDDE 603 and correlate them with my current teaching perspectives. As a result of this process, I have established instructional guidelines to incorporate into my teaching-learning environment. Included in this paper is a description of my current teaching and learning situation, eight personal learning principles that outline how people learn and how instruction should take place in a distance delivery setting, concluding with a personal commentary of personal reflection. Each of the eight learning principles, outlined in this paper, includes a definition, an explanation of how the learning principle applies to teaching-learning context, and practical uses of the learning principle within a distance education environment.

**Background**

Currently, I instruct courses for the School of Business at Okanagan College. My instructing background includes a variety of office administration and computer software courses offered through the Office Administration certificate, BC Campus, and the Bachelor of Business programs in both face-to-face and online learning environments. For the purpose of this paper I have chosen to focus on an online course called Job Search. This 30-hour course is one of many courses within the Office Administration certificate program that is offered online to adult learners within British Columbia. This course has been designed using the learning management system Desire2Learn. Throughout each learning principle I will be referencing this course by indicating how I currently apply specific learning principles or how I intend to apply specific learning principles.

**Learning Principles**

Throughout this course many significant qualities of learning and motivational theories have been examined. As part of the learning process I have amalgamated various learning and motivational theories, combining both Social Cognitive Theory and Constructivist Theory into a personal guideline of the Theory of Practice; then examined these theories and applied them to my own teaching–learning context. Each of the eight learning principles includes a detailed description, its importance, how students learn, how instruction takes place, relevant theories, and the justification of applying the theory to my own teaching –learning setting. In addition each principle includes strategies and approaches that will be incorporated into my teaching to achieve desired outcomes.

**Learning Principle One: Learning flourishes when the instructor is responsive and supportive.**

Teacher responsiveness and support within a DE (distance education) setting are relevant to both the cognitive and constructivism learning theory. Teacher interactions within these two theories vary in areas such as: asking questions, providing feedback, administering rewards and punishments, praise and criticism, and responses to student questions. Although techniques may differ between these two theories; the characteristics of an effective instructor prevail in both circumstances. These characteristics include: an academically focused teacher; one who selects variety of activities; uses group instructions; uses active teaching skills; communicates clearly; have high expectations, and are enthusiastic. A teacher’s role is to support the intellectual and personal growth and development of the learning community by being responsive to the learner’s needs. This responsive and supportive role demonstrates a commitment to the class which indirectly encourages the learners to be responsive to the group and to the instructor, while providing guidance to learners for respecting each other by creating an atmosphere where learners feel comfortable giving and receiving feedback. Possessing these characteristics and being responsive and supportive fosters learning as cited by Tickner (1999), “The humanity of the instructor is the vital ingredient in promoting learning” (p. 40).

Responsiveness and support resonates with my teaching-learning style. As an office administration online instructor of adult learners; I feel that this learning principle is imperative to ensure that students are supported in their learning. Addressing students concerns and acknowledging their success and contributions develop a positive teacher-learner relationship and learner- learner relationship. Instructor support can be provided through various forms of communicating such as; posing questions, participating in discussions forums, or providing feedback on a daily basis. This constant teacher participation signifies a sense of instructor’s presence. I have found that frequent instructor interaction and support, encourages students to contribute and interact within the online environment which promotes enhanced learning.

**Learning Principle Two: Learning proceeds more effectively when the leaner is active and engaged in the learning process.**

Cognitive and constructivist theory both recognize the importance of engaging the leaner. Each identifies cooperative learning as having a significant impact on learning by building the learning community, resulting in a balanced learning environment. Cooperative learning can appear in many different forms. Engaging activities include group work, class discussion, peer tutoring, and cooperative learning. Cooperative learning encourages learners to engage in dialogue with other students and the teacher, enables learners to internalize the course standards by studying and applying the standards to others’ work, and allows feedback from peers. Alternatively, there can be disadvantages of cooperative learning, it can influence personal feelings; peers may have difficulty in offering advice or direction; and peers might focus on irrelevant aspects.

Additional methods to engage learners, as suggested by cognitive theorists, is to provide problems, cases or tasks that are realistic; build activities that challenge the learners; vary the format of lessons; add multimedia; and incorporate stimulating games and other interactive materials.

In developing this learning principle I have realized that many of the office administration online courses are textbook driven. All learning materials are taken from textbooks, making for a very structured course and limited use of engaging activities. Although the present learning materials are relevant; the meaningfulness is lacking. To exemplify this learning principle I reflect on a current online course called Job Search, which is offered to office administration students. Currently, all evaluated work is individual based and does not support any type of group work. Incorporating group work into developing effective cover letters and resumes would achieve the desired learning outcome of resume building and reflect this learning principle. This principle also suggests that varying course materials can be effective in the learning process. The Job Search course includes an interview skills module, again being textbook reliant, this module lacks in its courseware. Recently, I have researched a variety of online interview skills resources and have discovered many resources applicable to interview skills. Adding multimedia to support this module will provide meaningful and practical applications that convey effective interview skills resulting in engaging and active learning.

**Learning Principle Three: Learning is facilitated when the learner can connect new knowledge with previously learned knowledge and experiences.**

Establishing a connection between previously learned knowledge and experiences and new knowledge is a principle that both cognitive and constructivist theorists identify as a method that fosters effective learning. Constructivist theorists believe that learners formulate new ideas based upon previous or current knowledge. Using the old knowledge as the basis, learners then formulate new hypotheses and make decisions, as cited by Schunk (2008), “One perspective on constructivism is Endogenous. Knowledge derives from previously acquired knowledge and not directly from environmental interactions” (p.238). Likewise Schunk, (2008) observes that “Cognitive theory suggests that elaboration is a form of encoding information. Elaboration is the process of expanding upon new information by adding it or linking it to what one knows” (p. 154). Meaningful ways to incorporate establish connections are to create connections before material is taught.

* Use pre-exposure of the material to “plan the seed” far in advance.
* Post a schedule in advance.
* Mention continual references to topics that you will get to in a few weeks.
* Ask learners to research one topic that also requires they get exposure to another.
* Show a video before starting a new topic to connect it to existing knowledge.
* Use work association to trigger old and new thoughts.
* Use students ideas and contributions during the lesson.
* Use elaborative rehearsal or Mnemonic devices.

An effective approach to incorporating this learning principle into the Job Search course can be accomplished in many ways. One method would be to provide activities that surround the concept of “Knowing Yourself,” these activities would identify abilities, skills, personality, and work values. The outcome of these activities can be effective in connecting old knowledge to new knowledge throughout the course by means of “planting the seed”. These abilities, skills, personality traits, and work values can be recalled when creating resumes and when learning useful interview techniques. In addition, emphasizing and recalling the “Knowing Yourself” activities can contribute to successful encoding. Another method of linking new knowledge to old knowledge is through group discussions. This is an effective way to introduce or suggest new material. For instance, employability skills are a key concept in Job Search; therefore, it is critical to discuss the importance of employability skills early in the course, later students can rely on old knowledge to recall employability skills when building a resume.

**Learning Principle Four: Learning influences the ability to transfer skills.**

The ability to transfer learned skills is the ultimate goal of the learning process in office administration. The transferability of using ideas, information, concepts, and new processes in new situations demonstrates subject mastery. Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, (1999) cite, “Measure of transfer play an important role in assessing the quality of people’s learning experiences” (p.51).

Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999 list the characteristics of learning and transfer are:

* Initial learning is necessary for transfer, and considerable amount is known about the kinds of learning experiences that support transfer.
* Knowledge that is overly contextualized can reduce transfer; abstract representations of knowledge can promote transfer,
* Transfer is best viewed as an active, dynamic process rather than a passive end-product of a particular set of learning experiences.
* All new learning involved transfer based on previous learning, and this fact has important implications for the design of instruction that helps students learn. (p.53)

As part of the Interview module of Job Search, students are required to prepare for an interview. This preparation includes identifying traits that an employer seeks, negotiating salary, and answering mock interview questions. An effective activity to incorporate this learning principle into this module is to have the students act as the interviewer. By reflecting on previous modules the students would transfer this knowledge and create relevant interview questions and research tips on how to conduct an interview. These activities promote the transferability of using ideas, information, and concepts learned from the interviewer perspective and apply the concepts to an interviewee perspective.

**Learning Principle Five: Learning is enhanced when teachers are experts in their subject matter.**

An expert is defined by Schunk ( 2008) as, “an individual who has attained a high competence level in problem solving” (p.206). Alternatively, a novice is defined by Schunk ( 2008) as an individual who has some familiarity but generally performs poorly; a novice is not one who has no knowledge of problem solving” (p.206).

Studies indicate that teachers who are experts in their subject matter are far more effective than novices. Experts to provide insights key principles and importance of experts’ knowledge as outlined by Bransford, Brown, & Cocking (1999):

1. Experts notice features and meaningful patterns of information that are not noticed by novices.
2. Experts have acquired a great deal of content knowledge that is organized in ways that reflect a deep understanding of their subject matter.
3. Experts’ knowledge cannot be reduced to sets of isolated facts or propositions, but instead, reflects contexts of applicability; that is, the knowledge is “conditionalized” on a set of circumstances.
4. Experts are able to flexibly retrieve important aspects of their knowledge with little attentional effort.
5. Though experts know their disciplines thoroughly, this does not guarantee that they are able to teach others.
6. Experts have varying levels of flexibility in their approach to new situations. (p.31)

The cognitive learning process identifies expert’s qualities as being organized and are able to identify and group problems and relate them existing knowledge to obtain solutions. Often experts have the ability to easily “chuck” information into small meaningful sections without analyzing the material. Much of expert’s knowledge is based on experiences; therefore, when students are encoding new knowledge the experts can provide adequate elaborations or schemata to facilitate storage. Incorporating expert instruction into an online classroom contributes to student learning. Experts monitor performances to ensure the new knowledge is being encoded, they engage students in problem solving activities, contribute examples and ideas to foster discover learning, and easily adapt or tailor instructions so specific learner needs.

The importance of this learning principle became apparent after reading course material on expert vs. novice. My role as an interviewer at Okanagan College is a common occurrence. Over the past ten years I have been involved in many interview panels and recruitment committees. I have recently recognized the importance of my involvement with recruiting; it has gained me the experience and knowledge to effectively facilitate job search skills. As a result, this experience has enabled me to guide and support students in identifying personal skills, creating professional resumes, writing cover letters, addressing the importance of networking, developing effective interview skills, and identifying job search strategies. Expertise in job search is vital in facilitating the Job Search course.

**Learning Principle Six: Learning environment climate important for accelerated learning.**

Positive climate setting establishes an affective learning environment where students feel they can succeed. The onset of a course is when students are anxious and have questions regarding the purpose of the course. Often questions posed include: “How will this course address my particular needs?” or “Why do I have to take this”, or “Why am I here?” Students will often question their expectations such as, what will be expected of me and will the instructor understand and accept my situation. In addition, students will question their role as well as the role of the instructor. Lastly, students may be curious of the content and questionwhat is being studied or learned in the course, will there be time to practice or apply what is learned, or will I be able to perform as well as others. As an instructor, answering all of these questions is the beginning of establishing of a positive learning environment.

Recent insights into this learning principle have influenced my actions to ensure that on the first day of a course, a posting that states and legitimizes the purpose of the course is delivered to the students. This purpose statement will include a detail description of skills that the students will gain from the course, a clear statement of expectations for workload and schedule, a schedule of topics and readings, expectations that relate to attendance, participation, standards of work and ways of working. Throughout each module and activity the roles and expectations of both the student and the instructor will be communicated. I will also ensure that the content is connected to student’s needs, that expectations and roles ensure a clear sense of purpose, and possess a commitment to the instructional process. This communication process will establish a climate that promotes learning.

**Learning Principle Seven: Learning is constructed by metacognition.**

Metacognition as defined by Schunk (2008) is, “Metacognitive awareness where individuals monitor, direct, and regulate actions toward goals (Paris & Paris, 2001)” (p.217). Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, (1999) indicate that, “Students should learn to monitor and regulate their own understanding in ways that allow them to keep learning adaptive expertise” (p.78). Both the cognitive and constructivist theory agree on a form of self-regulation where learners are aware of their personal capabilities, interest, and attitudes. Often students are unwilling to take the time and effort to engage in metacognitive activities, students may not realize that these activities can improve their academic performance. Teachers can foster student metacognition by encouraging students to apply study strategies to reach a goal.

As mentioned Job Search consists of text heavy materials; therefore, encouraging the students to adopt an organized reading pattern will support an effective study strategy. As a method of integrating metacognition into Job Search I will suggest that students read course materials by following these steps: 1) Read the introduction and summary of the chapter, 2) Read each heading to get a feel of the chapter, 3) Read the chapter, and 4) Answer questions provided on the study guide. Incorporating these logical steps will help provide meaning to course readings and foster effective reading habits. In addition to providing students with effective reading techniques, I will introduce the concept of chunking as a study strategy. This concept reduces overload and supports effective study habits. Guiding and providing students with effective study techniques improves a student’s megacongivtive ability.

**Learning Principle Eight: Learning is driven by motivation.**

Both cognitive and constructivism theorists consider motivation as being a key aspect to an effective teaching-learning process. Wlodkowski & Ginsberg (1995) support this by citing,

“It is part of human nature to be curious, to be active, to initial thought and behaviour, to make meaning from experience, and to be effective at what we value. These primary sources of motivation reside in all of us, across all cultures. When students can see thaw hay they are learning makes sense and is important their motivation emerges” (p.119).

There are two types of motivation - intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation refers to motivation that is driven by an interest or enjoyment and exists within the individual. Extrinsic comes from outside of the individual. The Teaching Guide for Graduate Student Instructors (2010) explains this as

Cognitive theorists believe that cognitive motivation is essentially intrinsic--based on the learner's internal drive. Conversely, constructivists view motivation as both extrinsic and intrinsic. Because learning is essentially a social phenomenon, learners are partially motivated by rewards provided by the knowledge community. However, because knowledge is actively constructed by the learner, learning also depends to a significant extent on the learner's internal drive to understand and promote the learning process (p1).

Motivational strategies that I have developed for this learning principle focus on attention. As cited by Schunk (2008), “Attention is a necessary prerequisite of learning” (p. 139). Gaining and maintaining student’s attention is imperative. Incorporating attention getters into each module will awaken the student’s interest as suggested by Schunk (2008), “Introduce lessons with stimulating material. Appeal to students’ interests at other times during the lesson” (p.140). To exemplify this concept I will adjust the current module “Knowing Yourself” to begin with a pre-assessment rating quiz. Beginning the first module with this activity will motivate the student to determine if they really “know themself”. Furthermore, Schunk (2008) suggests to “use different materials as teaching aids” (p. 140), maintaining student attention. The textbook heavy materials in Job Search leads to attention loss, lack of motivation, and decrease memory retention amoung students. To avoid these symptoms, I will utilize a web-authoring tool (Softchalk) to provide students with interactive materials such as learning games, matching games, crosswords, six question types, and pop-up text annotations to define terminology and module concepts. Implementing instructional design strategies that gain and maintain student’s attention significantly contribute to the storage and retrieval process learning.

**Commentary**

Developing personal learning principles designed around distance education has established new insights, identified key areas in need of improvement, as well as supported and reinforced concepts that I actively employ.

This activity has sparked my creative juices and has motivated me to redesign the current learning- teaching environment to include my newly developed personal learning strategies. I have identified areas within Job Search that lack student engagement. To address this issue I will incorporate cooperative group work, multimedia and other tools that encourage student participation. The insight of connecting knowledge with previously learned knowledge is significant to me. Although I recognized the important of the correlation between concepts I was ignorant of the enormous impact it has on memory retention. As outlined in the learning theory, I have conceptualized activities that reflect this theory in my teaching. The ability to transfer is very important in office administration. Much of our work is applied; therefore, the ability to transfer skills is crucial and sometimes difficult in the online environment. This is where creativity sets in. I have only identified a few methods to address this theory. I recognize that this area is weak; therefore, developing methods that facilitate the transferability of skills needs much more consideration.

Throughout this assignment I have commended myself for adhering to many of the learning principles by playing an active role in supporting, responding and establishing a positive climate for online learning. I actively participate in discussions by offering expertise in areas of concern. I often find myself developing a comfortable rapport with students (which ties in nicely with my TPI scores) by constant communication which denotes a sense of presence.

This paper has motivated me to consider and identify many learning theories that apply to my teaching learning environment. As my instruction ends for the summer, I look forward to September, when I can begin incorporating my newly developed learning principles into the system design of online courses.

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