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Theory of Practice in Education

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This short paper will illustrate the author’s theory of educational practice in consideration of the learning theories studied to date. It will encompass an overall view of education encapsulated in three main principles which are grounded in pedagogical theory and established through personal experience teaching and being taught in various environments.

Learning Principle #1: Learning is a fluid process, building upon previous and ongoing experiences.

Learning preferences are shaped from the learning experiences that we’ve had previously and it can be argued that they begin to form from a very early age – even before formal schooling begins. An individual’s relationship with teaching and learning develops as one progresses through elementary school and into high school, through their (arguably) most formative years. As students enter post secondary education, the framing of what education “is” plays a vital role in how they approach learning. The variety of educational practices between schools as well as the many alternative options such as language-specific, private or Montessori programs, results in students entering post secondary education with a wide range of experiences.

Constructivist learning theory states that learners construct their own understanding and knowledge through experience and through reflection on that experience. (Schunk, 2012) Learning is a fluid process, where an individual constructs meaning through their past experiences and by reflecting on those experiences, hope to deepen that learning.

Learning is also experienced differently based on the experiences taking place concurrently. At the Canadian Memorial Chiropractic College (CMCC) we provide many different experiential learning opportunities to help ensure that students are contextualizing the information which they are learning. Examples would be simulated experiences in labs, assessments involving standardized patients and observership requirements in teaching and chiropractic clinics. Learning Principle #1 also considers other factors in a student’s life which will affect their ability to learn, as well as their relationship with the learning process. Over the years we have had students who have gone through romantic break-ups, or who have experienced additional stressors such as personal health issues or the loss of a loved one. Learning cannot be looked at in a silo without consideration of these important other factors in a student’s life.

Learning Principle #2: Learning must be done voluntarily, and at the learner’s own pace.

Learning principle #2 builds on the experiential nature of learning captured in principle 1. Although early learning traditionally must be pushed upon young learners through the elementary years, the most effective learning occurs when a student chooses to learn something they have interest in. Individualized learning programs such as the Khan Academy appreciate the fact that learners go at different paces, and structure their curriculum accordingly. They also recognize that mastery can occur at different times, so their program is self-paced and step-wise. (Thompson, 2011) The success of gamification in education builds on engagement principles to show that when students choose to learn, they do so at a deeper and more successful level. (Huang and Soman, 2013)

Voluntary learning starts in a learner’s infancy, but also predominates once a learner’s “formal” education process concludes. Adult learning theory, pioneered by Malcolm Knowles, includes the preference for voluntary learning as one of the key characteristics of adults. (Knowles, 1985). Having choice in learning is also a preference of adult learners, and thus adult learners in particular learn best when learning is voluntary.

At CMCC all classes are mandatory and are taken in a specified order, but there is some choice woven into the curriculum for assignments and areas of focus. Selection of clinical placements in 4th year and supervisory clinicians also builds on this desire to have choice in their education. The decision to apply and embark on the Doctor of Chiropractic degree program is done so voluntarily, after completion of an undergraduate degree. Many of our most successful students apply to CMCC only after taking some time off to accumulate worldly experience and making sure of this very important choice.

Learning Principle #3: Learning must be applicable to an individual’s context and situation.

Students learn best when they see a direct relationship to what they are learning, and what they are going to do with this information. Solidifying the relationship between information gained, and application requires focussed curriculum planning. If a student can see the pathway towards achieving higher level of Bloom’s taxonomy, they are more apt to learn the foundations with the end in mind. This is a key foundational concept of Backwards Design in curriculum planning. (Anderson et al., 2001)

Another of Malcolm Knowles (1985) widely accepted preferences of adult learners is that learning must be oriented to the individual’s circumstance, and their orientation shifts from being subject-centered to being problem-centered. At CMCC many learning and assessment opportunities are provided that cultivate this problem-centered learning preference. Indeed, the applicability of learning is of utmost importance in creating a student’s professional identity as a health practitioner. Opportunities such as Grand Rounds begin in first year, giving students an opportunity to envision their life as a Doctor observing and interacting with patients and clinicians. This takes place to illustrate the importance of contextualizing their learning.

Conclusion

In composing a theory of practice on education, both consultation of the literature and reflection on our own practices were conducted. Drawing from elements of constructivist and andragogical learning theory, 3 learning principles were created that reflect the author’s views on education within a health care learning environment. It is suggested that these principles be routinely re-visited when planning curriculum, and in engaging in the teaching and learning process.

References

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