

Planning the Future: Having a Vision

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Abstract

This paper explores issues associated with a learner having a vision for his/her future. Possible reactions to a transition in employment are reviewed, but the paper primarily focuses on those who decide to return to school. This paper briefly compares traditional and adult students at Shimane Women's Junior College and concludes that currently, the adult students have a clearer vision for their future both during and after college. Obstacles and motivations for returning to school are discussed. Finally, the benefits of mentoring are addressed.

Introduction

Educators and students cannot let the future just happen; both must be active participants in determining the future of students. As learners gather knowledge for the future, they must be pro-active rather than reactive. Not only do learners need to have a future orientation, with a plan or goals, but the instructors who are disseminating knowledge also need to have a set of concrete steps for helping the students discover and envision the future so they can create it. In addition, educators must stay abreast of new discoveries in their field of study in order to be oriented toward the future. Instructors who are experiencing burnout cannot help learners in determining where they are headed since they, themselves, are lacking vision. Although both educators and learners may be afraid to make changes, Bittel (1989, p. 140) noted that 'what you decide to do is less important than the fact that you decide to do something.' Reacting to situations is not good enough. As such, knowledge should be gathered in order to mold the future. This knowledge can be gained through formal educational courses or through experience while working in a specific field. Learning can also take place through training provided in the workplace.

A vision or plan for progressing needs to be constructed in each individual's mind before more knowledge is gained (Deshler 1987). If a plan for the future is not made, then there will be little progress. 'A' * is a good example. She came to Japan to teach English on the Japanese Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program with the goal of becoming more proficient in Japanese. She was a Japanese teacher in Australia and already had an intermediate level of Japanese when she started the JET program. After three years in Japan, her Japanese had improved very little; furthermore, she regretted her lack of motivation ('A' 1997, pers. comm., Jul.). This woman did not have concrete steps for realizing her goal, and as a result, she left Japan disappointed that her Japanese skills had improved much less than she had hoped.

As Bittel (1989) noted, having a challenge in life is an important part of feeling alive. If there is no challenge in what a person does, he/she tends to become bored and his/her performance at work, as well as during free time, declines. There is a direct relationship between enjoying life and being able to perform better in life, whether at work or during free time (Warnock 1989).

Transitions

Since the Industrial Revolution, the work environment has become one in which people communicate with other people via machines, or people only communicate with machines, such as computers. Mills (1956) noted that power is becoming more and more focused into the hands of a few elite members of society; this trend is continuing to the present. In the past,

companies had a larger management group, but with the increase in efficiency, the number of managers has decreased. Ten to fifteen years ago, American businesses laid off managers and executives in large numbers. This phenomenon has been repeating itself in the United States in the past two years with a doubling of the number of unemployed white-collar workers (August et al.

* The names of individuals have been substituted with capital letters to respect each individual's privacy.

2002). In Japan, as well, economic recession has led to lay-offs because of the restructuring of and bankruptcies of many corporations. This is reflected in the current unemployment rate of 5.4 percent, which is considered high for Japan (*The Japan Times* 31 Aug. 2002).

‘Milestones are significant moments or events in life which symbolize our progress and development’ (Bittel 1989, p. 136). Milestones can be signposts or they can be obstacles stopping people from changing (Bittel 1989, p. 139). Each person who encounters a milestone can decide to change or to make excuses for accepting why a change cannot be made. As Bittel (1989) explained, there are any number of excuses that can be made for not changing—placing the blame on a boss, on the union, on the system that does not allow change, or on someone/something else—but each person chooses if and how to react. Change is often not easy, but if a person really wants to change, he/she usually can.

Faced with a milestone due to a change in their employment situation, people can react in at least three different ways. First, people need someone to help them ‘acquire [and develop] new skills, attitudes, and behaviors’ (Boulmetis 1995, p. 12), but some will not seek this assistance and lack vision on their own. Rather than examine their attitudes and behaviors, they staunchly hold on to the past, reliving their ‘glory days.’ ‘B’ was such a person. He was a vice president at a large company, but when it merged with another company, he found himself without a job. When he applied for work, he limited himself to similar position openings and ended up underemployed for over ten years. During those ten years, he chose to not change and thus was stagnant. When he started looking toward the future as something to control rather than be controlled by, he once again found success in the work force. He now laments those ‘wasted years’ (‘B’ 2002, pers. comm., Aug.).

A second possibility is to redirect previously gained knowledge (Bittel 1989). ‘C’ was employed by the state government for fifteen years and dissatisfied with her working situation for many of those years. Finally, using some of the skills honed at that job, she found a position as an editor at a national corporation. In the new

job, her skills proved invaluable, and she found that she could excel in this new kind of work. Although her new job required longer hours, she found that she had more energy at the end of the day because she had found new personal fulfillment in her work ('C' 2000, pers. comm., Oct.).

A third option is to return to school. *Monbukagakusho*, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, is encouraging people to return to school. When adult learners return to school after a long absence, they are suddenly separated from their families because of the addition of classes, study time, and the commitments that come with them. As Boulmetis (1995, p. 11) noted, instructors can relieve some of the pressure in the work-to-school transition by helping learners to 'see and understand the relationship between what they are taught and its utility in the workplace.' Remembering their goals will help adult students deal with the difficulties of combining family, work, and school.

There may, however, be a larger obstacle for some adults in Japan who return to school. For one class of teachers returning to university for master's degrees, the fear of alienation was a prime motivation for keeping their studies a secret from their colleagues. These adult students were willing to study but feared being ridiculed as special (McMurtrie 2000). Bittel (1989, p. 107) noted that people who feel alienated share a 'feeling of dissatisfaction with life and the feeling of powerlessness, an inability to do anything to change this situation.' One adult student from Shimane Women's Junior College noted her appreciation for the people around her who have provided an environment which has allowed her to be brave enough to quit her job and strive toward her goal. Her appreciation may be heightened by the realization of how difficult it would otherwise be to return to school.

Currently, there are three adult students at Shimane Women's Junior College. The current adult students, along with first-year and second-year traditional students who are majoring in English, were asked to complete a questionnaire. None of the adult students are in the English department, although in the past

two years there were adult women majoring in English. In order to examine differences in motivational factors and views of their futures, students were asked to evaluate statements using a Likert scale of A through E, with A representing strongly agree and E being strongly disagree. Open-ended questions and non-Likert selected-response questions were also utilized. For this study, traditional students are defined as those students who entered the junior college after high school.

Technology

The use of electronic mail, video mail, and the multiple functions of the Internet are a permanent part of today's life. Communication by telephone and by the Internet is becoming so widely utilized that some people do not even go into an office for work; they telecommute. More than ever before, ideas that are new now will be widespread in the near future. For example, although the computer industry grew slowly at first, new computer technology and software is marketed almost daily. Former American Commerce Secretary Norman Y. Mineta (*The Daily Yomiuri* 18 Oct. 2000, p. 13) was quoted as saying, 'Each year being connected [to the Internet] becomes more critical to economic and educational advancement and to community participation.' One must be willing and able to embrace this new form of communication or it will be an obstacle to future growth. Looking through the employment section in any newspaper or employment website, it quickly becomes obvious that those who do not know how to use computers are finding themselves less likely to get jobs. Knowledge is the modern person's tool in the work place (Drucker 1994). Today, knowledge is power, and power is knowledge. Even those who have some computer skills must continually be learning new skills and technology. Educators are in a unique position to prepare students for the future by keeping them abreast of developments in new technology. As part of the formal education system of adults, instructors and counselors can help those adult students who are not familiar with these new forms of communication, as well as keep them oriented to the future (Deshler 1987).

Motivation

Motivation is directly related to a person's desire to increase his/her knowledge. Expectancy motivation, motivation stemming from something that can be gained in the future, is one type of motivation (Howard 1989). This motivation can compel an adult learner to enter school again to gain knowledge and to earn a degree that can be used to improve his/her future. These goals for the future may include a better job with more pay; a job that is more interesting because a current job is no longer a challenge anymore--the phenomenon of plateauing; or the desire to be more proficient in a current job. The expectation that the satisfaction in life and/or the quality of life will increase is a strong motivation for people in any country, including Japan.

There must be motivation to do something when a person comes to a milestone in life. Instructors of adults need to be conscious of the fact that many adults need encouragement to complete a change. Encouragement from instructors can be an important motivator. As a learner is taking steps to change, there are points where he/she may feel like giving up, such as when he/she feels overwhelmed. This is when the instructor needs to step in and provide some incentive to help the learner continue forward. This kind of motivation may be as simple as pointing out the fact that the short-term goal of a project is almost accomplished, providing the next step toward the ultimate goal.

A learner who only wants a passing grade and documentation that he/she has taken a course for a qualification will not have as deep of an understanding of the class material as someone who is learning not only for a qualification but also for self-enrichment (Howard 1989). For example, the 18- and 19-year-old women majoring in English at Shimane Women's Junior College seem somewhat like empty vessels. Unlike the adult students, who agreed or strongly agreed that they have a vision/plan for their time at college, half of the traditional students neither agreed nor disagreed to the statement. In addition, when asked about their time after college/university, the adult students agreed or strongly agreed that they have a vision or plan, while just over a third of the traditional students

neither agreed nor disagreed that they have a vision for their time after college/university.

This lack of vision is apparent in the classroom. Even though 70 percent of the traditional students indicated that one reason they are attending college is for self-enrichment, in class they do not seem as interested in improving their English speaking skills as the adult students from previous years. One possible explanation for this is that these traditional students have come to college for a variety of reasons, including to get a job or to get a better job (71 percent), to make friends (46 percent), and because their teachers/parents said they should (12.5 percent).

The adult learners at the junior college, on the other hand, have a lot of experiences and opinions and have been more willing to participate in class. Adult learners were asked, 'How have your life experiences affected your current classroom learning?' In response to this question, an adult student who graduated from Shimane Women's Junior College last school year and who now studies at Shimane University wrote, 'It's important to use all of my abilities in class.' Based on weekly observations in classes at the junior college, this student participated more in class than did her younger classmates. She actively conversed and helped the younger students better understand topics based on her greater knowledge gained through her experiences.

Drucker's statement (1994, p. 76) that 'knowledge can be acquired only through schooling' seems extreme. Educators should not dismiss the experiences that adult learners bring to the classroom. As one of the adult students at Shimane Women's Junior College noted, there are things that she did not understand until after entering the working world because during her first time at university nearly twenty years ago she did not fully understand what was necessary and important to her personally. Not only may adult learners have a greater general knowledge, but they also may have specific knowledge in a certain field of expertise. This knowledge provides a solid foundation from which to develop plans for the future. These adult learners have chosen to start or return to college

for self-enrichment and future job prospects. They seem to understand that one way to learn is through active participation in class. These women are trying to actively control their futures. Instructors must be willing to accept and act upon the different visions and motivations that adult students bring with them.

Mentoring

Mentoring may be a current fad, as noted by Elmore (1995), but there is a need for mentoring by educators. The strength and wisdom passed on to the mentee are important to the future growth of the one being mentored. Mentoring is a powerful tool for gathering knowledge from people who have experienced more than the mentee and who have compiled information on subjects of mutual interest (Elmore 1995). Educators can help a learner 'look for new opportunities to grow and develop as a person' (Bittel 1989, p. 141). A mentor is not only a person with whom to discuss new ideas, but he/she is also a person who can share wisdom gained through both accomplishments and personal mistakes. One of the adult students noted on her questionnaire that younger students have asked her about such things as finding jobs, getting married, and raising a family.

Deshler (1987) discussed *Delphi analysis*, using a group of experts to project possibilities about the future. Although he was writing about the use of a group of experts, mentoring utilizes the same general concept; using those same concepts on a smaller scale will prove helpful in planning an individual's future. In a similar manner, mentoring is directly related to *transformative learning*, which occurs when someone reflects on the past and applies it to the present and/or the future (Mezirow 1994). Transformative learning includes dialog among people. This communicative learning occurs when a learner searches to understand 'the meaning of what others communicate concerning values, ideals, feelings, [and] moral decisions' (Mezirow 1991, p. 8) with a mentor. Because learning occurs not only from the mentor to the mentee but also from the mentee to the mentor, it is mutually beneficial (Elmore 1995). The previously mentioned Shimane Women's Junior College graduate noted that she has both asked and

been asked questions by traditional students. With future-oriented relationships, both parties can grow and develop visions for the future.

The recent growth in distance education courses and classes offered through the Internet in Japan and other countries (*The Japan Times* 12 Apr. 2000) would seem to support the idea that personal relationships have become less important than disseminating information through books, videos, tapes, and computers. With distance education, physical separation can make it more difficult for the instructor to interact with each student and for the students to interact with each other. This does not have to be the case, however, if modern technology is used. By utilizing e-mail and electronic cyber boards where students post ideas for all of the students and the instructor to discuss, mentoring can occur not only between an instructor and the student posting the material but also among students.

The University of Southern Queensland (USQ) in Australia has successfully used a cyber board system. The instructor for USQ's Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) course gives students the incentive to use the cyber board by making it a small part of the course grade. It is an effective learning tool for the participants because some of the learners have more experience with computers and are willing to assist those who are new to CALL. In this way, more knowledge can be shared than if the instructor had to help each student individually. When there is no external incentive to participate, students may not utilize this type of mentoring system. This should not, however, stop instructors from attempting to use such a system, since mentoring is an educational tool that is needed and that helps learners to reflect on their thoughts and project them into visions.

Because educators have limited amounts of time to help many students, they can extend the benefits of mentoring by utilizing members of the community. Southern Methodist University (SMU) in Texas has been able to give large numbers of MBA and Executive MBA students the advantage of having a mentor in the real business world. Because it has proven to be a valuable asset for both

the students and the mentors, the program has become so successful that it is now a primary reason why many students select SMU. The mentees have gained tremendous insight into their fields, and some mentors have gained valuable employees (Mitchell 1998).

The Future Is Now

In classes at Shimane Women's Junior College, the traditional students have taken a less active role than the previous years' adult students. In addition, fewer traditional students currently have a vision for their time at college or their future after graduating. If this attitude persists, these traditional students will find themselves reacting to life rather than inventing their futures. These young women do not yet fully understand the difference between book knowledge and real-world wisdom, but instructors can help them in distinguishing the differences and in visualizing their futures. On her questionnaire, one adult student noted that she is now able to understand things more easily and in a broader, more generalized manner than when she was younger. She went on to say that now she is able to visualize what the instructor is saying. Instructors need to help learners devise plans that will actualize their individual visions.

Learning is a lifelong activity, and if a person stops learning, there is the possibility of becoming stalled in work and in life, in general. On the other hand, if a person believes in himself/herself, he/she can learn and grow with life's changes. An individual's vision for acquiring knowledge, the abilities that the new knowledge provides, and movement beyond current boundaries are all powerful tools a person can utilize. More than any other institution in society, education is best suited to helping learners formulate and attain their goals while remaining oriented to the future.

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