

BOOK REVIEWS/RECENSIONS

SELF-DIRECTION FOR LIFELONG LEARNING: A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE TO THEORY AND PRACTICE.

Philip C. Candy. (1991). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers

Over the last two decades self-directed learning has been a major focus of research and writing, and beginning in the mid-1980's, the subject of critical interrogation of its creed-like status. Philip Candy's recent book contributes to the field of adult education by providing a comprehensive look at self-directed learning—its meaning, underlying ideologies, history, and related educational research. In questioning assumptions and offering a reconceptualization of self-directed learning, Candy presents a challenge to current theory and practice.

In Part One of his book Candy, joining other recent critics, seeks to dispel the conceptual confusion enveloping the term. Concerned that this confusion blocks the evolution of a robust theory of self-directed learning and is detrimental to good practice, Candy teases apart the tangled web of meanings currently found under the rubric of self-directed learning, identifying two processes and two personal attributes.

Candy terms the first of the two processes *learner-controlled instruction* and the second *autodidaxy*. The former term is used to describe self-directed learning which takes place in instructional situations inside formal institutions and the latter describes self-directed learning which takes place outside formal institutions. Candy identifies the two personal attributes as *self-management* and *personal autonomy*. The former is used to describe the ability to be self-directing in learning within given constraints and the latter to describe the propensity to exercise freedom on a broader scale. Candy points out that the failure of adult educators to distinguish between these four meanings—learner-controlled instruction, autodidaxy, self-management, and personal autonomy—has resulted in support for the concept by individuals from diverse perspectives. Following a balanced discussion of the promises and limitations which learner-controlled instruction and autodidaxy have for education and training, Candy argues that these processes of self-directed learning are “no panacea for all the ills that beset education and society” (p. 96).

In Part Two of the book, Candy examines further the meaning of four dimensions of self-directed learning and their interrelationship, providing an extensive review of relevant educational research approaches and findings from Australia, Canada, Scandinavia, and the United States. In Part Three, Candy is more explicit in challenging concepts underlying traditional views of self-direction. He characterizes traditional understandings of self-direction in the following terms:

...self-direction was seen essentially as a personal quality or attribute; knowledge as a fixed and enduring set of “facts” to be mastered; learning as a process of acquiring attitudes, skills, and knowledge from outside the self; and individuals

as substantially asocial atoms, independent of their social and cultural environments. (p. 246)

Candy begins to build a case for a new conceptualization in which:

...self-direction is acknowledged as a product of the interaction between the person and the environment; knowledge is recognized as tentative, evanescent, and socially constructed, learning is defined as a qualitative shift in how phenomena are viewed; and individuals are seen in a complex and mutually interdependent relationship with their environments. (p. 246)

Candy's reconceptualization of self-directed learning is built on a constructivist foundation that posits all learning as self-directed in that each individual takes new information and actively constructs idiosyncratic cognitive structures related to previous experience. This constructivist view of learning is seen as "particularly congruent with the notion of self-direction" (p. 270). The reconceptualization has many implications which are explored by Candy at length. He focuses in Part Four on the way that self-directed learning can be promoted and in Part Five on the implications of his construction of self-directed learning for adult education practice and research.

Candy's reconceptualization does challenge current orthodoxy. For example, he uses constructivism, which emphasizes the importance of the learner's understanding, to provide a theoretical basis from which to distinguish between learner-controlled instruction and autodidaxy. In autodidaxy, Candy argues, the learner construes that he or she maintains control of the learning experience, even when seeking assistance. Thus autodidaxy must be seen as being outside the realm of instruction and individuals seeking to assist autodidacts are cautioned to respect the learner's perception of ownership of the learning situation.

A second challenge to current views of self-directed learning is Candy's contention that autonomy in learning is not a generic attribute that, once attained in a particular learning situation, can be transferred automatically to another. He argues persuasively that autonomy is context-specific and that, within each context, there are situational and epistemological elements to autonomy. Situational autonomy, as characterized by Candy, is dependent upon the individual's self-management skills in learning, his or her self-concept, and the learner's understanding of his or her own role and that of educators in the learning process. To enhance self-directedness, therefore, it is not sufficient for the adult educator to simply provide the opportunity for learners to be autonomous. Candy argues convincingly that simply allowing learner freedom and control may be counter-productive if learners lack appropriate skills or self confidence or if they prefer traditional instruction.

In mapping out future directions for research, Candy calls for a movement away from empirical, instructor-oriented approaches which have dominated past research on self-directed learning. Rather his theory places emphasis on how the learner construes and constructs information, the learning process itself, and the learning situation. Clearly his orientation calls for naturalistic, learner-centered approaches to research. In this regard, Candy offers useful suggestions for future research.

Candy's reconceptualization of self-directed learning is not without problems. He acknowledges that learning and knowledge construction are largely social acts in which other people are the source of new ideas and of validation of the individual's constructed knowledge. However, Candy's choice of a psychologized, constructivist base makes problematic the incorporation of these social aspects into his analysis. Candy anticipates criticism of his individualistic form of constructivism in the following terms:

This constitutes one of the major limitations of constructivism—that simply exploring with learners their personal constructions of autonomy does not address the factors that may inhibit, constrain, or determine either their constructs or their ability to act freely. (p. 261)

In spite of this observation, Candy does attempt to include social as well as individual constraints in his model for enhancing self-directed learning. This acknowledgement of social constraints does represent an advance on the previous literature. However, Candy's discussion of societal barriers is cursory and superficial, and he is not clear about the role that he anticipates for the adult educator concerning these barriers. Candy states only that the educator "should be aware" (p. 421) of possible distress that may be caused when an adult educator encourages an individual to go against the cultural norms of his or her social circle and should "recognize that increasing the rights of individual learners may entail changes in their social circumstances" (p. 423). Unlike critical theorists, Candy does not explicitly advocate a political role for the adult educator.

When, in his final chapter, Candy recommends possible new directions for research, the proposals fall back on the individual, psychological approaches. He ignores the possible research questions arising out of the interplay between the individual and society in the construction of knowledge, in the social construction of the individual's way of thinking, and in constraining freedom. Again, Candy acknowledges the limitation of his analysis:

...the agenda for research on self-direction...must be treated as partial.... Although it is believed that the adoption of a constructivist approach may generate new and valuable lines of research within the psychological tradition, it is also hoped that this research will stimulate a more comprehensive and critical analysis of the social dimensions of autonomy in learning. (p. 416)

Moreover, Candy's emphasis on the individual and the psychological at the expense of social factors is demonstrated when he attempts to identify Habermas' emancipatory interest as the natural "home" of self-directed learning. Unfortunately, Candy seems to be unaware of critiques which have shown that his individualistic and psychologistic interpretation of the emancipatory interest profoundly misinterprets a phenomenon identified by Habermas as being primarily social.

How are we to understand Candy's reconceptualization of self-directed learning? Is it a redefinition of the field of adult education around which practitioners can rally? Certainly this is not what Candy claims. Unlike Knowles' suggestion that self-direction defines the adult learner and the method of adult education, Candy's claims

for his reconceptualization are more modest. His underlying view of learners as active construers and constructors of meaning does not presume that adults are self-directed, only that they have the capacity and the propensity to become both self-managers of learning and more broadly autonomous. Furthermore, his concept of autodidaxy falls outside the preserve of instruction altogether and his view of learner-controlled instruction is that it is an appropriate approach to adult education in some, but not all institutional settings. For Candy, "...self-direction can never, and should never, replace the position of the teacher in every learning situation" (p. 3). He maintains that the development of self-directedness in individuals cannot be seen as the exclusive domain of adult education observing that, "...indeed the socializing influences of early educational experience are so strong that by adulthood, it may well be too late for many. Accordingly, the project of developing self-directed learning competence and confidence is a lifelong one" (p. 416-7).

Candy's reconceptualization of self-directed learning then, does not provide adult education with a single pedagogical orientation for its practice. His book does, however, represent a continuation of a recent movement toward questioning previously taken-for-granted assumptions around the obsession with self-directed learning which has dominated adult education in North America for the past two decades.

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