

Framework Essay and Caption Statements

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The task of educating adults requires more than simply understanding the subject matter. There are numerous other factors to consider. From age and preexisting intimacy with the material being covered to an adult's desire to learn and potential outcomes, there is nearly no limit to what can influence the outcome of a learning exercise. This is where an understanding of adult development and learning theory proves valuable.

This paper will explore various facets of the adult experience. We will begin with an examination of adult development theories, focusing on particular aspects of the self. This paper will then explore two learning theories that particularly impact learning in a professional setting. In the second section, we will briefly look at how all four work together in a professional setting. Finally, everything will be tied together in a framework that defines my understanding of both development and learning through the lifespan.

### **Part I: Development Theories**

I've always operated under the assumption that adults develop in unique ways. No two individuals share the same experiences, meaning that no one arrives at the same point via the same path. As an example, two people can have ample academic opportunity while they are young, live in a home with two parents, have a stable housing situation and mature at what society considers an acceptable rate until they reach Point X. That does not mean they've developed emotionally, spiritually, academically or any in other manner the identical way. Conversely, two people on opposite ends of the socioeconomic spectrum can travel divergent paths, bump into each other outside a bookstore and spend the rest of their lives in partnership, changing their communities for the better.

In each scenario, development (and individual differences) rests firmly in the perception of self. And since people process similar developmental experiences differently, there are multiple ways the self can manifest. A word of encouragement from a mentor in a moment of difficulty or time and time again finding failure despite one's best efforts impact our perceptions in a variety of ways. To be sure, this is a humanistic view. And this is why I find the theories devoted to the self, specifically self-concept and self-esteem, so intriguing.

Regarding self-concept, or "the cognitive process of knowing" (Lemme, 2006, p. 80), I find disequilibrium particularly compelling. As Lemme writes:

Disequilibrium is, in fact, the major impetus for cognitive development: as our current level of thinking becomes increasingly inadequate to deal with the information and experiences we are confronting, we become motivated to develop a more effective (and advanced) level of cognitive ability. (p. 80)

On a personal level, this is absolutely true. I will never forget the first time I saw true racial injustice as a freshman in high school. I was uncomfortable. There was new information to process. I sought guidance and asked questions. It changed my world-view and helped me grow into a person consumed by social justice. I didn't know it at the time, but the unease of the situation forced me into a disequilibrium that altered my social schema.

As a trainer, the concept of disequilibrium is critical to my work. The use of metrics to gauge effectiveness, for example, is so against the personal nature of advising that it is oftentimes resisted or rejected outright. Individuals are uneasy looking at their efforts in a quantitative way. It is on me to use the discomfort to my advantage, allowing staff to increase their level of thinking and assimilate the new information into their knowledge structure. This

requires being cognizant of their conceptual level. As Joyce (1984) noted, successfully implementing ideas or strategies that are met with resistance is to understand where an individual is in regards to the concept, find a “dynamic disequilibrium” and then take the time to allow them to work through their discomfort, finding knowledge in the process (p. 29).

When it comes to self-esteem, or an “individual’s feelings toward and evaluation of the self, as well as an assessment of its worth along a positive-negative continuum” (Lemme, p. 84), the idea that there are different domains—academic, social, physical, occupational—is particularly fascinating. Consider two individuals with poor physical self-esteem (specifically, attractiveness) but high levels in both the academic and occupational domains. One may have high global self-esteem since they do not put as much weight into the physical nature of one’s being. In opposition, the other person may place great emphasis on physical appearances, overshadowing their accomplishments in school and/or the workplace. It is a matter of perception. How we’ve developed over the years will determine how we view each domain in relation to the others. This can mean the difference between crippling anxieties and finding value in things that positively impact society. This is a powerful concept.

Thankfully, self-esteem in all domains can be increased in two ways, according to Robert Atchley’s model. One of them is to enhance “one’s view of oneself” (Lemme, 84). This is where I have a direct impact as an educator. If I challenge staff to see new ideas as opportunities for personal and professional development, afford them the time to work through things in a collaborative setting, provide the tools needed to accomplish the developmental task and supply positive reinforcement throughout, there is a strong chance an individual’s self-esteem will go up. After all, success naturally leads to an increase in the perceptions of our aptitudes. That last piece is a perfect segue into the next section.

## Part II: Learning Theories

As it pertains to learning theories, self-efficacy and situated cognition stand out.

Let's start with self-efficacy. First put forth by Bandura (1977) and part of his larger social-cognitive theory, self-efficacy, "or one's belief and expectations about whether one has the ability to successfully complete or accomplish a particular task" (Lemme, 2006, 87), drives so much of what we do. From mundane things like getting a laundry list of chores done before the kids are out of school to things of phenomenal consequence, such as being by the side of a mother battling Alzheimer's, we must believe we can get the job done or we fail before we begin.

Thankfully, an individual's level of self-efficacy is not set in stone. According to Bandura (1977), four things can improve the trait:

- Performance Accomplishments: This is when a subject finds success in a task or behavior.
- Vicarious Experience: This is when a subject see another accomplish a task without negative consequences.
- Verbal Persuasions: This is when a subject is given positive reinforcement through suggestion or words of encouragement.
- Emotional Arousal: Keeping emotions under control allows the subject to focus on completing a task.

To be sure, each of these areas can lead to a decrease in self-efficacy. If failure is consistently the result of effort, others find failure or face reprimand in the completion of a task, the verbal

persuasions are negative in nature, or emotions run high to the point of anxiety, the likelihood that an individual will believe they can accomplish whatever it is they are doing will go down.

This is what makes self-efficacy so compelling as a practitioner since it is something I can influence. As Gist and Mitchell (1989) posit, not only is self-efficacy malleable, but even the smallest things can lead to increase in this ever-important characteristic. Among other things, breaking learning tasks down into digestible parts rather than an overwhelming whole, framing the training session in positive tones (regardless of performance plan), and giving the trainee some control of what will be covered first can all increase the self-efficacy of an individual (pp. 194-201).

Equally extraordinary is situated cognition, or the idea that “the physical and social experiences and situations in which learners find themselves and the tools they use in that experience are integral to the entire learning process” (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, 178). This concept is applicable throughout life. From learning how to walk and speak, to learning mathematics and how to comport one’s self if a large group, the environment the learning takes place in is as important as the activity itself. Out of context, many lessons lose power or don’t resonate as well with the audience.

As a professional educator, situated cognition means that I must do several things. First, my trainings need to be collaborative, soliciting feedback from the group to ensure that the work they are doing is authentic and understood. As Brown, Collins, & Duguid (1989), “Groups however, can be efficient in drawing out, confronting and discussing both misconception and ineffective strategies” (p. 40). Situated cognition also means that the trainings conducted are not isolated events. If past experiences are taken into consideration in the learning exercise’s construction, and the physical and social environment of the workplace are utilized effectively,

then a training session does more than impact a specific concept—it reflects and reinforces the organization’s culture. In other words, it becomes an “authentic” exercise (Brown, et al., 34). And these types of learning experiences have proven through research to have a tangible impact on learning.

Another thing that stands out is that if we look at self-efficacy and situated cognition under the same lens, their compatibility is apparent. For example, if a training session is collaborative, has well-defined goals, occurs in an appropriate setting with the proper tools, and is targeted at a specific task, the participants will feel as though they can accomplish the objectives. And if supportive dialogue (verbal persuasion) from the facilitator and proper demonstrations from peers (vicarious experiences) are provided, their self-efficacy is bound to go up and carry over into actual practice. This type of scenario should also diminish defensive behavior.

### **Part III: Personal Framework**

When thinking about how all of this ties together in my understanding, I immediately turn to communities of practice. First posited by Etienne Wenger and Jean Lave, a community of practice is describes as a group of people learning together in a shared space through collaborative work (Lave, 1991). It is the thing that defines every group I am a part of from my home life, to my professional workspace and the community organizations in which I am a member

Let’s take a look at this at my place of business. Within this community, all manner of learning takes place that uses shared language and customs, establishing its own set of norms and mores. For example, informal learning is constantly engaged in through casual conversation and

the general sharing of information or through observed behavior that ends up becoming the model for a new hire. It truly is a social learning system, incorporating Etienne's (2000) modes of belonging. We learn our limits and how others respond to our actions (engagement), develop images of ourselves and of the community of practice (imagination) and strive toward the same end (alignment) on a daily basis (p. 228-229). Not only am I learner in this community, but as a member of the leadership team, I help form the meaning-making that is taking place.

All of this is to say that my understanding of learning and development in this space is centered on the fact that I have the fortunate ability to make an impact, regardless of age, gender, sexuality or experience level. From positively impacting an employee's self-efficacy through verbal persuasion to creating a "dynamic disequilibrium" that fosters discourse and growth, I am party to personal and professional improvement. This is especially true if I take the context of the learning and the learners into consideration. Seeing as how no two learners are in identically the same spot developmentally or with regards to their learning capacity due to factors including age and experience, my lessons must be malleable. That is not to say that the objective changes, of course. Rather, the manner in which I reach the desired outcome cannot be rigid. This is what Eraut (2000) would call an "emergent strategy" within reactive learning, or being able to tacitly take "advantage of learning opportunities as they arose" when "the intent and the learning activity were deliberate, but the recognition of learning opportunities was reactive" (p. 116).

On a personal level, my understanding of development and learning through the lifespan is remarkably similar. There is a community of practice in my home. My wife and I create tension in learning for our children, challenging them (the eight-year-old, at least) to think in the abstract and challenge what she sees and hears instead of taking the words of others, including ourselves, at face-value. My wife and I share an enterprise, insomuch as raising children is both



part of a familial contract and a craft. We share language, teaching techniques and communicate on discipline in an effort to raise two girls so they are ready to face the world with a sense of empathy, justice and understanding. We have a sense of what is doable, (Etienne, 2000, p. 230-233) and push boundaries when new situations arise. We rely on each other to take the lead in certain circumstances, understanding that we each have areas of opportunity and are aligned in our message. We promote high self-esteem and self-concept, building our daughter's level of self-efficacy through modeling, verbal persuasion and limited emotional arousal. We stress that practice is the only path toward mastery and that even if the first attempts are met with failure, progress is the true measurement of effort.

When framed in the context of a community of practice, my understanding of learning and development is rather encompassing. That is to say that I've learned that there is no one way to approach any given learning situation. There is no one path of development through the lifespan. We are all unique creatures driven by varying social forces and defined by others and ourselves in different ways. The one constant is that I am a part of a community of practice in the workplace and at home, striving to be better while helping those around me grow, regardless of what may stand in my way. It is the tie that binds the theories of development and learning.

## References

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## **Caption Statement 1**

### **What?**

The posting chosen for my first artifact is my Module 3 discussion posting from EDUC-505 wherein we created a study guide for the rest of the class. Specifically, the artifact discusses the concept of self-efficacy and the work of Albert Bandura.

### **So What?**

This posting is important to me because it is when I found a new perspective on my own strengths and weaknesses as well as an understanding of how I impact others. From a personal perspective, the idea that I am in control of the forces around me as they relate to my internal motor is an “aha” moment. Since completing this assignment, I count no less than three instances when I drew from past experience to give myself the added confidence I need to see a task to its completion. I will continue to use the past as a model for the present.

Professionally, the fact that self-efficacy is malleable is powerful. This means that individuals who struggle to grasp a concept are not doomed to consistently find failure. Through various methods, instilling confidence that a successful outcome will be reached is, to a certain degree, within my sphere of influence. From staggering tasks to ensure that incremental milestones are hit, to using verbal persuasion and limiting emotional arousal, I can help advisors find the confidence in themselves.

### **Now What?**

Now that I have a handle on how I influence the self-efficacy of others, my next steps are evident. To start, I can model a desired behavior in my own efforts. When a new training method

is implemented, for example, I can take the needed time to set the standard before rolling it out to the rest of the staff. This accomplishes two things. First, it allows me to find weaknesses in the new method, thereby ensuring that when staff begins training, I will be able to tailor the lesson and praxis exercises to ensure optimal retention. Second, staff will see the benefits in my results. This serves as a vicarious experience wherein my staff sees the results of my efforts, increasing the likelihood that they will believe their efforts will be met with success.

## **Caption Statement 2**

### **What?**

The posting chosen for my second artifact is my Module 1 discussion posting from EDUC-505, describing our personal perspective on the events that shaped our development to this point. Specifically, the artifact delves into the psychological development theory of Erik Erickson.

### **So What?**

Seeing as how this was my first exposure to any of the theories of development, I found the idea that life was a series of stages reassuring. In particular, Erikson's argument that an adult can revisit issues relating to intimacy and identity well into adulthood is comforting. It allows the individual to resolve crisis that otherwise have the potential to impede healthy development. On a personal level, it seemed powerful.

Truthfully, however, I would not select the psychological model again. Instead, I would select the sociocultural perspective. Simply put, the former is too confined. Indeed, one of its criticisms is that it seems built for middle aged white males. Factors such as race, gender, economic status and sexuality impact the way we are defined within society. And those social forces have a distinct impact on the way we learn and development.

### **Now What?**

Seeing as how people influence, and are influenced by, their surroundings, I would be wise to keep both in mind. For example, creating an environment that is inclusive and welcomes participation allows for the sharing of new ideas and the feeling that it is okay to make mistakes.

Likewise, not providing the proper tools to complete a task severely limits the outcomes of a training exercise. After all, the praxis opportunities have to be authentic, and if the participants don't have access to the things they need to properly learn the skill or behavior, feelings of self-doubt have the potential to manifest. This is counterproductive to learning.

### **Caption Statement 3**

#### **What?**

The posting chosen for my final artifact is the Module 7 assignment on informal learning in EDUC-505. In specific, I explore informal learning through the lens of communities of practice, which were first posited by Etienne Wenger and Jean Lave.

#### **So What?**

I chose this assignment because it showed how learning occurs without defined intent in many different ways. For example, a community of practice consists of members that challenge one another, pushing the next person into uncomfortable territory in the name of growth. This is not always done in a formal setting and has incredible value in a recruitment environment when our primary goal is to take care of students while simultaneously achieving assigned metrics. Operating in this space requires a level of innovation that cannot be taught explicitly. It can be taught through the daily interactions of the community, however. Central to this is the idea that a community of practice shares, through language, custom and process, an identity. As a grower of teams, a shared identity is critical. It is how we cultivate ownership and collaboration.

#### **Now What?**

I find that a majority of my interactions with subordinates in a training capacity are in formal settings or follow-up activities. We interact on a personal level, of course, but I tend to keep those conversations as limited in scope as possible. What ends up happening as a result of the brevity of said encounters is that teaching opportunities are missed. For example, learning is not confined to the classroom. By sharing my experiences and making deeper connections, I can teach employees about what other units are responsible for and what challenges they face



without holding a formal training session. This can provide added insights for my staff, impacting their ability to navigate the many responsibilities of the role.