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LEARNING READINESS: AN UNDERAPPRECIATED YET VITAL DIMENSION IN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the important topic of learning readiness. Learning readiness, from the authors' framework, is the degree to which learners, in both management education and training, have prerequisite cognitive, emotive-attitudinal, and behavioral attributes, skills and orientations that will prepare them for involvement in active, experiential learning contexts. It is the view of the authors that this topic is underappreciated as a key dimension in the practice of experiential learning methods. The authors will share their emergent model of learning readiness based in social learning/social cognitive theory.

INTRODUCTION

Two basic questions motivate this paper. Are our students ready for experiential learning? Do we take into account learning readiness in our EL practices? Beyond these questions loom other related questions of concern. Have you ever thought that your current learners or trainees seem less ready for the challenge of experiential learning than learners in the past? Have you found that your learners are less willing these days to engage themselves in the partnership of learning that experiential educators promote? Do you wonder to yourself about individual-level factors that might define what learning readiness entails? The topic of learning readiness and its operationalization may offer answers to these queries.

In preparing this paper, the authors completed an extensive background literature search on the topic of "learning readiness". Using the major databases of the management, we could find not even a single article directly addressing the topic. This was somewhat surprising as well as troubling. Given that experiential learning involves the active, willing participation of learners in their own learning (Kolb, 1984), it is truly surprising that the management education and development disciplines seem to ignore the salience of the topic. This suggests that the topic of learning readiness is either viewed as irrelevant by many experiential learning practitioners, often unschooled in learning theory, or, a topic that we have rarely consider in a systematic manner. Hence, from that conclusion emerges this paper and our intent to begin a systematic dialogue on the topic.

This paper emerges secondarily from an exploratory survey research effort into the perspectives of experiential practitioners regarding this and other fundamental issues in experiential learning. The scale represents the authors' first attempt to frame Learning Readiness in terms of Social Learning theory concepts related to cognitive, emotive-attitudinal, and behavioral readiness dimensions. In this paper, we will: 1) provide an overview of the existent literature related to or complimentary of the construct of Learning Readiness; 2) overview the Social Learning model of Learning Readiness in its current incarnation; 3) share research results; and 4) discuss implications for further study.

Ultimately, we are hopeful that the consideration and contemplation of Learning Readiness will help us promote and reinforce what Gallos (1993) calls the autonomous stage of learning. Herein the learner is ready to cope with inner and outer conflicts inherent to life and learning, is tolerant

of paradoxes and ambiguity, and accepts responsibility in life and learning processes. Additionally, by considering the centrality of learning readiness dimensions to our practice of experiential education we may also encourage more educators and learners to experiment with self-management (Harvey, 1998) in their learning undertakings.

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVE

The facilitators consider themselves to be artisans of learning. We are certain that many, if not most, of our ABSEL colleagues also see themselves as artists in the craft of learning. In artwork, one must have sound raw materials to render a work of art. Superior clay renders better art than does average clay. Metaphorically, our students are the clay we help to mold into a higher art form—the learned young adult. If we have less than adequate clay to mold, then regardless of our artisanship, our artwork may always be somewhat less than artful. By contemplating learning readiness, we may better understand the potentialities of our students in a better way. This seems especially important in experiential contexts where learners are challenged to both learn and grow.

The possibility that our students lack learning readiness to learn should trouble us all. Not discussing learning readiness does not obviate the possibility that many of our students lack the readiness to undertake experiential learning. By considering this overlooked topic, we open the door to learn about a very central dynamic in the success of our learning craft.

Learning Readiness, from our perspective, is the "possession by the learner of the requisite emotive-attitudinal, cognitive, behavioral characteristics, skills, and orientations needed to be a successful learner." The current model is adapted from other models inherent to social learning theory foundation. It reflects the notion of reciprocal determinism wherein individual cognitive, emotive-attitudinal, and behavioral domains have facilitating or inhibiting influence on the ways in which an individual adapts to the world (Bandura, 1978).

We assume that learners who possess readiness characteristics, skills, and orientations will adapt to, feel comfort with, and gain more from experiential learning than those with lesser levels of readiness. Such learners will be more amenable to the challenges of experiential learning methods and less resistant to the experimental, exploratory nature of many experiential learning methods, activities, and classes. From our own experiences of teaching some 42 cumulative years, it appears that learning readiness may be declining rather than improving. Our task of facilitating learning outcomes is more difficult when learners lack not only requisite content knowledge, but also readiness to be active participants in their own experiential learning endeavors.

LITERATURE OVERVIEW

This section of the paper addresses a variety of orientations and influences on our thinking and the evolution of a preliminary model related to Learning Readiness. To frame this discussion, a quote from Robert Gagne (1977) informs us on what learning is—"Learning is a change in human disposition or capability which persists over time and which is not simply ascribed to processes of growth."

Management Education and Development

As noted, there is little, if any, systematic study of learning readiness theory and conceptualization in the management education literature. Where any exists, the authors frequently defer to learning theorists or educational psychologists for their operationalization of constructs and dimensions (Knowles, 1975, 1980; Raelin, 1997). This situation is not going unnoticed completely. Adler and Milne (1998) decry the fact that many accounting students lack readiness for learning, although, they, too have no consistent framework for operationalizing readiness beyond the accounting curriculum. Apparently, no one is

attempting to delineate specific or general domains of learning readiness that may apply to business students in general and, in particular, to students who will be expected to learn within the experiential framework. Hence, we have begun an exploratory research and theory-building project to fill these voids.

While learning is clearly essential in organizations, too often, there remains the naïve assumption that all adults, be they 18 or 68, are ready to learn. This simply is a poor assumption to hold. Further, there seems to be a particular focus on "learning style" as an essential variable related to "fitting" the learning content and process to the dominant learning style (Dibella and Nevis, 1998). Learning style can definitely allow us to acknowledge the learning orientation, inclusive of method and process, that learners "prefer", but it cannot tell us if the learners, regardless of age, are ready for learning. It seems ill-advised to assume that all learners come to the learning experience with the same level of readiness to learn.

Shani and Lau (2000) note that "self-learning is related to self-motivation, self-awareness, and self-control. It presupposes that learners are interested in learning. Further knowing oneself and having the ability for planning and a sense of commitment seem critical". Here, we discover some of the cognitive, behavioral, or emotive-attitudinal dimensions we currently associate with holistic learning readiness.

General Perspectives on the Conditions of Learning

Chickering (1969) indicates that adolescents become adults by developing their competencies, emotions, autonomy, identity, interpersonal relations, purposes and integrity within the collegiate environment.. Gagne (1977), in his classic book on learning, notes that the conditions of learning attributable to the learner include innate academic ability, previous preparation from secondary education, and various motives and incentives learners bring to their collegiate experience. In the case of these great learning theorists we find limited consideration of the issue of learning readiness and the specific dimensions therein.

It is generally accepted that learning is influenced by a number of key factors. Lowman (1995) suggests that individual student ability and motivation, faculty ability and motivation, and course objectives and orientation directly affect learning efficacy and impact. While he indicates individual differences in students' ability to do academic work constitute the foremost of the six influences, he fails to define student abilities critical to learning. Raelin (1997) provides another take on the interactionist perspective by suggesting that learning context, conditions of learning, the philosophy and orientation of the educator, and indefinite situational factors impact learning and its transfer. Within the generally accepted interactionist frameworks, it is our assertion that learning readiness is a critical factor influencing learners' receptivity to learning and success within experiential learning contexts.

Self-Directed Learning Readiness

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, Guglielmino (1978) initiated groundbreaking work on self-directed learning readiness building on the adult learning orientations of Knowles (1975). Knowles (1990) defines self-directed learning as learning wherein "individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes". Wellens, Byham, and Wilson (1991) note that self-directed learning is critical to organizations as they seek to most efficiently maintain their knowledge advantage. Hence, the operationalization of self-directed learning readiness focuses primarily on the readiness of adult learners to undertake

independent learning ventures in world-of-work venues.

Guglielmino developed the "Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale" to assess adult readiness for independent learning. Abbott and Dahmus (1992) reflect that the SDRRS focuses on determining the degree to which adults are willing to accept responsibility for their own learning. Numerous research projects and critical analyses have focused on the SDLRS. It "is designed to assess the degree to which individuals perceive themselves to possess attitudes and skills frequently associated with self-direction in learning" (Durr, Guglielmino, and Guglielmino, 1996, p. 350).

Guglielmino's (1978) 58-item survey encompasses eight self-directed learning readiness factors including: openness to learning opportunities, self-concept as an effective learner, initiative and independence in learning, informed acceptance of responsibility for one's own learning, love of learning, creativity, future orientation, and the ability to use basic study and problem-solving skills. Some of these broad factors have influenced our selection of the initial twelve items for our exploratory model. However, given our current focus on the collegiate arena and experiential learning and our social learning framework for definition of factors, we feel that we can develop an independent instrument for the particular uses we have in mind. Further, since we are, at this time, focusing primarily on traditional learners, our conceptual basis for development of the learning readiness scale is not focused on the adult learning realm.

Social Learning Theory Adaptations

A basic social learning model is depicted in Figure 1. In this model, the direct and reciprocal relationships between an individual's cognitive, emotive-attitudinal, and behavioral domains are evident. Simply put, reciprocal determinism suggests that each of these domains is affected by and affects each of the other domains within an individual (Bandura, 1978).

In the broader framework of social learning theory, learning readiness may well be reflective of, but not identical to, individual self-efficacy applied to the learning context. Self-efficacy represents the generalized expectancies of success and competence an individual holds as he/she approaches life in general and singular domains of experience in particular (Bandura, 1977). Clearly, if a learner approaches learning wiith positive self-expectancies and with positive outcome expectancies, he/she is more likely to do well than someone with less positive expectancies in either domain. Although generalized and domain-specific expectancies may be precursors to learning readiness or, in fact, cognitive elements of learning readiness, we do not equate expectancies with learning readiness.

Wood and Bandura (1989) expand this view of self-efficacy to include an individual's assessment of his/her ability "to mobilize the motivational, cognitive resources, and courses of action need to exercise control over events in their lives." In this context, the idea of mobilization seems to reflect both motivation and volition to act proactively. Again, we do not dismiss these dimensions as unimportant to learning, but see them as subordinate to other readiness factors. Obviously, self-efficacy has a great deal to do with the cognitive component of the social learning theory model given that expectancies are often related to cognitive schema held and reinforced by an individual.

Positive generalized self-efficacy has been associated with assured, opportune action, ability and willingness to change and adapt, willingness to show proactive control in new situations, inclination to approach rather than avoid challenging situations, and ability to accept negative feedback without emotional upheaval (Bandura, 1982, 1984; Gist and Mitchell, 1992; Greenberger and Strasser, 1986; Locke, Frederick,

Lee, and Bobko, 1984). These outcomes derived directly or indirectly from positive self-efficacy would contribute to learning readiness, but, again, fail to capture the totality of cognitive, emotive-attitudinal, and behavioral factors that contribute to learning readiness from our perspective.

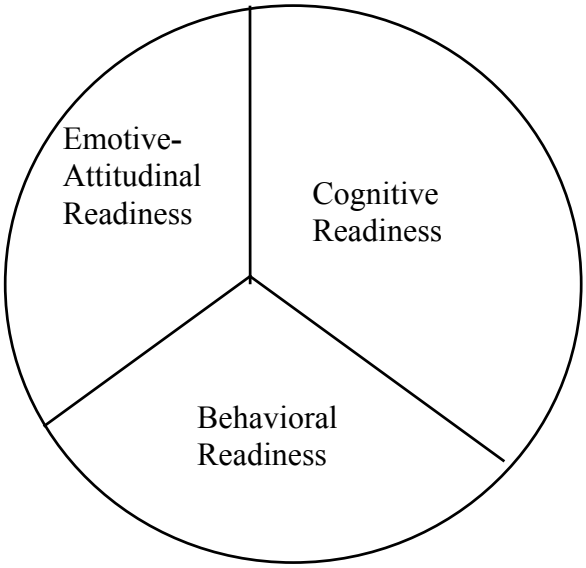
The Current Model of Learning Readiness

As noted, we are seeking to build a comprehensive, holistic model of Learning Readiness that is based within the conceptual framework of social learning/social cognitive theory. In this context we are generating and evaluating cognitive, emotive-attitudinal, and behavioral factors that are related to learning readiness. The use of a social learning operationalization of learning dynamics is not unusual. For instance, Menges and Weimer (1996) utilize a social learning framework to discuss student motivation noting that attributional patterns, self-worth, and learning strategies are important to learner motivation.

In building this model, we are also cognizant of the perspectives of Dressel (1980). This author suggests that student-centered teaching, at the core of experiential learning practice from our perspective, must consider both cognitive and affective dynamics and orientations. Obviously if both cognitive and emotive factors are viewed as related to higher order teaching and learning, they are also worthy arenas of consideration related to learning readiness.

Figure 1 depicts the social learning model we are referencing and Table 1 exhibits the categorization of the twelve initial learning readiness variables we have prescribed. It should be emphasized that this is a "work in progress" designed to move us toward a more comprehensive delineation of learning readiness factors in all three domains. We assume that the number of items in the scale will grow as our theoretical work on the topic is enriched and expanded by further study.

FIGURE 1. APPLYING SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY TO LEARNING READINESS



RESEARCH UPDATE AND RESULTS

During the summer of 1999, two experiential learning questionnaires were distributed to two random samples of ABSEL, OBTC, and Academy of Management MED members. Over 700 surveys containing the 12-item Learning Readiness scale were sent out. The Learning Readiness subsection was designed to explore the perceptions of sample participants related to the learning readiness of their reference learners. In this exploratory study, respondents rated their perspectives of their students' learning readiness, using a four-point scale ranging from "not typical" to "very typical". Unfortunately, we received only 58 responses to this initial survey. Of those respondents, 76 percent were male, the average age of the sample was 52 years, and the average length of academic experience was 18 years. Table 2 presents the means and standard deviations for each learning readiness variable and the correlation matrix for the 12 variables in the current model.

TABLE 1. LEARNING READINESS DIMENSIONS AND VARIABLES

Emotive-Attitudinal Readiness:

- Emotionally ready to assume responsibility for their own learning. (Variable 1)
- Enthusiastic about learning. (V4)
- Willing to adapt to the sometimes ambiguous and open-ended nature of experiential learning. (V7)
- Comfortable with self-direction and autonomy in learning. (V9)
- Appreciate the intrinsic value of learning. (V12)

Cognitive Readiness:

- Possess the cognitive and critical thinking skills necessary to succeed as learners. (V2)
- Aware of their own strengths and limitations. (V6)
- Readily make connections between classroom learning and "real world" applications. (V8)
- Aware of their personal values and willing to disclose them in the learning process. (V10)
- Able to integrate concepts and tools from various academic disciplines. (V11)

Behavioral Readiness:

- Willing to function in a partnership with their learning peers and facilitators. (V3)
- Adept at organizing time demands to achieve learning goals. (V5)

DISCUSSION

While the results presented in Table 2 indicate the presence of a central tendency effect, we can draw some preliminary inferences about the learning readiness dimensions with the highest and lowest mean values. On average, respondents indicated that their learners possess some, but not all, of the critical cognitive, emotive-attitudinal, and behavioral attributes necessary for engaging in experiential learning.

The highest scoring readiness dimensions include learners' willingness to partner with peers and facilitators, possession of the requisite thinking skills, enthusiasm for learning, and ability to make connections between classroom concepts and "real world" applications. These results are encouraging, as learners are perceived to have some necessary cognitive skills, enthusiastic affect, and a willingness to engage in partnering behaviors within the context of experiential learning environments.

Yet, the four lowest mean scores indicate that learners are perceived to lack sufficient comfort with self-direction and autonomy, the ability to integrate across academic disciplines, and the awareness of both their strengths and limitations as well as their personal values that may be disclosed in the learning process. Lower scores on the latter dimensions, indicating a lack of self-awareness on the part of learners, are particularly insightful in light of Dressel's (1980) emphasis on cognitive factors as prerequisites to higher order learning processes.

Several of the correlations, particularly among the emotive-attitudinal dimensions, are worthy of note and provide directions for future research. Emotional readiness to assume responsibility for learning correlates highly with other attitudinal factors, including enthusiasm for learning, comfort with autonomy in learning, and willingness to adapt to the ambiguity of experiential learning environment.

Further work in this area ultimately will afford the opportunity to subject these preliminary results to more rigorous statistical testing. Our goal at this stage of the research, though, is to refine the model of learning readiness dimensions, specify clearer indicators of each dimension for use in subsequent data gathering, and broaden the sample to include a more diverse group of respondents.

This study represents a first attempt to explore the area of learning readiness. As discussed, we feel this topic is vital to our roles as experiential educators as well as the learning processes and outcomes of tomorrow's workforce. Hence, our

goals in presenting this research at the ABSEL 2000 conference are threefold: (1) to initiate dialogue among experiential educators about a seemingly neglected topic of inquiry, (2) to explore the dimensionality of the learning readiness construct as it relates to social learning theory, and (3) to gather feedback for use in refining our research model, survey instrument, and methods.

TABLE 2: MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS, AND CORRELATIONS FOR LEARNING READINESS VARIABLES

Variable	Mean	SD	1)	2)	3)	4)	5)	6)	7)	8)	9)	10)	11)	12)
1)	2.29	.71	1											
2)	2.57	.75	.41	1										
3)	2.65	.81	.41	.25	1									
4)	2.54	.66	.61	.33	.40	1								
5)	2.21	.71	.54	.49	.30	.31	1							
6)	2.04	.68	.50	.27	.35	.16	.60	1						
7)	2.16	.80	.68	.23	.31	.48	.36	.38	1					
8)	2.54	1.04	.46	.39	.52	.50	.47	.30	.52	1				
9)	1.95	.83	.63	.45	.34	.38	.65	.35	.52	.53	1			
10)	2.04	.71	.48	.30	.12	.15	.48	.37	.49	.39	.58	1		
11)	2.11	.82	.29	.42	.16	.09	.55	.57	.36	.46	.38	.43	1	
12)	2.18	.78	.49	.37	.15	.37	.42	.09	.33	.32	.45	.30	.33	1

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