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"The Grand Experiment:" Modeling Adult Learning with Adult-Ministry Students

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Abstract. *Adult-learning theory challenges faculty to adapt their teaching to certain characteristics of adult learners, including self-direction: if adults direct the bulk of their lives outside of school, so should they be permitted to direct their own educational experiences. To what extent is self-directed learning an optimal, or even realistic, methodology for seminary teaching? Does it matter what subjects we are teaching? This essay details an experiment with self-directed learning in a seminary ministry class: what worked; what might be altered before experimenting again with this teaching methodology; how it challenges our view of ourselves as faculty to teach in this way. Student feedback from the course in question enhances our understanding of the best (and most challenging) features of the experiment.*

"We can't teach like that," I thought as I read how Malcolm Knowles began a class, "Our students don't know what they don't know!" Knowles had written, "On the opening day, I had them organize teams and develop learning plans, identifying what each person wanted to learn, how she would learn it, and how he had demonstrated that he had learned it." (Knowles 1993, 93-94). I had never in ten years of higher education and several years of teaching seen anyone teach this way; could it be viable in a seminary setting? What might be behind my instinctive aversion to the idea, and was that aversion part of a larger problem afflicting our educational system?

Thus began an adventure of exploring and experimenting with adult-learning techniques, strategies, principles, and theory. This article will detail very briefly the findings of literature on the subject of adult learning; it goes on to explore how those findings might be implemented in various ways in a seminary classroom.

A Brief Overview of Self-Directed Learning

Much has changed since the publication of Malcolm Knowles' *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: Andragogy vs. Pedagogy* (1970), later reprinted as *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: from Pedagogy to Andragogy* (1980). In this work, Knowles set forth four characteristics of adult learners which, he argued, should influence how we teach adults

differently than we would teach children. First, humans move through life from being dependent to being largely self-directed. Second, adults bring to the classroom a body of experience that can inform the learning experience, both for them and for their peers. Third, adults' orientation to learning is influenced by their developmental tasks, which leads to the fourth principle, that adults need and insist upon an immediacy of application in their learning (Knowles 1980, 43-47). These principles, Knowles suggested, should influence our teaching in a variety of ways, chiefly that teachers of adults must avoid making their students dependent or treating them as such.

Knowles himself has backed off from a hard-and-fast distinction between andragogy as for adults and pedagogy as for children, acknowledging that some adults need more structure than pure self-directed learning provides, and some children benefit from self-directed approaches to learning. The contrast between the "andragogical spirit of helping adults learn" and the "pedagogical spirit of teaching children" is still apparent in adult-learning literature, although few use the term "andragogy" anymore (Knowles 1980, 15). Knowles wrote in 1980 about a "new emphasis on education as a process of facilitating self-directed learning and a redefinition of the role of teacher as a facilitator of self-directed learning and a resource to self-directed learners" (19). Most adult-learning literature today takes self-directed learning as its starting point, and still sees the role of the teacher as more of a facilitator, but recognizes nuances in how best to nurture self-directed learning in others.

One of the more helpful resources in this regard is from Gerald Grow, who proposes what he calls a staged self-directed learning model. His model acknowledges that every student is different, and that in the same class a teacher may be required to employ different teaching/facilitation styles for students who are by nature more or less dependent. He suggests

that different teaching methods and a different role for the teacher are appropriate for certain

kinds of learners, as illustrated in this table (Grow 1991, 129).

Stage	Student	Teacher	Examples
Stage 1	*Dependent*	*Authority Coach*	*Coaching with immediate feedback. Drill. Informational lecture. Overcoming deficiencies and resistance.*
Stage 2	*Interested*	*Motivator, guide*	*Inspiring lecture plus guided discussion. Goal-setting and learning strategies.*
Stage 3	*Involved*	*Facilitator*	*Discussion facilitated by teacher who participates as equal. Seminar. Group projects.*
Stage 4	*Self-Directed*	*Consultant, delegator*	*Internship, dissertation, individual work, or self-directed study group.*

I would add that this table also lends itself to conversations about the level of self-direction

appropriate to teaching different subjects. In a seminary context, students may be learning

biblical languages (often best suited to stage-one teaching), church history (a new subject for

many, perhaps optimized by mostly stage-two teaching), and ministry (an area where many, but

not all, of them have some level of expertise, lending itself to more stage-three or even stage-four

teaching, the latter of which is certainly employed in their internship experiences). Full respect

for adult agency also challenges us to move our students in the direction of greater self-direction

in any course/subject, as Grow's research indicates. Sometimes this takes the form of providing

more choice in one assignment, or moving from the teacher's facilitating the course (or exercise)

at the beginning of the term (or class) towards having the students facilitate at the end.

Grow suggests that when a learner from one stage finds him- or herself in a classroom

with a teacher more comfortable with a different style of teaching, that mismatch may cause

severe discomfort, even animosity, from the student to the teacher. Whether very self-directed

students are chafing against a directive teacher or dependent students find themselves challenged

by a more facilitative teaching style, the challenge for the teacher is to provide resources and

learning challenges for all levels of learners in the classroom. Grow also proposes that students

can be led from states of increased dependence to more self-direction over time, and suggests several ways of doing so within one course or between beginning and advanced courses in a curriculum. He also explores how courses can combine a variety of teaching styles to meet the needs of a variety of learners and encourage a movement towards self-direction. We will explore this type of combination in a real class below.

A recent assessment of adult-learning theory observes that, while self-directed learning has been eclipsed in recent decades by newer educational trends, this does not mean self-direction is no longer important. Rather, new directions in research and application may help us "take the study of self-direction to a new level" (Merriam 2001, 10). Need more here—find the Merriam info!

A Case Study: Applying Self-Directed Learning in a Seminary Adult-Ministries Course

My experiment with applying self-directed learning in ministry courses in a seminary context has unfolded slowly, in several stages. First, I invited a group of students in my 2003 adult-ministries course to work in groups at the end of the semester to redesign the course, focusing primarily on what students should learn, but also considering how they might learn it and how they might demonstrate what they had learned. Predictably, several different redesigns ensued, with the chaplains among the students in the course proposing different content and learning methodology than the laypeople and acting church staff, whose proposals were different still from the few senior-pastor 'wannabes' in the class. After this exercise, I asked them, "What would have happened if I had asked you to do this on the first day of class—could you have done it?" The students suggested they could not have done it, because "we didn't know what was possible, and we didn't know how much we didn't know." They recognized there was some material they would not have known was important, such as adult-development theory. This is an argument for

not proceeding with a entirely self-directed approach to a course, but does not preclude the inclusion of certain aspects from time to time as the course progresses. One of the most difficult tasks of discernment in engaging adult learners is knowing when, as a faculty member, one must be more 'hands-on' and when one can move more to a facilitative role.

The following semester, I expanded my experiment with students in my communication class. On the first day of class, I gave them both the course syllabus and a handout listing general categories of material we would cover in the class from week to week. I asked them to work in groups to make two determinations: what were we covering that they believed they did not need, and what were we not covering that should be added to the class? Surprisingly, they took very little out, and their proposed additions were somewhat minimal, with the exception of a request that we cover drama ministries in the church. One student in the class was particularly passionate about drama ministries, and I invited her to make a presentation on this topic and substitute it for one of the other assignments in the class. The rest of the added topics were easily integrated into existing course sessions.

B The "grand experiment"

In the fall of 2004, with these two smaller experiments behind me, I embarked on the most radical course experiment yet, again with my adult-ministries course. I chose this course in particular because I felt it provided the best opportunity to explore and to model adult-learning theory: all the students were adults (and as such, engaged either as leaders or as participants in ministry to and with adults). Exploring adult learning not only would enhance how they as adults learned, but would also hopefully inform their work with adults in the church. On the first day of class, I distributed my normal syllabus for the course, along with a handout listing general categories of what we would normally cover in the class sessions. First I asked them to think

about what might be present in the course that did not "scratch where they itched," and also to think about what they might add. Then I proposed the twist: students would be given the option of either choosing the traditional syllabus or proposing their own individual learning plans: what did they want to learn, how would they learn it, and how would they demonstrate what they had learned? The one non-negotiable would be the assigned reading, which every student would be expected to do (this arose partly out of a desire on my part that students be given a basic set of material and tools in the area of adult ministries, and partly from the pragmatic reason that the bookstore orders had been placed several months previous, and I didn't want the books to have been ordered in vain).

I knew that in my class of nine students, three of them usually appreciated very clear direction in their assignments, and I anticipated the self-directed learning approach might make these three very nervous. I was careful to emphasize that no student was required to design their own learning; all were welcome to choose the set syllabus. I was also careful not to require students to make a decision on the first night of class; I let them consider whether they might like to embark on self-directed learning, and said we would make a decision the following week about whether to experiment in this way, and their learning plans would not be due until after that class session (our classes meet once a week for three hours at a time). I also designed a blank thermometer for students to fill in at the end of the first class, measuring their level of anxiety at the prospect of directing their own learning; this allowed me to see that most students were actually very excited, a couple were a little bit nervous, and one student was off-the-charts anxious (as I had expected, this student chose the traditional syllabus).

By the second class session, the students were ready to decide on how to proceed, and eight out of the nine students elected to try the self-directed learning option. One of my main

tasks at that point became how to sequence and organize the material and presentations the students and I would bring. We brainstormed further what kinds of topics they would like to explore, and determined who had the most passion for which topic, and also whether there were areas where some students already had some expertise they could share with the class. For example, one student had been heading up equipping ministries in his church for some time; he could easily share this expertise early on in the term. One downside to self-directed learning is that, if students are to have time to learn a new subject and prepare a presentation on it, this weights a class with a lot of student presentations later in the term, and can prevent a student from exploring more than one or two topics in any depth. Drawing on a student's own expertise allows a student to make a contribution to class earlier in the term, and they enhance their own mastery of the subject by presenting it to their classmates (this also respects the body of experience any adult brings to the classroom). I encouraged students, however, to incorporate new learning with their existing expertise, so that the learning experience in the course would be optimized for them. I am still considering the optimal blend of sharing expertise with acquiring new knowledge; should I say on learning plans that no more than 25% of a student's grade be made up of sharing existing expertise, for example?

After the second class session, I asked each student who was following the self-directed learning approach to e-mail me with a proposal of what they intended to learn, how they would learn it, and how and when they would demonstrate what they had learned. If their proposal seemed vague or unrealistic, I would propose alternatives or suggestions for clarity. I negotiated topics, learning approaches, and presentation dates with students by e-mail so that by the third class session, we had a fairly good sense of who was exploring what and when, with my presentations more common at the beginning of the term and more student presentations towards

the end. At that class session, I presented a revised syllabus to the students, with a list of who would be presenting from week to week, and on what topics. By the end of the term, I had learned that this process of negotiating learning plans needed a little more specificity to optimize the students' learning process, and I have developed a form for students to use in compiling their learning plans (see Appendix A—I have since used this form in my communications class, and am still honing how I might best include self-directed learning approaches in that and other classes).

Normally, my adult-ministries course begins with adult development, then focuses on specific characteristics and programming needs of different categories of adults. In this group of students, there were two who had a special passion for young adults and another student who wanted to learn more about adult faith development, desiring to apply her learning to spiritual direction with senior adults. This student, who is one of our strongest students, was willing to present briefly on Fowler's stages of faith comparatively early on in the course (with the understanding that her presentation would be simple), and then present later about her integration of Fowler's material with her learning on senior adults. Meanwhile, the two students passionate about young adults came up with a very strong presentation about this population—so strong, in fact, that it took up one whole evening, which we had not expected. This illustrates one challenge for a professor interested in permitting students some agency in the classroom: I had to prepare my own material in such a way that when one student took only half the time she had planned for a presentation, I could be ready with material to supplement it, and when other students' presentations were much long than they had originally planned—but fully engaging for the class—I could let go of what I had brought for that evening, or find other ways of presenting that

material. Course-management websites can provide an optimal place for ensuring that material we miss in class is still made available to students.

Presentations varied in quality and quantity, as they often do. Some students habitually embark on their learning with vigor and depth, and this showed in their presentations. Other students habitually do just enough to get by, and this showed as well (one student admitted to the whole class that he had thrown his presentation together that morning at work). I discerned partway through the course that a few students were leaping directly from "what do you want to learn" to "how will you demonstrate what you have learned" without really mastering the material en route; this prompted my revision of how they would approach their initial learning plans. When I used the reformatted learning-plan template later in another class, nobody jumped over the "how will you learn it" step.

Then there were the very memorable presentations, and the difficult question of how much correlation there is between 'memorability' and learning. The most obvious example of this is the student who wanted to explore small-group ministry in the church. He demonstrated his learning by bringing an automobile engine to class, dismantling it, labeling all the parts with analogues to small-group ministry, and inviting/teaching the class to put the engine together, while talking about small-group ministry as we did it. Overall, it was a vivid lesson in the importance of the parts of the body working together: we could both see how the engine parts fit best and experience how it was for us to work together in assembling it (with a class of nine students, one professor, and one volunteer who came to help with the assembly, it was a little crowded). Several months after the class ended, I asked my students what they remembered about small-group ministries from the presentation. As one student put it, "I was so fascinated by the motor... that I had to put what [the presenter] was saying about ministry aside to learn about

the motor. I guess that analogies have to be less interesting than what they are illustrating in order to concentrate on the main educational objective..."

Many students included with their presentations some form of handout: a bibliography, copies of PowerPoint slides, suggestions for further study, a summary of what they had learned. Upon reflection, respondents suggest that these handouts were the most valuable part of their learning, because they have something to refer back to later. This, in turn, raises the possibility that perhaps presentation of their learning on paper is all that is needed—in a larger class, we would not need 10-20 PowerPoint presentations or video clips on subjects related to the class, but could ask every student to post his or her results to a course website or distribute them in class in a form other students could access. In fact, one student said, "I would have liked to have copies of the final papers for my content knowledge." I would normally be reticent to distribute large quantities of additional reading to students who might not take the time to read it, but in this case the student feels it would be more helpful to have that material. This also reminds me that there is an interplay between exposure to material (in this case, small-groups ministry) and providing resources so that students who need more of them can go deeper (those with extensive small-groups involvement in their churches had at hand more information about this ministry, but we did not spend class time going into all of it).

A word about the experience of the one student who chose the traditional syllabus is in order here. She chose this approach because the expectations were most clear; she knew what she had to do to succeed in the class. As the semester progressed, it was interesting to see her engage with her classmates' self-directed learning. At one point, she even approached me and requested to present what *she* was learning in the class, which had not been required of her (the assignments in the syllabus were mostly written). By the time she got to her presentation date,

what she presented was completely different from what she had proposed, because she had taken her learning beyond the bounds of what the syllabus required of her. She also made a valuable contribution to my own course redesign by recommending that all students, not just those who followed the traditional syllabus, be required to complete a take-home final synthesizing their learning from the readings, material presented in-class, and assignments. I think she's right.

Her experience was an important example to me of how even a stage-one learner can be given some opportunity to shape her own learning. As I have continued to implement self-directed learning principles in other classes, I am moving towards a practice of permitting (insisting upon?) minimal self-direction by asking students to complete assignments in several different categories, but permitting choice in each category. This semester, for example, in a course on equipping and discipleship, I am asking that each student complete an assignment on radical discipleship—but there are three or four choices of assignments they can do. This means more work for me up front in designing the assignments, and there will still be students who do not want to have to choose among them. But there will also be students who feel the freedom to say, "Can I propose my own radical-discipleship assignment?"—everyone gets exposure to important principles regarding radical discipleship, but some degree of choice is present for every student.

B <u>Reflecting on our learning</u>

How to evaluate learning in a course where each student has proposed and contributed such very different things is a difficult task. Graded assessment took two forms in my adult-ministries class. I had initially asked students, in their learning plans, to propose how much the various parts of their plan should contribute to their grade, and I would assign the final grade

based on my evaluation of the quality of their work. For students who felt strong in presentations and weak in papers, this gave them the opportunity to weigh their presentations more than their papers in their final grade, and vice-versa. But by the last day of class, the whole experience had been such a participatory one, I felt uncomfortable being the only one weighing in on a student's final grade. So on the last day of class, I gave each student a form asking what they had set out to learn, how well they had actually learned it, and how well they felt they had demonstrated their learning.[1] At the end of this form, I asked them what grade they thought they should receive for the class. In most cases, the grade the student gave him- or herself was similar to the grade I would have given the student. In only one case did a student propose a higher grade than I would have given; I made it clear to that student why the grade had been lowered. In one other case, a student proposed a much lower grade than I would have been inclined to give. Interestingly, no student accused me of "bait-and-switch" for changing how grades were calculated at the end of the course, which I would have expected. I haven't yet decided whether it would be better to say to students on the first day of class, "On the last day of class, you will be allowed to participate in determining your grade," or whether this would be a disincentive for them to do their best work throughout the term.

Several months after the end of the course, I also sent my students a list of questions about their learning experience in "The Grand Experiment." I asked what they remembered from the work they had done for the class, what they remembered of their classmates' presentations, what they had retained of what they had learned (as opposed to merely remembering), and how this might compare to other courses they had taken. I also asked about optimal class size for such an experiment and what other elements of the self-directed learning approach were especially valuable (or especially frustrating). Their comments were revealing. Many cited how much they

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[1] See Appendix B.

had learned from the material they had presented (they have opportunities to present in many of their other courses, and they also learn from those). Several mentioned how each presenter's passion about the material increased the effectiveness of their presentations: "That is what makes this format great: you are getting the best information from people who are passionate about their topics." This passion contributed to our surviving a whole semester of evening classes without any disengagement on the part of any of the participants. Another student responded, "The presentations would not have been as effective if the leaders did not have a personal investment in the material."

One of the most interesting sets of comments had to do with the relationship between the community built in a small class and the retention of information. In this small class, the students got to know each other fairly well. The level of relationship the students had with each other contributed to their retention as much as anything did. During the semester, I had a guest presenter come and speak about middle adults, the population he has pastored for several years in a large local church. He had been my students' favorite guest speaker the previous year; he knows his subject very well and is capable of presenting it in an engaging way. But when my students were asked to recall the content of his presentation, even a week later they could not remember it—and several months after the course, all they could recall was that he "was really dynamic but I can't remember a thing he said." The one student who remembered it vividly was a student particularly interested in that topic.

Some students cited, not only the personal connection they had with each other, but how each presenter owned and demonstrated the material in unique ways. When asked whether they would have to do more, less, or about the same review to apply and appropriate material from this class compared to other classes, a student responded, "I think I would actually be able to do

less review. There was something about the variety of topics, presenters, and their methods that helped me to hold onto this better. Every class was different—it was like getting to open a gift every week." Even if one professor were able to summon such a variety of teaching approaches, it appears that something about the number of different presenters allows the students to recall the material better. When we think back on what each student presented, we have a mental picture of that student in the front of the classroom and can remember what material he or she was discussing that way. If a professor's face is the only one we've seen at the front of a room, remembering our learning by beginning with the face of the presenter does not allow us to make that connection.

Other comments from the students demonstrate how this experience reflected adult-learning theory. One response exhorted the seminary that "these kinds of experiments should be tested out because they make learning more personal.... Everyday [sic] we are surrounded by people, regardless of their educational level [sic] who could bring so much to the table." Again, what a student 'brings to the table' may depend in part on what we are teaching; it is one thing for adult students in ministry to contribute to a class on adult ministries, and another thing entirely for adult students in ministry to contribute to a class on Greek or church history (although many creative professors have found ways of making this happen, through giving a choice of scripture passages to translate or paper topics to research). Another appreciated the modeling of adult learning in the class: "I learned about how adults learn. Since I am probably going to be pulling our adult education program together..., this is vital info." Adult-learning theory contends that adult students are more interested in immediate application of their learning than students at earlier developmental stages may be. The student who presented out of his own expertise on equipping ministries observed, "I have been able to leverage the class papers and

presentations in my ministry context and with other colleagues interested in the Equipping

Ministry focus. In other words, the application of my increased knowledge and skills were [sic]

more immediate than in other class dynamics..."

There were also some critiques of the experiment. One student was concerned about the

uneven quality and organization of the presentations: "some of the presentations were scattered

in the sense of hard to follow the presenter's thread"—but this was not a function of the students'

having a choice about what to present so much as it was a function of which students were doing

the presenting. Another articulated a common criticism of self-directed learning, in remarking on

the optimal class size for such an experiment:

> I do think that a self learning experience like our ministry class would only work with a
> small class. It would take too much time away from necessary teaching by the Professor to
> give that much time to oral presentations from all the members of a large class, especially if
> the student contributions were of uneven quality. People pay a lot of money to learn what an
> academic expert, with many years of study under his/her belt [sic] has to offer, than to spend
> most of the class listening to amateurs doing the teaching. As students, we do need to learn
> to make presentations, but probably more on our own 'nickel' than on someone else's
> $1,000 investment in tuition.

This raises the issue of how we frame our teaching philosophies for our students. If we believe

adult learners bring some level of expertise from their own life and ministry experiences to the

classroom (especially in ministry classes), how do we best help students understand that their

expertise is comparable to the expertise of "an academic expert, with many years of study"? For

my students, learning about young adults from someone who is a young adult and is currently

engaged in working with young adults and is passionate about his topic was a vivid educational

experience. Beyond the fact that I would not have taught the topic with those particular songs,

video clips, and examples, would my academic expertise (and my own experience as a young

adult) have necessarily created a better learning experience, or merely an equivalent one? If I am

not the head of equipping ministries in my church, I can certainly study and present on the topic

for my students, as my academic qualifications have taught me how to research well and how to teach. However, my level of passion on the subject and my ability to answer student questions on the material are likely actually to be lower than those of a student who ministers in this area weekly.

This reality may be one reason for my initial aversion to Malcolm Knowles' approach, and why some professors hate conversing about adult-learning theory; it can feel like a threat to our sense of ourselves as experts, and to our control in the classroom. If I confess a student may have more expertise than I on a given subject, does it diminish me as a professor? If I give up a certain proportion of my classroom time to student presentations, am I abdicating control over what students learn? If I allow students to have a voice in their own learning, doesn't that suggest that perhaps I do not know best what they need to learn—which again might be threatening to the self-image of a long-time academic?

I should say at this point that I had the luxury of experimenting with this class because I was a junior faculty member and it was only my second time teaching it (and after the first time, it was patently clear the course needed revising—so I had nothing to lose in doing so). This would have been much harder to do had I been revising a course I had taught for many years, or a course where I was sure I knew what my students needed to know. In my reconciliation course, for example, where the emphasis is on transformative learning, there are more class sessions and assignments where students have little voice/choice in what they will be learning (although two papers allow them to customize how they will use the information they are learning). In my approach to the adult-ministries class, I had content ready to present, and did present it for the first several weeks of class. In dialoguing with students about what they were presenting, I had both the opportunity and responsibility for shaping how the class would unfold,

both in scope and in sequence. Every week when students were presenting, I had to come prepared to fill in the gaps or to provide material if a student's proposed 90-minute presentation went only 45 minutes (as did occur once). Yes, it is a challenge to my desire for control to have to work my material around the students' presentations, and to allow them all to present even if I know a given student's work is likely to be of lower quality. But is my desire for control in the classroom more important than respecting my students as adult learners, or than their desire to learn about topics that are their passion? Does a PhD necessarily mean I can and will be a more creative teacher than the student with the automobile engine? Will I be able to sustain the variety in teaching from week to week that will best engage different kinds of learners? As one participant articulated in an e-mail to me, "Overall, I remember the class for the diversity of learning experiences. There was never a dull moment. I think the combination of instructor, guest and student presentation reached a somewhat optimal balance for a class as unique as this was. Inspiring creativity in presenting to adults became the difference that made the experience. It allowed me to see that interaction, active learning and a sense of community is [sic] welcomed by our church adults."

The question of what size course might be optimal for this kind of experiment presents itself. In a class of 40 or in a much larger seminary, many professors would not know a majority of the students enrolled in their course, and could not make a determination before class began about how many students might be amenable to this methodology. Also, in a larger class there would be less time available for student presentations. I surveyed my students after the class ended about the optimal size course for such an approach, and consensus was that it could work in a group of fewer than 20 students, if presentation length were closely monitored.

B <u>What I will do differently</u>

Will I utilize self-directed learning again? Absolutely. Will I use it in every class? Probably not, although I am encouraged by this experience to see how it might be applied in other classes. Two years ago, for example, I taught a communication class in which three students were very strong communicators and three others displayed a variety of weaknesses in their communication styles. Had I utilized a more strongly self-directed learning approach in this class, the stronger communicators would have had opportunities to teach the weaker ones on areas of passion, which probably would have made the course more valuable for both groups of students. This last spring when I taught that same course, I tried this in helping my students learn to use presentation software: there were equal numbers of students in the class who knew PowerPoint or Keynote well and who wanted to learn these programs. So I paired up the experts with the novices, and one group of students practiced communication through teaching while the other group learned how to use presentation software (this worked because our classrooms have wireless capacity, and many students had laptops with them—so there were enough computers for each pair to use one, and internet access when they wanted to make use of images).

There are certain things I know I will do differently (and have done differently) next time I utilize self-directed learning. I always begin my classes by explaining that I do not believe in the banking model of education, where my job is to lift up the tops of their heads and pour content inside. In a course where students are directing most of their learning, though, it will be important to make a stronger case (and to make it more frequently) for why this is a valuable learning model. I have also created a template for a learning plan, to address two problems that came up that fall. One student had proposed that he present on three very different topics—on each one, he was also submitting a written assignment. He had chosen this as a means of

breaking his grade down into smaller segments, so no one assignment would determine a large percentage of his grade. What he had not counted on, however, was his own passion on those topics—he spent much more time than he had originally estimated on learning each topic and really burned himself out (it did not help that this was his last semester in school). So now I limit the total number of assignments a student can include in the learning plan. I am also requiring that the learning plans specify exactly how a student will go about learning more on a given subject, to counter the tendency of some students to leap over the learning stage to get to the demonstration-of-learning stage. And I will probably require that all students complete a take-home final, so they have the opportunity to integrate what they have learned from the readings with what they have learned from their own projects and those of their classmates.

If I had to distill my learnings to a set of principles on self-directed learning, here is what I would say:

1. When students are permitted some choice in what they will study, they almost invariably bring more passion to their work than if I assign it (although C.S. Lewis writes of the value of the 'journey into foreign lands' found when one pursues an assignment given by someone else as opposed to doing simply what we want to do). Even in a course where much of the curriculum is set by the instructor, specific assignments can often be customized to allow a student to explore an area of particular passion; at minimum, it may be valuable to include a statement in the syllabus encouraging students to propose alternative assignments if they can make a solid case for doing so.

2. It is important to provide a certain level of structure within which to experiment with self-directed learning, so the stage-one learners can find ways to succeed (now, all of my self-directed learning attempts begin with something like "choose one of these three…"

and allow students who prefer more initiative to propose more creative learning plans for themselves).

3. In-class presentations are not the only way students can share their expertise with one another, and may not be practical in larger classes.

4. It remains important to use required readings and integrative/summative assignments to provide some consistent exposure to and grappling with the basic body of information in a field (a new course I am designing for this fall will have resource sections on our course website for each major topic the course covers—I can post resources there, as can any student who may be exploring that topic in more depth).

5. And finally, in courses and institutions small enough for us to know our students reasonably well, we might incorporate what we know of a given student in choosing how much latitude to give him or her in customizing a learning plan (for example, if I know a student has a tendency toward laziness, I might encourage that we not include a classroom presentation as part of the learning plan and/or encourage self-directed learning for only part of the course, and completion of required assignments for the rest).

Overall, this was a fascinating experiment to have conducted. It gave me more confidence to take risks in the classroom; it provides me with tools for negotiating how best to bring students' experiences and life situations to bear upon the classroom experience; it gave students an opportunity to be intimately involved in their own learning process. I will continue to incorporate what I have studied about adult learners into my teaching on a regular basis.

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