SELF DIRECTED LEARNING APPROACHES TO DEVELOP EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE IN THE BUSINESS SCHOOL CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a pedagogical innovation designed to effectively deliver a course which could be better appreciated through learner led experience sharing and exploration. As Universities across the world are struggling with a shift in the paradigms of teaching and learning, the constructionist view of learning encourages us to consider the learner as being responsible for the planning and control of his learning process, thereby becoming self directed in the process. The Learning Conference technique, which refers to serious and common consultation, leading to self directed learning, was used for meta-reflection on learning experiences. This technique was used successfully by the researcher, at the post graduate level, to deliver a challenging course on Emotional Intelligence. Self directed learner led sessions were designed using the Learning Conference four cornerstone approach resulting in a pedagogical innovation.

KEYWORDS: Learning, Learning Conference, Pedagogical Innovation, Emotional Intelligence

INTRODUCTION

Emotional Intelligence is increasingly gaining recognition as a factor that is linked lead to better performance. Emotional Intelligence (EI) has been defined as the ability to sense, understand and effectively apply the power and acumen of emotions, as a source of human energy, information, connection and influence (Cooper & Sawaf, 2000). Emotionally intelligent individuals stand out due to their ability to empathize, persevere, control impulses, communicate clearly, make thoughtful decisions, solve problems, and work with others earn them friends and success. They tend to lead happier lives, with more satisfying relationships. At work, they are more productive, and they spur productivity in others. At school, they do better on standardized tests and help create a safe, comfortable classroom atmosphere that makes it easier to learn. It is due to this reason that business schools in many countries, including India, are looking at ways of integrating Emotional Intelligence into their curriculum.

Although generally business schools realize the significance of learning and teaching EI abilities, there are many challenges along the way. Contrary to other courses taught in a business school, a course on Emotional Intelligence development may differ on several counts such as assessment, objective and goal setting, duration of classroom sessions, choice of model of EI, amongst others. There does not exist one "right way" of “teaching” Emotional Intelligence. Due to the recency of the models and constructs in the field of EI, as well as challenges associated with them, several experimental approaches are being tested by facilitators to result in effective increase of EI in the learners.

In the primary and secondary school context, social and emotional learning, the increasingly common term for emotional intelligence instruction, can take the form of Life Skill classes, involving lessons on the hurtfulness of put-downs followed by discussions on ways to communicate “put-ups.” It may take the form of regular morning meetings, in which students share such personal feelings as the pain of their pet dying or the joy of a family outing. It can be an analysis of a conflict in a movie or a book, and a discussion about different paths the characters might have taken. It can be a common plan to take a moment to think, rather than react automatically, and often aggressively, to distress. It can be a
commitment to community service, or even a software program that lets students get a clearer idea of their reactions to risky situations.

In higher education institutes, the challenges associated with teaching EI are of a different kind. Not having learnt to attach importance to the development of EI abilities, the students approach the course in a tentative manner, with unclear goals and only with a firm belief that it must be of value. A search to understand what techniques are used by faculty to teach a course on EI revealed a reliance on case studies, role plays, stories (with a moral), discussions and write-ups related to EI abilities. Reuben, Sapienza and Zingales (2009) conducted a study to test whether EI can be taught, using pre and post course MSCEIT scores for students. The course was conducted over 16 hours, taught by David Caruso and Susan Korniacki, to teach the four branch model of Emotional Intelligence. The post test MSCEIT scores indicated an increase of 5 standard score points compared to scores of students who had taken another course. Not many studies are available to show which approach would be the best one in order to teach a course on Emotional Intelligence.

Moreover, adult learning is very different and distinct from child learning (Knowles, 1970). Knowles proposed five assumptions in andragogy, the art and science of helping adults learn. First, the adult learner is self directed and not dependent on others for direction. Ozuah (2005) affirms that the learner has a need to know about educational training or development to aid them in self directed goals so that optimum learning occurs. Second assumption of Malcolm states that adults enter the educational setting with more experience than children, and often incorporate their life experiences into their learning process. These learnings are shared with other learners, enabling the learners to learn from each other.

The third assumption is the adult’s readiness to learn new information that enhances their lifestyles and meets their educational needs. The fourth assumption states that adult learners have a life-centered, task centered or problem solving orientation to the learning process, as they see education as an aid in learning to deal with life’s problems. The fifth assumption states that adult learners are motivated externally, but internal motivation has a bigger effect on their lives.

The andragogical model of Knowles thus assumes that there are resources other than the faculty, that have specialized skills and knowledge. The constructivist view of learning demands that students become responsible for planning and controlling their learning process and thus become self-directed learners. Numerous researchers such as Richard Boyatzis have written extensively about the significance and efficacy of self directed learning.

This paper describes an innovative design of a self directed learner led approach in a higher educational setting, to develop Emotional Intelligence abilities, based on principles of adult learning and self directed learning. While a faculty centered approach would work well in imparting information and providing instruction, it may have limited impact in sessions centered around the self development of individual learners. This approach was found to enhance individual and group learning, while providing a structured way to self reflect, share and develop abilities of EI.

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Emotional Intelligence is fast emerging as one of the most widely discussed aspects of intelligence in literature. Though systematic research in this field is only a decade old, researchers have claimed to have made important strides in understanding the nature, components, determinants, effects and modes of modification of the construct of Emotional Intelligence. It is being claimed that EI predicts important occupational criteria far beyond than those predicted by general intellectual ability.

There is an increasing body of research highlighting the promising role of EI in leadership capabilities. Some prominent EI advocates suggest that EI is the crucial difference between an average leader and effective leader with close
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to 90 percent of an effective leader success being attributable to EI (Goleman, 1998). While no study to date has been able to demonstrate that EI can be attributed to 90 percent of effective leadership, the cumulative research on EI does show every indication that it can be predictive of performance and is in fact a construct worthy of research with the field of leadership (Van Rooy & Viswesvaran, 2004).

Goleman (1995, 1998) defined Emotional Intelligence as the ability to be aware of and to handle one’s emotions in varying situations. He claimed that Emotional Intelligence includes such things as self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skill. Goleman (1998) stated that although IQ and technical skills are important aspects of leadership, emotional intelligence is the most essential contributor to effective leadership.

Bar-On (1997) viewed emotional intelligence as an array of competencies and skills that influence both an individual’s ability to succeed in life and an individual’s general, psychological well-being. These competencies and skills make up the personal, emotional and social dimensions of intelligence by asserting that the focus of emotional intelligence is on the personal, emotional and social competencies and not on the cognitive dimensions of intelligence should be separate from general intelligence.

The ability model of EI is the most theoretically well clarified, being developed over a series of articles appearing in the 1990s (Mayer and Salovey, 1993; 1997; Salovey and Mayer, 1990). This framework conceptualizes EI as intelligence in the traditional sense consisting of a conceptually related set of mental abilities to do with emotions and the processing of emotional information. Mayer and Salovey (1997) have fully operationalized EI according to a four-branch hierarchical model from basic psychological processes to higher more psychologically integrated processes. These four core abilities of the model are further operationalized to include four specific skills related to each, forming a 4 x 4 or 16 ability – based model of emotional intelligence (Mayer and Salovey, 1997).

The four areas of EI as specified by Mayer and Salovey are

- Identifying emotions- the ability to recognize one’s own feelings and those of others around them.
- Understanding Emotions – Emotional Knowledge, that is the ability to recognize transition of one emotion to another
- Using emotions- the ability to access an emotion and reason with it
- Managing emotions – the ability to self regulate emotions and manage them in others.

Performing a factor analysis of intelligence measures, Davies, Stankov, and Roberts (1998) found that emotional intelligence is indeed independent of the fluid and crystallized abilities that are associated with general intelligence. This evidence suggests that emotional intelligence is a separate construct from general intelligence. In addition to being a separate construct, several authors have suggested that emotional intelligence is a better predictor of performance than general intelligence (Goleman, 1995; O’Neil, 1996).

Much of the popular press espoused the benefits of Emotional Intelligence as the key foundation to an organisations’ success (Cooper & Sawaf, 1997; Goleman, 1995) These key benefits were supported through a great deal of anecdotal evidence and some academic studies. Abraham (1999) conceptualised emotional intelligence within the framework of the organization. This conceptualization consisted of nine propositions of emotional intelligence ranging from its relationship with workgroup cohesion, performance, organizational commitment and organizational citizenship. Caruso & Wolfe (2001) explored the role of emotional intelligence in the workplace. Through their case study writings
they laid the foundation for empirical studies into the relationships between emotional intelligence and (a) career development (b) selection (c) training and (d) management development.

Feldman (1999) discussed emotionally intelligent leadership as the development and application of emotional and social skills to positively influence others. He stated that there are two sets of skills present in emotional intelligence, core skills and higher-order skills. The core skill set consists of several specific individualized skills:

- Knowing yourself
- Maintaining control
- Reading others
- Perceiving accurately, and
- Communicating with flexibility.

The higher-order skill set also contains several specific skills:

- taking responsibility
- generating choices
- embracing a vision
- having courage, and
- demonstrating resolve.

Feldman suggested that the combination of core and higher-order skills leads to effective leadership because emotionally intelligent individuals are aware of others’ needs and are able to effectively respond to any situation.

**SELF DIRECTED LEARNING**

Self-directed learning seeks to put the learner as much as possible in control of the learning process. It is the learner rather than an institution, a teacher or a learning program who chooses the educational objectives, emphases and learning strategies. Learners set their own goals, analyze a given problem, observe the learning progress and assess the learning results. However, in some contexts, where the content may have to be predecided by the faculty, it may not be practical to demand completely autonomous learning.

Self-directed learning poses high demands on the personality of the learners because of their responsibility for the learning process. That is why the demands of the learning environment should be in balance with the competences of the learners for self-directed learning. For self-directed learning, a learner should have the following competences:

- self-observation, self-reflection, self-judgment
- development of own objectives
- reactivation of initial knowledge
- autonomous organization of learning (e.g.: time management)
- autonomous development of learning motivation and concentration
- development of learning and problem solving strategies
- knowing when to seek the assistance of other learners or the tutor

Often students are only used to learning in a teacher-directed setting, so a long term goal of education institutes should be to develop these competences for self-directed learning. To allow typical learners to perform well in a self-
directed setting, they need support by a faculty who can help with organizing the learning process, solve technical problems and answer questions regarding the content.

The general question in designing environments for self-directed learning is what degree of self-directed learning is suitable for which goals, what type of students and under which conditions.

SELF DIRECTED LEARNING AND ADULT EDUCATION

For several decades, self-directed learning (SDL) has been a major focus of adult education (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999) although the notion of its centrality in adult learning tends to be assumed without question (Rowland and Violet, 1996, p.90). Controversies and misconceptions about the definition and dimensions of SDL continue to arise. SDL is based in the autonomous, independent individual who chooses to undertake learning for personal growth (Merriam and Caffarella 1999). Braman’s (1998) review of literature suggests that the SDL construct has been primarily based in individualistic attitudes and values, in keeping with the viewpoint that lifelong learning has primarily instrumental objectives related to individual responsibility and work force development.

Another school of thought stresses the social construction of knowledge and the social context of learning. One of Brookfield’s criticisms of SDL research (cited in Long 1994) was that it ignored social context by focusing on the individual, isolated learner. Maehl (2000) asks, “Is self-directed learning possible if knowledge is socially or culturally constructed (p.51), while Merriam and Caffarella (1999) call for wider recognition of the interdependent and collaborative aspects of SDL.

In British open learning centers, O Mahony and Moss (1996) found that adult basic education students “identified a common bond and developed a collective self – direction” (p.30) through work on a student committee; they also enhanced their sense of individual self – direction. O Mahony and Moss(1996) also noted that SDL can be used just as any other approach to deliver a traditional curriculum or dominant ideology. Percival (1996) distinguishes between learning as a social activity (constructivist view) and as a socialized, conditioned response (the behaviorist view), noting the oppressive potential of behaviorism.

Of all the models of SDL they reviewed, Merriam and Caffarella (1999) find that Hammond and Collins model is the only one that “explicitly addresses the goal of promoting emancipatory learning and social action as a central tenet of self-directed learning” (p. 304). In Hammond and Collins model, learners critically examine the social, political and environmental contexts that affect their learning and they develop both personal and social learning goals. However, Merriam and Caffarella found no studies using this model as a conceptual framework.

In order for self-directed learning to achieve its emancipatory potential ‘certain political conditions must be in place’ (Brookfield 1993,p.227). Organizational culture may limit learner control over the educational environment. Marginalized or low – income groups may have limited access to learning resources (Merriam and Caffarella 1999). Gray (1999) proposes that the Internet may be “one of the most powerful and important self-directed learning tools in existence” (p.120), however gender and income imbalances still exist among users, vested interests may act influence what is transmitted and who has access to it. According to the visionary Malcolm Knowles, by 2020 all learning from elementary school through post graduate education – will be based on the principles of self-directed learning (Hatcher,1997).

SELF DIRECTED LEARNING THROUGH LEARNING CONFERENCE TECHNIQUE

In trying to design the course on Emotional Intelligence, one of the challenges experienced by the author was to be able to conduct the course on Emotional Intelligence skill development without relying on the traditional lecture mode.
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or the case study vehicle. The objective led to the examination of various experiential techniques based on self directed learning and their suitability to the classroom environment. The Learning Conference was found to be an apt tool for organizing and conducting the sessions.

The term Learning Conference in the context of Self directed Learning refers to the common consultation of all people involved in the Learning process, stressing the seriousness and importance of common consultation for achieving self directed learning. Thus it is a participation based model. The application of the Learning Conference was described by Kemper/Klein (1998) and cited by Klein, Reutter, Schelepa and Wenzig in their article The Conception, Counselling of Learning, on the basis of four cornerstones:

- Individual Reflection
- Report Round
- Interaction and group reflection
- Feedback to the moderator of the Learning Conference

These four cornerstones offer a structured way to reflect on individual learning as a process and to take over responsibility by active participation and joint decision. In the Individual Reflection stage, the learners carry out self reflective practices by themselves, with or without a framework provided by the facilitator. In the Report Round, the learners come together physically as a group to share what their experiences and learnings around the focus area have been. In the subsequent Interaction and group reflection round, the group as a whole discusses, clarifies, reflects, probes and crystallizes the data generated.

In the last round Feedback to the moderator of the Learning Conference, the group concludes their discussion and sharing process, followed by a round of summarizing the key learnings of the group, conducted by the moderator. The learners assume responsibility for the moderation of the process and individual reflection is facilitated by the pre-work assessment sheets done by the learners. The Learning Conference has been described as a platform for meta-reflection on learning experiences.

The author decided to implement the Learning Conference (LC) technique based on the principles of self directed learning for the conduction of the course on Emotional Intelligence because of the following reasons:

- Learners participate in setting their own learning personal agenda within a broader framework of group learning goals.
- A safe learning environment would enable experimentation and practice of new behaviors in place of older unchallenged and reactive behaviors. Experimentation and practice are most effective when they happen in conditions in which the learner feels safe (Kolb and Boyatzis,1970b).
- Acceptance of experiences and data from a peer group would be higher
- Social relatedness would promote the motivation of the students
- Students can help each other
- Students acquire social competence in team work.
- Competences of self directed learning would develop in the group members resulting in life long learning experiences

In the second year of the MBA program at a renowned School of Business Management in Mumbai, the course on Emotional Intelligence is offered to the students as an elective. The course is placed in the last trimester and is open to
students from various management functional areas. The only prerequisite is an understanding of the basic organizational behavior course offered in the first year. The course is conducted by a trained faculty over 20 sessions, each session 90 minutes long.

The course begins with introductory sessions aimed at informing learners about the various EI models, definitions, latest research findings and the potential of the concept to increase one’s effectiveness. These sessions were led by the faculty. The subsequent sessions introduced the Learning Conference technique in a structured way. The constant attempt of the faculty was to develop a class environment which was supportive, nurturing and conducive to self-examination and learning.

Students were provided with self report assessment sheets and worksheets to be completed before each session. Each worksheet dealt with a specific EI skill as its focus area, and required indepth self reflection and analysis on the part of the student in a structured way. A Learning Conference moderator was nominated for every LC and was provided with details on how to conduct a successful Learning Conference. Clear norms of participation, group work, commitment to pre-work, ownership around class learning were discussed and laid down. Learners were explained the importance of creating a supportive group atmosphere and were asked to maintain the confidentiality of the personal experiences shared by the learners.

Each student had to compulsorily participate in the discussions and this was the responsibility of the LC moderator. The class seating arrangement was a closed circular one, so that each student could see the others and have an opportunity to speak without any physical barrier between the student and the class. This also created the image of a group working and discussing together, shifting the focus away from the faculty positioned outside the circle.

The session was begun by the LC moderator, with an introduction to the EI skill in focus and its significance. The LC moderator would then invite the group to volunteer and talk about their scores. Each section of the assessment sheet and the self reflective worksheet was discussed by the entire group. The process relied on personal contribution, ie, students sharing their personal meanings, understanding, experiences and opinions, and mindful listening, ie, listening actively to every other group member in order to understand them and their perspectives.

At the end of a discussion on every section of the worksheets, the moderator would summarize the key discussion points for the group. This would be followed by inviting group members to speak on the exercise conducted and give feedback. The Learning Conference would then close with the faculty’s feedback and inputs, as required. The learners would be urged to implement learnings derived in the session and share feedback with the group in subsequent sessions.

EVALUATION OF THE LEARNING CONFERENCE TECHNIQUE

The Learning Conference technique offered the faculty the flexibility to have broad preset learning goals for the course, which were achieved through the group work in class. Total autonomy to the learners, especially in terms of setting their own learning goals, may not have been effective, due to the unfamiliarity with the EI concept. Moreover, there is bound to be subjectivity in the experiencing and management of emotions and the related EI skills. The LC technique offered the advantage of legitimizing this subjectivity and making it a source of learning, by making it the focus of discussions.

The preclass worksheets and assessment sheets, on the other hand, ensured that all students were going through similar self assessment processes ensuring consistency in process and providing a similar framework for discussing and examining a particular EI ability.
The LC moderator styles and effectiveness and the groups response to the role was examined. The faculty found that some of the LC moderators liked to work in an orderly manner ensuring that each person spoke in turn, whereas others preferred to allow students to volunteer in a random manner. While the former way provided and reinforced structure, the latter encouraged initiative and welcomed repeated participation. The group was deferential to the moderator role and complied with norms set without letting this affect their opinions and thoughts.

Peer respect was generated during this process. The Learning Conference mode ensured an inclusive way to allow expression of each student. Learners were forced to be in a situation where active listening was required. This challenged their assumptions, forcing them to relook at how they make judgments about others in the same setting. Respect towards each learner based on their participation increased.

Increased sensitivity towards group members was found with a better appreciation of the view points of others. Articulation and expression of values, beliefs and assumptions increased and learners increasingly became comfortable in sharing data and experiences of a personal nature.

Mindful listening to and acceptance of values, beliefs and assumptions of others in the group also increased. This was especially important in the section discussing coping strategies. It was observed that the group provided evidence of the development of supportive, appreciative and powerful group norms which drive learning. Ownership of sessions by the group as a whole increased.

A critical finding was that the ability to self reflect was repeatedly demonstrated by the learners although the degree and depth may have varied.

The feedback on the course was considered an important parameter to understand the effectiveness of the Learning Conference technique. The feedback scores indicated that the learners appreciated the use of the LC technique and the process by which they were able to participate in generating learning for each other.

Another important parameter was the level of participation during the sessions in addition to the depth of self analysis being conducted. The high level of participation in the sessions indicated that the learners felt safe about sharing their emotional experiences, thought patterns, successes, failures, triggers and coping strategies. A supportive group atmosphere developed progressively with a sharp focus on learning from, and through each other. The participation in the class and contribution to the discussion relied on a fair amount of self reflection and self analysis conducted beforehand. Although a few group members were at times unable to complete their worksheets, the majority of the class did indepth analysis work with the sheets.

**IMPLICATIONS**

This educational experiment answers to Merriam and Cafarella(1999)’s call for integrating self directed learning processes into formal educational context, especially in higher educational institutes. The attempt of introducing the Learning Conference technique in a higher educational setting to teach abilities of Emotional Intelligence was a fairly successful one. The success of this approach should provide impetus to its widespread use in other educational settings. Since self directed Learning may become an important way to learn in the future, developing the competences of Self Directed Learning would prove to be advantageous to learners. This approach may be replicated in other functional areas to test its suitability and effectiveness. Since this approach increases awareness of how learning happens for the individual the learners develop a new perspective about the mechanism of learning and are able to transport it to other contexts, such as the context of learning in a fast moving, chaotic environment.
The work reported has implications for future research as well as practice. Important research areas could be studying the efficacy of other methods to teach Emotional Intelligence courses in relation to the Learning Conference technique. Training on EI for corporate executives could also be relooked at, by incorporating the technique of Learning Conference. Practitioners should be cautious while designing environments for self-directed learning and by assessing the degree of self-directed learning which might be suitable, while keeping in mind the profile and competences of the learners.

CONCLUSIONS

Self directed learning, being an important part of adult education, is a goal of adult education as well as leads to successful learning (Merriam, 2001). Though self directed learning is fairly well researched area, studies relating it to learning Emotional Intelligence in the context of higher educational institutes, especially in India are few and far between. This can thus become a new area of exploration, given that development of EI abilities is seen as key to success in career and life goals.

Further research related to self directed learning for development of critical skills and abilities would eventually lead to sustainable learning experiences.

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