

Supporting Students through Role Redefinition: A Self-Determination Theory Perspective

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Abstract

Self-determination theory (SDT) is a well-established theory of motivation that posits that we grow optimally to the degree to which we are afforded *autonomy support*, the collective term for the provision of opportunities to satisfy our needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence. Although Ryan and Niemiec (2009) suggest that self-determination theory can be “critical and liberating,” I trouble their assertion, and propose that redefining the student role is an essential form of autonomy support if we wish to follow through on these possibilities. To that end, I undertook a narrative inquiry into five students’ experiences in a set of non-traditional university courses. Once these students redefined their roles, they engaged more agentially in other courses by expressing themselves more, taking more risks, and even standing up to miseducative instructors on their own and their peers’ behalves. They came to perceive themselves as agents of change in their institutions and in other arenas, following through on the critical and liberating potential of SDT that Ryan and Niemiec had envisioned. This study has broad implications for how we engage with

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students and structure our institutions, as well as how we conduct SDT research, if we wish to capitalise on this potential.

Keywords: self-determination theory; autonomy support; radical collegiality; transformative learning; student roles; agentic engagement; defiance; critical pedagogy

Introduction

Originally developed by Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan some 40 years ago, self-determination theory (SDT) is an empirically based, cumulatively built macro-theory of motivation, emotion, and personality (Vansteenkiste, Niemiec, and Soenens 2010). According to SDT, we are anything but passive agents who are pushed and pulled by environmental stimuli; rather, we are active agents who choose what to do with the opportunities that external stimuli present to satisfy our needs (Deci and Ryan 1985; 2000; Ryan and Niemiec 2009). The contexts we are embedded in foster or thwart this propensity towards growth and motivation to the degree that they provide opportunities to satisfy our basic psychological needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence (Deci and Ryan 2000). The need for autonomy is the need to feel one's actions emanate from one's own self; the need for relatedness is the need to care for and feel cared for by others; and the need for competence is the need to feel that one is effective in the world. The provision of opportunities to meet psychological needs is collectively referred to as autonomy support, and the opposite of autonomy support is referred to as control. In general, autonomy-supportive instruction is characterised as a move away from educators "[being] controllers, monitors, and trainers to being facilitators, guides, and supporters of development" (Ryan and Niemiec 2009, 270).

In this article, Ryan and Niemiec's main argument is that an empirically derived theory such as SDT can be "critical and liberating." As Henry Giroux states, "critical pedagogy ... is ... about encouraging students to take risks, act on their sense of social responsibility, and engage the world as an object of both critical analysis and hopeful transformation" (2011, 14). Cook-Sather adds that critical pedagogy has a commitment to "redistribute power not only within the classroom, between teacher and students, but also in society at large" (2006, 365). However, SDT has not yet framed itself in such daring ways. Ryan and Niemiec take care to redefine the role of the teacher, "away from viewing [them] as controllers, monitors, and trainers to being facilitators, guides, and supporters of development" (2009, 270), but do not concomitantly redefine the roles of students.

In suggesting that schools and educators “can become liberators,” they situate students as passive objects of liberation, and not agents in their own right. But Freire himself argued that a liberatory pedagogy had to be “forged *with*, not for,” those it intends to liberate (1972, 33).

Reeve and Tseng’s (2011) proposal of the addition of agentic engagement to our definition of student engagement introduces the possibility in SDT that students themselves can be agents of their own liberation. Engagement, which is the publicly observable manifestation of private, unobservable motivational processes, had previously been conceptualised as consisting of three different aspects: behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement (Reeve 2012). Behavioural engagement is indicated by such observable behaviours as on-task attention, effort, and persistence. Emotional engagement is indicated by expressions of “task-facilitating” emotions such as interest and enthusiasm, and the absence of “task-withdrawing” emotions such as frustration and anxiety. Cognitive engagement is indicated by the use, for example, of sophisticated learning strategies and self-regulatory strategies such as planning. However, as Bandura (2006) notes, agency is not only exercised individually, but also by proxy—through influencing others who may act on our behalves—and collectively. Therefore, Reeve defines agentic engagement as “the process in which students proactively try to create, enhance, and personalize the conditions and circumstances under which they learn” (2012, 161).

Although Ryan and Niemiec (2009) argue that SDT acknowledges the importance of giving voice, a review indicates that student voices are still all but absent in the empirically derived self-determination literature. Research on agentic engagement repeatedly characterises agentic engagement as “constructive” contribution to and engagement in classroom instruction (see e.g. Reeve and Tseng 2011). However, from a social constructionist perspective, researchers’ and instructors’ ability to define what constitutes a “constructive” contribution grants them power and serves to marginalise alternate ways students might choose to express their agency (Burr 2015).

In his 1999 article introducing the concept of *radical collegiality*, Fielding speaks of “plac[ing] students firmly within the collegium, not merely as objects of teachers’ professional gaze, but as agents in the process of transformative learning” (22). This is SDT’s agentic engagement taken to its logical end, encompassing the full dialectic of not only students learning from and being

influenced by their teachers, but teachers learning from and being influenced by their students and students learning from and being influenced by other students. If we marry the role of teacher as facilitator that Ryan and Niemiec (2009) suggest with, for example, the role of “students as radical agents of change” that Fielding’s 2001 article of the same name suggests, we now have a more complete picture of what a truly autonomy-supportive and liberating education might look like.

The Current Study

This paper attempts to follow through on the critical and liberatory potentials that Ryan and Niemiec suggest are embedded in SDT by asserting that redefining the role of students in tandem with redefining the role of educators is key to this process of liberating with and not for, and thus a powerful form of autonomy support. To this end, I examine the experiences of role redefinition of students in a set of non-traditional courses at one institution of higher education.

The context of the study was a set of six expressive arts courses called Interdisciplinary Expressive Arts (IDEA) that had been offered by Kwantlen Polytechnic University in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia, Canada. These courses were electives open to students in any discipline. They used the expressive arts (visual arts, writing, music, drama, and dance and other movement practices), contemplative practices such as meditation and t’ai ch’i, and nature and travel activities as jumping off points for discussion and development of self-awareness, creativity, leadership, and other personal growth. I (the first author) knew about these courses because I had taken a number of them myself, and my research questions were prompted by my own experiences.

The purpose of this narrative study was to explore the lived experiences of long-term students in IDEA, focusing on the processes by which they were encouraged to redefine their role as students. Thus, the central research question I considered in this study is: What are IDEA students’ lived experiences of role redefinition in the context of their IDEA courses?

Because I wished to propose role redefinition as a form of autonomy support, and because I wished to explore how agentic engagement plays out when students have redefined their roles, I also focused on the following subquestions: 1) Does role redefinition emerge as part of students’ experiences of transformation? 2) How did IDEA instructors and peers foster this process of role

redefinition? 3) What impact has this role redefinition had on how they engage with their educations? 4) What impact has this role redefinition had on how others in their educational contexts engage with them?

Employing narrative inquiry as my methodology permitted me to capture the temporal element of transformation—the before, during, and after. It was also a particularly appropriate methodology with which to examine SDT because both my methodology and theoretical framework acknowledge the ongoing influence of context.

Methodology

“The qualitative researcher,” writes Stake, “emphasizes episodes of nuance, the sequentiality of happenings in context, the wholeness of the individual” (1995, xii). So, while SDT posits a common human nature that Ryan and Niemiec (2009) argue is a basis for the use of quantitative methods that produce generalisable results, they also acknowledge an alliance with qualitative researchers in their acknowledgement of learning as situational and meaning as constructed. According to SDT, there is not a direct correspondence between teachers’ behaviours and students’ motivation; the relationship is mediated by how teachers’ behaviours are perceived and interpreted by students, as well as students’ own histories, motivational orientations, and internal regulatory processes. Thus, qualitative research’s interest in “understanding ... interpretations ... at a particular point in time and in a particular context” (Merriam 2002, 4) was germane to our aims. Further, as Perry, Brenner, Collie, and Hofer (2015) discuss, the survey self-report methods widely used in SDT research limit participants’ responses to researcher-defined constructs. And by potentially denying participants the ability to choose responses they fully endorse, such research methods deny participants autonomy and voice for the sake of expedience.

Narrative inquiry was a particularly appropriate methodology with which to examine SDT because both the methodology and theoretical framework of this study acknowledge the ongoing influence of context. Although the study focused more narrowly on autonomy support, agentic engagement, and role redefinition, SDT acknowledges that the degree to which our needs are met over time determines our *causality orientations*, the relatively stable individual motivational profiles that develop over time, through our interactions in different social contexts (Deci and Ryan 1985; Ryan

and Deci 2002; Vansteenkiste, Niemiec, and Soenens 2010). Echoing Clandinin and Connelly's assertions about behaviours as narrative expressions (2000, 25), we might also say that engagement is the expression of individual stories within a particular context at a particular time. And as Fraser (2004) discusses, narrative interviewing may uncover hidden ideas that challenge "official accounts and established theories"; this is precisely the reason I employed narrative inquiry in this study.

Participants in this study were five individuals—four women and one man—who had taken multiple IDEA courses, and who identified as having transformed *as students* as a result of their involvement in IDEA. I wished to consider a different way of engaging in research that more explicitly honours students' voices as well as their competencies, by framing those whose narratives I solicited not simply as data sources, but more radically, as colleagues and collaborators, an approach consistent with much of the research conducted in a students-as-partners paradigm (Fielding 2001). Implicit in my reframing of participants as colleagues and collaborators was the possibility of participants as co-authors, which necessitated a wider range of confidentiality options such as those suggested by Kaiser in her 2009 article on protecting respondent confidentiality. As Giordano, O'Reilly, Taylor, and Dogra (2007) point out, making assumptions about participants' anonymity and confidentiality denies them autonomy and voice, two outcomes that are distinctly contradictory to the aims of this study. Participants Abbey, Chelanna, Connell, and Sana chose to use their real names and be included as co-authors. "Maya" opted to use a pseudonym. The voices that are represented here are just five of the voices that could have represented IDEA; to include some was to necessarily exclude others.

I used interviews as my primary source of data, although I welcomed participants to provide other materials such as written course reflections, as well as any further thoughts that they deemed pertinent to the study. None chose to contribute additional materials; the additional data consisted solely of feedback they offered through our e-mail conversations. After conducting semi-structured interviews with participants, I edited the interviews into narrative form, putting them into chronological order as much as possible but not substantially altering participants' words, and asked them to review and approve these co-constructed narratives for fidelity.

Heather Fraser (2004) offers a straightforward guide to her method of narrative analysis, which I used as guidance in conducting my cross-narrative thematic analysis. Engaging with participants as collaborators, I also solicited their feedback and thoughts throughout the process about their peers' narratives (with permission), my draft data analysis, and a complete draft of the manuscript. I asked them to pay particular attention to the portions of their narrative I included, and if necessary correct my interpretations thereof, even if they chose not to review the entire manuscript.

Data Analysis

Based on my analysis and interpretation, participants' narratives indicated that redefining the role of students was indeed a crucial part of the transformations they underwent in IDEA. They emerged from IDEA as individuals who felt in control of their post-secondary educations, and who increasingly recognised their own authority, particularly when it came to decisions about their own learning and lives. They also built the skills and resources to better cope with contexts that weren't always need supportive.

To be clear, not all IDEA students may have undergone a transformation like the ones participants describe, nor did all IDEA students necessarily view their experiences as positively as the participants in the current study. However, examining the range of IDEA students' experiences was outside of the scope of the study; the focus was on the phenomenon of student role redefinition and how it might function as a form of autonomy support under SDT.

Role Redefinition

Themes of transformation through role redefinition were present in all of the narratives, but they appeared most strongly in Maya's narrative. Maya specifically described this process of reclaiming her authority over her own education:

For the most part you see this teacher as, like, the head, and you just need to obey them. And I found a lot of teachers have that sort of mentality that they expect that from you as well, but with [IDEA], your life is about you, for the most part, so take control of it. I did, eventually, get to the point where I didn't see teachers necessarily as special, or up there, or they're in charge. No, I'm like, "This is my education. I'm learning from you. I'm paying my tuition, so if I need to talk to you about something, we're gonna talk."

As Sana describes, IDEA levelled out the teacher–student hierarchy, with the instructor and students meeting as peers or colleagues:

[The IDEA instructor] did not take on the role of a traditional professor ... He was one of us. He sat down with us, and that, in itself, is a huge role-breaking ... Even when we took creative writing, we would join the desks together in a square or a circle, but you could always tell where the teacher was sitting ... IDEA really challenged that, and broke down that traditional sense of who's who.

Maya also characterised the relationship between instructor and students in IDEA as a partnership, and one in which students were encouraged to take more control and supported in doing so. For Sana, reconceptualising the student–teacher relationship as a partnership rather than as one in which someone else had power over her radically altered whether she was willing to seek help and show vulnerability: crucial moves if one wishes to develop competence.

Role Redefinition as a Transformative Process

Drawing on Meyer and Land's notion of a *threshold concept*—a “transformed way of understanding” (2003, 1)—Cook-Sather and Luz's (2015) work describes student–faculty partnerships as a threshold concept both students and faculty may initially struggle with and find “troublesome.” As Fielding and Rudduck assert, “What students have to say about teaching and learning may be feared as personally challenging or as threatening to the institution” (2002, 3). However, threshold concepts, once transcended, tend to be irreversible (Cook-Sather and Luz 2015); students who fully assume the role of partners experience a shift in their sense of self that reflects an epistemological maturity. They see themselves not only as consumers of knowledge, but also producers of it (Cook-Sather and Luz 2015), a conceptual shift that increases their possibilities for exercising both autonomy and competence.

This description reflects the nature of role redefinition as a process of transformative learning. For Mezirow, transformative learning is a process that involves exploring, trying on, building competence in, and integrating new roles and relationships (cited in Kitchenham 2008). It requires first becoming “critically aware of the cultural and psychological assumptions that have influenced the way we see ourselves and our relationships and the way we pattern our lives” (Mezirow 1978, 101), assumptions he refers to as *meaning perspectives*. He characterises maturity as the process of moving towards meaning perspectives that, among other things, enhance our sense of agency.

Cook-Sather and her colleagues' notions of learning partnerships and Fielding's notion of radical collegiality are two such meaning perspectives. Like Cook-Sather and Luz, Mezirow (1978) recognises the often threatening nature of this process of challenging assumptions, as well as its irreversible nature.

For Maya, who seemed to have had the most controlling history of my participants, the transformation through role redefinition that IDEA asked of her was quite challenging, and most closely resembled the uncomfortable process of wrestling with and transcending a threshold concept. She explained,

At this point, I've had I don't know how many years of schooling, including high school and stuff like that, in this one way. And now [IDEA] is trying to change everything ... It was definitely hard, and I felt that I definitely resisted it. I almost felt angry sometimes, because I just wasn't getting it. But if you keep going, and you really open yourself up and allow yourself to do things differently ... I feel like you'll do well.

Abbey in particular had a difficult time going back to the way things had been before, a characteristic of transcending a threshold concept. IDEA had been under continual pressure from the administration to conform to its strictures. Although Abbey had initially begged for more structure in IDEA courses, she had become a fundamentally different person by the time she received it, and thus rejected it:

And, like I said, the fact that I feel like the administration, or the bureaucratic pressure, made him structure those courses, I was disappointed, to be honest, in those courses. I was disappointed and it made me sad that he had a full outline. And because I had had those conversations with him at the beginning, now this is three classes after that first one, I think? I got an outline, and I was like, "What the hell is this? What is this? What are you doing? I don't want this." He's like, "Well, you got what you asked for." And it came with assigned books and shit. And I didn't want that.

But how did IDEA produce such a radical transformation in at least some of its students? In the next section I will discuss a variety of ways in which IDEA fostered this process.

Supporting Role Redefinition

Rich provision of forms of autonomy support that have already been identified in the SDT literature constituted necessary but not sufficient conditions for this transformative process of role redefinition; while students had some classroom experiences outside of IDEA that they

characterised as autonomy supportive, these stopped short of fostering the process of role redefinition. I will first discuss their experiences of control and autonomy support, and then the ways in which IDEA specifically fostered role redefinition.

Providing Autonomy Support

Participants indicated that their post-secondary experiences prior to their engagement with IDEA were often quite controlling, and these controlling experiences failed to satisfy their needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence, or even actively thwarted satisfaction of these needs. The amount of control varied by discipline; business and the sciences were perceived as more controlling, while creative writing in particular was perceived as generally being more autonomy supportive. Under the conditions of strong external control that constituted much of their university experience, participants did not feel as though they were in charge of their educations and their learning process, they did not feel connected to peers, and they felt limited in their ability to expand their competence in the ways they wished. As such, they felt demoralised, disengaged, “stressed out,” and sometimes even physically ill.

The process of role redefinition in IDEA, however, occurred against a backdrop of autonomy-supportive teaching practices. Participants were free to choose their own project topics, the products they produced, and the process they went about to produce them. They were encouraged to expand their competence, and given positive messages about their ability to do so. A sense of relatedness with instructors and among peers was cultivated through providing ample time for students to share about things that mattered to them, struggles, and triumphs, as well as encouraging students to collaborate with as many different peers as possible. These in-class collaborations often grew into deeper, longer-term friendships.

Participant Abbey identified this support specifically for satisfying the need for autonomy as having been crucial to this process of role redefinition. With their IDEA instructor claiming almost no ownership of the process and product of students’ course projects—not even setting the due dates, downplaying evaluation, and imposing no attendance or reading requirements—students had the space to claim full ownership over their learning.

“You Know, This Is for You”

Abbey suggested that one way students were able to reclaim their authority was through persistent messages that the locus of causality of students’ educational pursuits was not outside of them. It wasn’t just that they were given greater autonomy within the context of a course or a course activity, as the SDT literature typically conceptualises autonomy support. It is that they were told the entire enterprise of their learning and education belonged to and should be directed by them—that control over it should belong to them, and them alone. In addition to the repeated nudges towards an internal locus of causality that autonomy support has traditionally entailed, IDEA delivered large pushes in the form of explicit messages, as Abbey described.

I think his lack of structure was what did it, and his emphasis on, “You know, this is for you.” No one had ever told us that. No one had ever told us, “This is for you to get something out of it.” I sure as hell was never told that in those square courses. Ever. Even in my art courses! Even in my art courses I was never told that. Nothing was ever supposed to be for us. It was to please the instructors and get your grades, and to please the system, ultimately. So with him refusing to give us structure and then telling us, “No, this is for you to grow, I don’t care what you do with this. It’s not affecting me at all.” Well, he cared deeply about every single one of us, and our own journeys. And he would always talk about us walking our own labyrinth and all that, but it didn’t matter what you did as long as you got something out of it, and what you got graded on was how you interpreted it. That was never given to us before. The freedom is both terrifying and beneficial. So I guess that’s what it is, the freedom was different. We didn’t get that before.

The Circle

Every participant, without exception, spoke about the circle in one way or another. In IDEA, whoever arrived at the classroom first was asked to set up the circle of chairs. Whoever didn’t need to rush to their next class was asked to put things back the way they were for the subsequent class. At the start of a new semester, those of us who had taken an IDEA course before would typically set up the circle on the first day.

In my experience, and in that of my participants, it wasn’t necessarily unusual to have a classroom configuration in which students and instructor were able to see each other. But, as Sana had described, the circle in IDEA was used by the instructor in such a way that it minimised the trappings of authority. Maya pinpointed this importance of the physical environment in conveying expectations of equality among instructors and students in the classroom:

It's a very odd dynamic in the classes, because with IDEA, we move all the chairs out, and there's a circle, so there's that feeling of equality, whereas, with [a traditional] teacher, the setup is very structured, and they're at the front, and it almost feels like you're supposed to fall in line, that you're supposed to sit there with your hands like this and just absorb everything.

The Labyrinth, the Sword, and the Spool of Thread

Though only Abbey explicitly spoke about the labyrinth, it was a metaphor often employed in IDEA, particularly in the mythological narratives course. In Greek mythology, the Cretan labyrinth was a maze constructed by Daedalus to house the Minotaur, a monster with a human body and a bull's head (Bulfinch 1856). The Athenians were obligated to pay human tribute to Minos, the king of Crete; these youths were then sent to the labyrinth to be eaten by the Minotaur. The hero Theseus offered himself up for sacrifice to the Minotaur in the hopes of slaying the beast, and sailed off to Crete. When he arrived, the king's daughter, Ariadne, fell in love with him and gave him a sword with which to slay the beast, and a ball of thread to mark the way out. With Ariadne's help, Theseus proved victorious.

In IDEA, the labyrinth was used as a metaphor for facing great trials, and also a metaphor of becoming lost, disoriented, confused, and struggling, and eventually finding one's way out. The labyrinth provided students a framework in which to understand and persist through their lived experiences of transformative learning. Maya described the panic of being dropped into the labyrinth of university and not knowing how to find her way out:

We have so much more power than we realize. And IDEA helps you to realize you have that power. That is where, I think, a lot of the confidence comes from. We have that, and sure, in regular academics, they expect the same thing, but they don't do anything to empower you so that you feel like you can do this. Whereas IDEA does that. And so you're like, "Yeah, ok, I got this." And so maybe they're expecting the same things, but one of them is giving you the tools: the ability to reflect on yourself and to analyze things. Whereas the other one is just, "Go do it." And you're out on your own, and you're like, "Crap! What do I do?"

When faced with the task of navigating the Cretan labyrinth, most of the Athenian youths sent to be fed to the Minotaur were on their own. But Theseus received aid in the form of the sword and the spool of thread. Ariadne wished him to successfully escape. She could not slay the beast for him, nor lead him out of the labyrinth, but she gave him the tools with which to do it himself. Maya talked about this:

A lot of academics tells you that you need to be accountable for yourself, but it doesn't give you the tools. It doesn't tell you how. The [IDEA] instructor helps you with that. He helps you all along the way. And when you're struggling, he's there, or somebody else is there. There's a lot more tools being provided. You should be figuring things out on your own, but you're not being set up for failure, I feel. You're being set up to succeed. It's not sink or swim. It's like, we're gonna make sure everybody's floating.

Along with giving students a framework through which to view their struggles and adequate support to overcome them, IDEA offered students a grace that permitted them to make mistakes and fail without suffering overwhelming consequences. Connell referred to this grace as “slack”:

If I had been in three random other courses, I don't think I would have made it. The openness—I talk about openness, right, but it's almost like this slack, in a way. It's not just slack, but it's ... because I was falling in that semester. It had the cushion. Whereas other courses are hard in their structure, it had the cushion to contain me, to contain my fall, so that I could get back up on my feet rather than breaking my legs and crawling away.

Chelanna echoed this in her reflection upon the other narratives, adding that the “journey [was] just as (if not more) important than arriving at any predetermined waypoint.” Maya described this slack in detail, and contrasted it with the rigidity she experienced in her other courses:

With IDEA, things build. You can get better and better. You can do super poorly for the first $\frac{3}{4}$ of the term, but then switch things around at the end and prove, “I've made a difference.” And [the instructor's] like, “Yeah, you did. Good job.” Basically, everything you should have done all term, you fit into this last quarter of the course, but you've addressed it, you explained it ... It doesn't matter if you bombed a couple of exams early on. There's teachers where I found people were failing just because they formatted things incorrectly. It wasn't the content; it was just because they improperly formatted things, and they're losing letter grades. And by the end, they got it, but tough. Everything at the beginning, you've already lost all that. It doesn't matter that you know it by the end of the course, because that was already done and taken care of. So it's that nothing can go at your speed. You have to go at the teacher's speed. It's not very accommodating or adjustable or flexible in any way. It's all very rigid.

Outcomes of Role Redefinition

Agentic Engagement

Under SDT's dialectical framework, it is understood that students indirectly contribute, through their engagement and disengagement, to classroom instruction; teachers tend to respond to engagement by becoming more autonomy supportive, and to disengagement by becoming more controlling (Reeve and Tseng 2011). Reeve and Tseng's proposal of the addition of agentic

engagement is an important contribution to SDT's dialectical framework in that it describes the direct, rather than merely inferential, ways students can contribute.

According to Reeve and Tseng (2011, 258), students engage agenticly when they

offer input, express a preference, offer a suggestion or contribution, ask a question, communicate what they are thinking and needing, recommend a goal or objective to be pursued, communicate their level of interest, solicit resources or learning opportunities, seek ways to add personal relevance to the lesson, ask for a say in how problems are to be solved, seek clarification, generate options, communicate likes and dislikes, or request assistance such as modeling, tutoring, feedback, background knowledge, or a concrete example of an abstract concept.

As a result of role redefinition, participants did increase their attempts to engage agenticly with their other instructors, in and out of the classroom, but they did so strategically and not globally. Even after her IDEA experiences, Sana only engaged agenticly when she perceived her instructors as already being somewhat autonomy supportive. She often felt as if she was limited in the amount of change she could effect by herself. Faced with an instructor who didn't respond to her attempts to agenticly engage, Maya strategically shut down in class, while continuing to explore her interests on her own. Agentic engagement is intertwined with effectance; students will agenticly engage in the ways in which the context enables them to feel competent enough to do so.

Instructors' responses to students' agentic engagement are also intertwined with their effectance as instructors. Sana relayed a story of her peers attempting to agenticly engage with an instructor who responded frankly that he didn't know how to do things any other way. Thus, agentic engagement from students is only effective when paired with instructors who have the skills and the desire to be autonomy supportive. Reeve (2009) discusses the institutional, contextual, and individual factors that lead instructors to favour controlling styles over autonomy-supportive ones and a variety of ways to address these.

Maya and Abbey in particular spoke about the ways that their involvement in IDEA, and their feelings of empowerment, increased their attempts at agentic engagement. Maya learned the skills through IDEA to approach instructors and to create meaningful choices for herself:

In classes that I took after IDEA, I'd go through books, and I'd find a topic that was super interesting to me, and I'd be like, "Oh, I'm going to read more articles on this. This is what I'm gonna write my paper on." Even if the teacher was like, "These are the topics," well, then, I'd go speak to them and be like, "Hey, I'm super interested in this. I would really like to write something on this." And they'd be like, "Oh, sure." Because, you know what, teachers actually like to see students engaged, believe it or not.

She framed agentic engagement overall as a set of skills that she had learned through IDEA, and the resultant outcomes as deep learning, in contrast with her classmates' superficial learning.

Having only been proposed in 2011, agentic engagement is a relatively new construct. It is, however, an essential one if we wish to consider the critical and liberatory possibilities of SDT. To my knowledge, however, the self-determination and agentic engagement literatures have consistently treated students' bids for greater autonomy, agency, and self-determination as unproblematic and generally well-received in educational contexts, although the reality is that these are often viewed as threatening by instructors and institutions. The use of qualitative methods in the current study uncovered some of the nuances of participants' agentic engagement: specifically, that their willingness to engage agentially with their instructors interacted not only with their autonomy orientations, but also with their perceptions of the situation, their sense of responsibility to others, and their own histories. Instructors' reactions to students' agentic engagement also varied, intertwined as these were with their own sense of effectance at providing autonomy support. As such, a qualitative exploration of the ways in which students agentially engage with their contexts, how these contexts respond, and how self-determined students accommodate to these varying responses, seems requisite to understanding the process and practice of liberation. Additionally, what sorts of interventions might cultivate the capacity for agentic engagement remains an open question (see Reeve 2015), although the current study suggests that role redefinition is one promising path.

Defiance

As I previously noted, IDEA students' bids for greater autonomy were sometimes welcomed by their other instructors, and other times declined. In these latter instances, students disengaged or found other ways of engaging that did not require their instructors' cooperation. However, students' bids were sometimes perceived as being outright defiant, particularly when they came up against instructor behaviour they perceived as not only controlling, but outright miseducative.

As Maya described, it was not uncommon for IDEA students to take a strong stand in their other courses. More importantly, the stands they took were often motivated not just by self-interest, but out of concern for their peers' success and well-being. She was able to draw parallels between standing up for herself in class, and the broader role of defiance in society. Cultivating such dispositions in our students is essential to preserving the societal gains we have already made and creating even more liberating possibilities.

Taking Risks, Expressing Voice

Defiance wasn't the only form of risk-taking students engaged in. Connell described one of his own projects as "practice in following through with a strange idea, and in terms of invention and creativity and research, anything that's new, that is our most valuable skill, is following through on that strange idea." He also detailed the emotional bravery of the projects his classmates had created:

[T]here was ... a woman who had been kicked out of her dance program when she was 18, and it was very traumatic, and she had not danced since then, for 6 years, or 8 years, something like that. And she danced for us. She prepared this dance routine, and on the last day of class, she danced for us, ballet. There was another woman who—oh, it was gorgeous. She probably put in a hundred, two hundred hours. She made this Bonsai tree out of wire, gold wire, wrapped at the base around a rock, its roots, and then twisting up, and it had little gnarls in the trunk, and it branched out, and there were 60 or 70 leaves she dyed with tea, and they were cut out from a piece of paper where she'd written all these times she was ashamed of in her life, around one central theme. And she cut them out and made them leaves, and wrapped them into this tree, this beautiful golden tree, and you could read little snippets.

Many IDEA students, including Chelanna and Connell, had also taken substantial emotional and intellectual risk in leaving the comfort of their lives in Canada to attend the Amazon Field School in Colombia.

But one particular form risk-taking took was in students' expression of voice. Sana discussed how a student with speech difficulties who might have silenced herself in other courses felt free to express herself in IDEA. Chelanna spoke of "more reserved individuals finding their voice through IDEA." Abbey spoke about the centrality of student voice in IDEA. She acknowledged that those in charge didn't always want to hear student's voices—as we've seen with students' attempts at agentic engagement—but that IDEA gave students permission to express them, whether or not

they were heard. Just as Maya spoke about the locus of causality regarding her education moving from external to internal, Abbey spoke about the locus of causality for their own voices moving from external to internal. They speak not to please or to be listened to, but because something inside of them impels them to do so. Abbey explained,

I think a lot of them had a pretty profound change. Like I said, those ones that were maybe sheltered and never told that they were allowed to express themselves, maybe they come from a family where it's not OK to express yourself. Maybe they come from a background where it's not OK to express yourself, and maybe your voice isn't supposed to be heard. You're supposed to listen. Maybe they're just introverts, and they didn't really know what they were getting into with these classes. I'm not really sure. But I think a lot of them had a lot of growth ... Oh, someone wants to hear what I have to say, and it doesn't even matter if someone wants to hear it, it's what I want to hear from myself. I have the right to say it.

Criticality and Liberation

Returning to the issue of SDT's potential for criticality and liberation that Ryan and Niemiec (2009) engaged with, the students I spoke to did become engaged in this work in a variety of ways due to their experiences in IDEA. Maya, for whom "questioning" came up multiple times, spoke of how IDEA taught her not only to engage critically with her discipline, but to engage critically with the systems and institutions in which she was embedded:

But I also think that, in general, [IDEA] is teaching free thinking, creative thinking, employing critical thinking in a different sense. Because university always wants you to think critically, but they want you to think critically about a certain topic. They don't necessarily want you to think critically about how the course is set up, or how the school is run.

Sana felt similarly, and saw how she could, through her teaching, become an agent of liberation, and prompt her students to also become agents of liberation. She reflected,

For me, IDEA changed the way education was looked at, and I took what I learned from there into my other courses. So rather than look at my writing from a traditional point of view, I was looking at it from a different point of view. Hopefully, when I start teaching, I start to implement that in my own way of teaching, and it goes on and on until there is a change. Because change doesn't happen overnight. It's gonna take a while. I think it helped—at least we're thinking about it, thinking about the difference, and we have something to compare it to. That's what IDEA did. It showed us: there's this, and then there's this, which you really had never seen before. So that's definitely something it did, challenge traditional education. So hopefully when I start teaching, I'm definitely gonna take from IDEA and implement that in how I teach. And hopefully my students take from that and keep going forward with it.

Maya saw her classmates engaging with the community as agents of liberation, and had hope that, once enough people learned how to stand up against oppressive systems, together they would become an unstoppable force for liberation. She observed,

I feel like a lot of us have been branded. One of my friends who would go to the dean, probably me, because I've gone to the dean a couple times as well. That's what happens with people who stand up for themselves. But I mean, it's not gonna change until more people start doing it. Because it's like, if everybody starts: "Hey, that's not right, that's wrong. We're all gonna stop this," they can't do anything. Too bad if they don't like us. If there's this many of us, they can't do anything. I think it's important. A lot of IDEA people, too, I see them going to protests and stuff like that. Whereas a lot of other younger people, they're really not engaged at all with what's going on. They don't know. They don't vote. They're just so disengaged from society, but IDEA tells you to be part of your community.

This is the realisation of the critical and liberating possibilities that Ryan and Niemiec (2009) envisioned for SDT. Liberation ultimately lies not in the hands of benevolent instructors, but in the hands of students who recognise their own power to change the systems they are embedded in.

Conclusion

In this study, I have shown how redefining the roles of students to that of learning partners or radical colleagues follows through on Ryan and Niemiec's (2009) assertion that an empirical theory such as SDT can be critical and liberating. Participants who underwent this process of role redefinition did in fact change how they engaged with their educations in a number of ways that followed through on that promise. They took more intellectual risks. They became more critical not only within their disciplines, but also more critical of the systems and institutions they were embedded in. In situations of injustice, they spoke up where previously they would have remained silent. They spoke up not because others always wanted to hear what they had to say, but because they themselves felt impelled to speak. Participants came to see themselves as agents of their own and others' liberation. They were realistic but hopeful; they recognised that there were not yet enough people like them to produce change on a mass scale, but that they had a responsibility to stand up and do what they could and to pass the baton to others through how they led and taught. I will now discuss the implications of the current study for students, instructors and student support staff, institutions, and researchers.

For students, this study holds a hopeful message: that they can have greater impact on their educational environments and beyond than they perhaps currently recognise or exercise, and that seeking out autonomy-supportive contexts, as well as opportunities that encourage them to re-envision their roles as students, is crucial to building their capacity to have a meaningful impact. This study also suggests a different set of criteria than students are perhaps accustomed to employing in order to choose where to study, which courses to take, and which instructors to take them with if they wish to maximise their growth and well-being.

This study has broad implications for how educators and student support staff engage with students if we wish to follow through on the possibility of transformative change in education. One of the practices that was essential to reducing the teacher–student power differential and elevating students to the position of partner or colleague was the circle: the way the physical environment of the classroom was set up and used. The explicit message “this is for you,” backed by autonomy-supportive practices, had a profound effect on students by moving the locus of causality for their educations from external to internal, and was one of the primary ways in which IDEA courses fostered this process of role redefinition. Providing students a framework for understanding the process and struggle of transformative learning—in this case with the metaphor of the labyrinth—helped them persist through their difficulties, as did providing ample support and “slack”—the grace and cushion to struggle and to make mistakes and to still be successful. Maya expressed this ethos best when she said, “[i]t’s not sink or swim. It’s like, we’re gonna make sure everybody’s floating.”

It is important for us as educators to recognise that the transformative nature of role redefinition is not simply something that students struggle with. As educators, we may struggle with the idea of negotiating power and sharing it with our students, until the day that we don’t, and we cannot imagine going back to the way things were before. Sharing our own difficulties with the process and how we overcome them—as we have no doubt been through similar transformations before—offers us the opportunity to model vulnerability and leave our students a thread they can follow through their own difficulties.

Institutionally, this study, as well as the story of IDEA itself, offers some caveats. Due to its non-traditional nature, IDEA had long been a set of courses under threat; this was not a secret among IDEA students. Abbey has already discussed the bureaucratic pressure she felt IDEA was under to add more traditional structure (I use this word in the common sense, not the theoretical one) to the IDEA curriculum. After graduating, I (the first author) had been part of the IDEA Steering Committee, which aspired to the creation of a certificate, a minor, and/or a programme, and which was abruptly dissolved in May of 2014 when it became clear that the university was not interested in IDEA's further development, in spite of its popularity. I worked that summer as a research assistant with Kwantlen's INSTL (Institute for Innovation in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning), researching and creating new learning outcomes and rubrics to be piloted in the Amazon Field School and hopefully to be used throughout IDEA. However, the curriculum committee never approved the new learning outcomes. At the end of 2015, Ross Laird, my key informant and the instructor who had founded IDEA, announced that he would no longer be teaching IDEA courses, although they would still be offered by the institution. The sense among IDEA students was that IDEA would change irrevocably under new leadership and become something less-than, if it even survived at all. Autonomy support is both a bottom-up and top-down proposition: while students can influence what happens in their classrooms and institutions through agentic engagement, institutions can also be more or less autonomy supportive towards educators, and this impacts the level of autonomy support educators can and do provide to students (Reeve 2009). Just as instructor responses to student agentic engagement are intertwined with their effectance, so also is institutional responsiveness bound up with effectance in the form of institutional policies, structures, and processes. And just as students' bids for autonomy support are sometimes treated as problematic by their instructors, so educators' bids for autonomy support are sometimes treated as problematic by institutions.

This study also has broad implications for how researchers who engage with SDT as a theoretical framework might follow through on its critical and liberatory possibilities. What I have attempted in the current study is what Fielding and Rudduck refer to as a "rupturing of the ordinary" (2002, 5). A great deal of research has forged connections between SDT and other empirically based theories and constructs. But there is a rich landscape of literature that could provide philosophical gestalts that inform how we think about SDT from a critical perspective. To build the argument

that forms the basis of the current study, I consulted Cook-Sather's work on students as learning partners, Fielding's work on radical collegiality, and Levin's work on democratic education. There are many others to choose from. And as Fielding and Moss state, "education today needs fewer large-scale quantitative studies comparing performance on pre-determined outcomes, and more critical case studies of possibility, opportunities to enrich our imagination and vocabulary" (2011, 16). When we undertake SDT research in traditional settings, it serves to perpetuate cultural and economic reproduction instead of challenging it; schools are part of a web of institutions whose latent function is to preserve structural inequalities, which is often achieved through sorting students and teaching them different values and dispositions (Apple 2004). If we wish to follow through on being critical and liberating, we must look to "edge cases." If we wish to know how SDT can support critical engagement and liberation, the best people to ask are those embedded in learning communities that have been actively engaged in that work for centuries.

And finally, in a very real sense, what I undertook in this study was an act of agentic engagement: a plea for space in SDT for qualitative-interpretive approaches, and not just empirical-analytic ones, and a plea for others to claim that space with me. Through modelling my own navigation between these two approaches, I hope to provoke a change in the way we do SDT research: a radical collegiality between researchers in both traditions, one that acknowledges the contribution in kind of each range of approaches and the unique qualities of the researchers in each.

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