Full Access Learning: A Conceptual Framework for 21st Century Education

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Abstract

As much as education revolves around fulfilling aspirations regarding an external curriculum, it can also be about fulfilling an internal desire and willingness to pursue more personally meaningful content. Informal learning, together with self-determination, can usher in a more fully democratic practice of acquiring knowledge and gaining information. Often, the learning that occurs informally and through self-determination incorporates some form of technology and tends to emanate from the learners themselves – rather than being imposed – and, thus, suggests a more personally meaningful and technological learning route. This narrative research suggests that informal, self-determined learning, together with technology, opens different and greater learning possibilities for individuals to explore. Through a new conceptual framework, Full Access Learning (FUAL) (Ricci, 2017), learning – in particular, technological learning initiatives – can take shape in personally meaningful ways. Examples of FUAL in action are shared, especially and specifically, in terms of digitally and technologically supported examples, where learners explore technology and a desire to learn specific and individually important knowledge.

Introduction

In a world increasingly connected via technology, how and why one learns can benefit from a re-evaluation. Learning through traditional mainstream schooling approaches is just one way to achieve objectives and gain knowledge. Jandric (2014) points out that "education is an intrinsic
part of human nature" (p. 85), that "we all learn and unlearn from cradle to grave" (p. 85) and, so, learning (and education in general) can become even more effective when linked with a learner's own inquisitiveness and willingness to pursue certain forms and types of knowledge over others. As such, it is important to highlight and even carve out other ways and opportunities to learn and grow – ways that learners, who do not necessarily connect with mainstream learning, can craft for themselves. Full Access Learning (FUAL) is a conceptual framework that can cater to a more informal, individual and technological way of gaining knowledge. Seldom do we take the time to ask important questions such as: Are learners in traditional mainstream schooling provided opportunities to meld their out of school learning with what they learn in school? What sorts of technology are permitted within formal schooling and what technologies are restricted? And how are learners using technology outside of school

to gain knowledge and learn on their own time? What knowledge and sources of knowledge are students pursuing in their own time? And how is this knowledge meaningful, important and necessary for their circumstances, skills and lives? Is a different and more open learning model necessary to help learners, who do not fit within traditional schooling systems, thrive? In essence, can a more learner-centered, democratic and technologically infused conceptual framework produce a better fit with today's fast paced, technological society, where learners are able to gain and learn through many different spaces and places? FUAL aims to address some of the gaps associated with more formal learning processes.

Background

Emanating from such critical theorists as Freire (1998), Giroux (1999) and Chomsky (2000), FUAL represents a conceptual framework grounded in a constructivist approach that has similarities to Dewey's (1923), Rousseau's (1911) and, more recently, Robinson's (2009) research. The FUAL framework – through its democratic process – helps enable the voices and choices of each learner by offering more freedom and options that learners may decide to utilize in their own educational journeys. The aim of FUAL is to help create learning possibilities and bring in informal and technological ways of learning. Using modern technological tools to engage, instruct, interact and create, learners can implement their own internally created, learner-centered (Holt, 1967; Neil, 1960; Zhao, 2014) approach to learning.

It is important to remember and recognize that, with technology and the Internet, learners are also now able to become leaders and experts in subject matter that is close to their hearts. By focusing on specific knowledge, learners lead themselves to spaces and places where they feel comfortable and creative, while growing and learning. Through this lens, how learning looks and how it transpires is a deeply personal endeavour. As Eisner (1991) stresses, "educational practice does not display its highest virtues in uniformity, but in nurturing productive diversity" (p. 46). Often – and especially for younger generations – technology is blended into daily routines and is involved in some aspects of daily learning. Some learners create digital cohorts, utilizing social networks like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, while others prefer video spaces such as Skype. As technology becomes increasingly sophisticated, the merging of platforms also helps create more informal places and spaces where multiple formats of engagement and interaction can transpire – all in the name of gaining knowledge and crafting personal educational agendae. Slack, "the email killer" (Hamburger, 2014), is one such popular platform that exemplifies this newer type of technology by integrating multiple ways of connecting, learning and sharing in places and spaces where each individual learner may choose his/her own level of involvement.

Conceptual Framework

Full Access Learning (FUAL) embodies the vision of connecting all learning that one decides to pursue. FUAL shifts responsibility for curriculum and learning outcomes to the learner, making for a more deliberate and focused approach to learning. FUAL respects and accepts all learning opportunities that a learner wishes to pursue, and encourages technological applications and informal pursuits of knowledge that bring learners together with their own individual learning goals.

FUAL continues the idea of progressive education that A.S. Neill (1960) made famous, and follows in the footsteps of Dewey (1923) and Freire (1998), two intellectuals who have paved the way for learning frameworks such as FUAL to exist. In the same vein, Bauman's (1997) notion of "fluid modernity" opens up the possibility of connecting different learning situations and experiences in one continuous and integrated path. Through a post-modern lens, the flexibility of learning in such diverse and, often, unstructured ways become increasingly

possible. By including technology within the framework, the possibilities for individuals to take charge of their own learning journey into areas never previously possible, or even previously envisioned, become easier to realize.

FUAL includes five key elements encompassing learner-centeredness, democratic values, negotiation, trust and respect, and access as components. FUAL challenges traditional mainstream educational theory to think outside of restricted, top down, imposed curriculum (Halverson & Shapiro, 2012) and, instead, shakes up the status quo to place learners at the center of their own learning. With FUAL, it is the individual learner who controls all aspects of his/her learning, including all outcomes and assessments. FUAL is a learning framework designed to allow individual learners the freedom to control, access and assess their own learning. FUAL encompasses bringing together *all* available resources and tools in an effort to help learners grow and gain knowledge.

First, meaningful learning is best viewed from each learner's own perspective. That is, the most effective teaching happens when we cater to a learner-centered model (Holt, 1967). Following a learner's internal curriculum helps establish goals and achievements more relevant to the learner. Although the intent of externally imposed curriculum is to be flexible and customizable to help individuals gain experience and exposure with content that is most relevant for their lives, focusing on helping learners pursue their own chosen direction helps ensure a deep sense of ownership and commitment towards education.

The second pillar that works harmoniously with a learner-centered focus is the importance of a democratic learning model (A.S. Neill, 1960). Democratic learning options ensure that learners have voice and choice regarding their own education. These first two pillars are crucial and fundamental elements that can lead to more sustainable and life-long learning. This conceptual framework is as much about listening to learners as it is about effective communication. Having a voice and opportunity to actively co-create personal learning opportunities within a larger community signals to each independent learner that their participation and their efforts ultimately shape their experiences.

The third pillar of Full Access Learning revolves around negotiation. Through a learner-centered and democratic learning process, negotiation plays a central role in helping a learner move forward through his/her academic journey. Negotiation through FUAL involves listening, accommodating and guiding on a personal level. Each learner has different goals and reasons for learning and it is important to build strong student relationships that revolve around individual student choices. Working within these relationships involves a delicate game that places each instructor in a position of service toward each learner. The goal is to consistently help a learner succeed within a focused and desired direction.

This transitions nicely into the fourth pillar of trust and respect. Encouraging and welcoming learners to actively take risks in a safe and nurturing learning environment is fundamental to personal growth and learning. To succeed in this regard, trust and respect is paramount, as learners are encouraged to step out of their comfort zone to utilize different, new and emerging ways to perfect their craft and to experiment with confidence. Because Full Access Learning focuses on the whole learner (Miller, 2010) much of this fourth pillar of trust and respect resolves around building and gaining individual confidence. Highlighting and focusing on the individual strengths of each learner helps to differentiate unique abilities and pinpoints how each learner can contribute to a field of expertise in the learner's own ways. With FUAL, a strong effort is made to build confidence within the broader learning community. This highly reflects the nature of Full Access Learning; catering to and nurturing a learner's efforts through multiple layers on an individual basis. Encouraging and guiding learners to follow their own

interests by effectively utilizing modern technological tools and resources to further their goals, in an effort to be relevant and impactful, contributes to FUAL's overarching aims.

The fifth and final pillar of Full Access Learning involves access. This implies access to any and all available tools, resources and expertise in formal, informal, physical and digital means. Since FUAL leans as much as possible on learning through technology, it is not surprising that digital platforms, tools, usage and access becomes paramount. Along with encouraging technological and digital interaction, FUAL stresses the importance of learning and gaining experience through informal means. In an effort to stay current and relevant, bringing informal learning experiences into focus acknowledges the changing nature of how we learn.

Bridging formal and informal learning through technological processes and forging new ways of acquiring knowledge in informal ways is at the heart of a Full Access Learning approach. This helps fuel learners for futures rife with challenges and constant change. In effect, FUAL revolves around sharing and bringing together *all* learning – formal and informal – through increasingly technological means to better equip individuals for an increasingly digitally focused world.

Examples of FUAL in action are shared, especially and specifically, in terms of digitally and technologically supported examples, where learners explore technology and a desire to learn specific and individually important knowledge.

Conclusion

Technology, coupled with self-determination, plays an important role in individual learners creating and performing their own educational agendae. FUAL's five pillar approach toward learning and education helps set the stage for learners to take control of their own educational agendae, utilizing modern technological tools and resources. Through FUAL, all ways of gaining specific knowledge – deemed important for and from each individual learner – is an appropriate focus for knowledge attainment. FUAL challenges traditional learning concepts by shifting the focus of knowledge acquisition to the learner, rather than from the teacher. FUAL's focus on democratic ways of learning helps individuals gain the power to decide what knowledge to pursue, why to pursue it, and how deeply they may wish to venture into each educational domain. FUAL includes "the many informal learning situations that. . . exist alongside formal schooling, and also include the new computer- and Internet-based alternatives to classrooms" (Sawyer, 2014, p. 730). A chronic ailment persistent in educational fields seems to revolve around a perceived lack of genuine ownership that some individuals may feel about the directions in which their particular education takes them, as well as the disconnect with specific and particular interests that may not necessarily align well with the broader learning that occupies the majority of most formal learning initiatives. With society moving toward a more open, creative and digitally connected existence, how we learn can likewise benefit from becoming more open, creative and digitally created in personally meaningful and pursued approaches through new, more open learning methods such as FUAL.

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