# Journey to Self-Authorship and a More Meaningful Life

MARCIA BAXTER MAGOLDA is Distinguished Professor of Educational Leadership at Miami University of Ohio (USA) where she teaches student development theory in the Student Affairs in Higher Education masters and doctoral programmes. Her scholarship addresses the evolution of learning and development in college and young adult life and pedagogy to promote self-authorship, a concept she has been instrumental in developing and explaining through a 25 year longitudinal study of college students progressing through life. Among her many books *Authoring Your Life: Developing an Internal Voice to Meet Life's Challenges* (Stylus, 2009) provides a comprehensive and readable account of this theory. Marcia is a founding member and advocate of Lifewide Education.

Why is lifewide learning important?
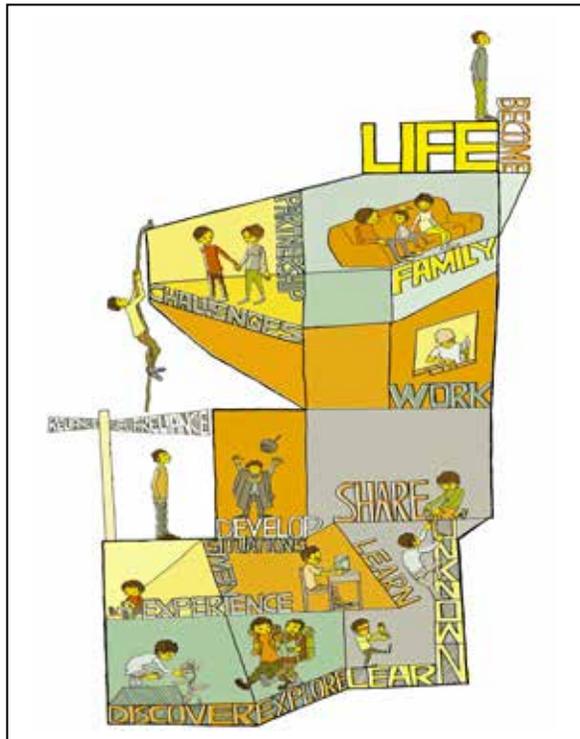
Encouraging, supporting and recognizing lifewide learning in higher education is crucial because of the central role that personal development plays in learning. Learning is often misconstrued as limited to cognitive functions and the acquisition of knowledge, and thus the classroom. Yet we know, from an extensive body of research on human development and learning, that one's sense of self and social relations are key factors in how one comes to know. The constructive-developmental tradition of human development, of which Jean Piaget was a pioneer, explicitly describes three interconnected dimensions of human development that are central to our meaning making. The cognitive dimension refers to our assumptions about the nature and certainty of knowledge and how we come to

know. The intrapersonal dimension consists of our assumptions about our sense of self and identities. The interpersonal dimension addresses our assumptions about the nature of social relations. We construct these sets of assumptions by making sense of our experiences. New experiences often produce dissonance that calls our existing assumptions into question, prompting re-evaluation and in many cases revision of our assumptions into more complex forms. The latter constitutes development. Robert Kegan[1] refers to this standing apart from our earlier assumptions to reflect on them and reshaping them to account for greater complexity as the "growth of the mind" (p. 34). This is the same process Jack Mezirow[2] calls transformational learning, or "how we learn to negotiate and act on our own purposes, values, feelings, and meanings rather than those we have uncritically assimilated from others" (p. 8). This connection between development and learning is crucial to understand if educators hope to engage learners in transformative learning.

Informational and transformative learning

Mezirow notes that learning involves both informational and transformational learning. Informational learning, or acquiring relevant knowledge and skills to solve problems and extending our frames of reference into new areas, is necessary but insufficient for navigating the complexity of today's world. Informational learning has typically taken the foreground in educational practice, as has the cognitive dimension. Transformational learning, or shifting frames of reference to navigate complexity and constant change, is becoming increasingly important for success in adult life. Transformational learning resonates with lifewide learning because both involve bringing all dimensions of a person to bear on learning. One complication, however, is that many learners have been socialized through informational learning to rely uncritically on what they have assimilated from others. Engaging them in standing apart from those assumptions to create their own can be a significant challenge. Thus even educators who recognize the value of learning within and throughout life are faced with the challenge of connecting learning experiences to learners' existing developmental assumptions.

Uncritically following external formulas
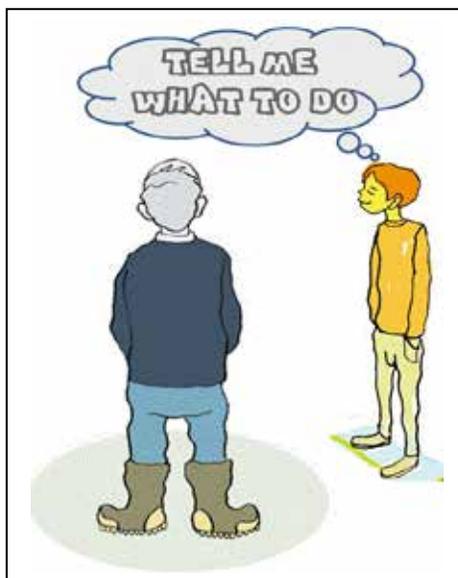
Following a group of young adults from their college entrance at age 18 to their current lives at age 45 is enabling me to witness the multiple ways in which assumptions about knowledge, self, and social relations evolve over time from uncritical reliance on external authority to internal criteria for guiding one's life, or self-authorship[3&4]. While learning through experiences across our lives can greatly enhance our ability to life our life within our own guiding framework of purposes, values and beliefs we must not assume that someone who leads an engaged life will automatically develop such internal authority.

One participant in my study, Kurt, offers an excellent example of someone who despite high engagement in college life (and lifewide activities beyond his academic curriculum) still uncritically followed external formulas into his twenties. By his sophomore year Kurt had acquired leadership positions in two student organizations. He described these roles as contributing to his career preparation, saying: *"I'm looking two and a half years from now and what will happen and how I'll be perceived. I'm trying to polish myself for the next step [career]."* Kurt spent his college career faithfully doing his academic work and engaging in leadership positions assuming that it would all add up to a meaningful life as an attorney.

Kurt took a position as a legal assistant in a law firm upon college graduation. He described what happened: *I was motivated by wanting to go to law school. The law firm was also motivated by prestige. Being a lawyer would be good because I would get acceptance. [But then] I got a taste of the environment, and it was not one I wanted to be in. I was torn about it. I talked to my dad. I'll remember that conversation the rest of my life! Dad said he didn't like wet weather and might move upon retirement. And I thought, "I'm staying here to be near family, then you are moving?" It was an awakening -- start living my life for myself.* (3 p. 78)

The recognition that he needed to start living life for himself was simultaneously a recognition of the drawbacks of uncritical acceptance of external others' perceptions. This moved Kurt from uncritically following external formulas to a crossroads fraught with tension between constructing his internal voice and listening to others.

Crossroads
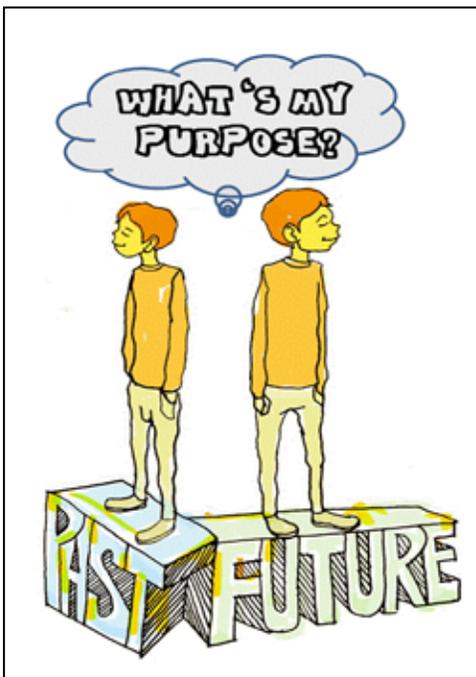
As Kurt soon learned, awareness is valuable but it does not yield immediate changes in long-held assumptions. Kurt reported that he learned more about his reliance on others' perceptions for his self-worth at a couple of workshops he attended in his early twenties:

The power of choice is mine; I have a choice of how I want to perceive each and every situation in my life. . . . Obviously I'm not to that point yet because I choose to make myself happy and make myself sad on what other people are thinking. (3 p.98-99)

Here Kurt sees the need to listen to his internal voice, but he has yet to figure out how to do so. A few years later, having worked at a hardware store, a youth center, and a factory, Kurt was still exploring who he wanted to be and what he wanted to do. He offered this comment on trying to listen to and cultivate his internal voice:

What is inside impacts what is outside, but it comes from inside. The inside is not influenced by others. You have to learn that it does come from inside. For a while you think others can

make decisions; you learn in the end that it comes down to you. There is a poem, something like "Man in the Glass." It talks about going through life, but the only person you answer to is the man in the glass -- the mirror, looking at yourself. I can't remember the exact lines, but one is that the most important person is the person in the glass. My parents have instilled that a lot. They never gave answers, just said, "You get out on your own and we'll support you." My experience with the law firm set me on the road to where I am now. I thought it would bring me happiness, I tried to live society's plan for me; no way! Then it was like, "Okay, I don't think there is any self-actualization in what society has planned." In order to self-actualize yourself, you have to look inside yourself. (3 p.127)

Despite his parents' encouragement to listen to himself, other societal pressures apparently were stronger in leading Kurt to try to live society's plan. Discovering that it did not work, Kurt reported spending most of his twenties trying to construct and trust his internal voice.

Self-Authorship
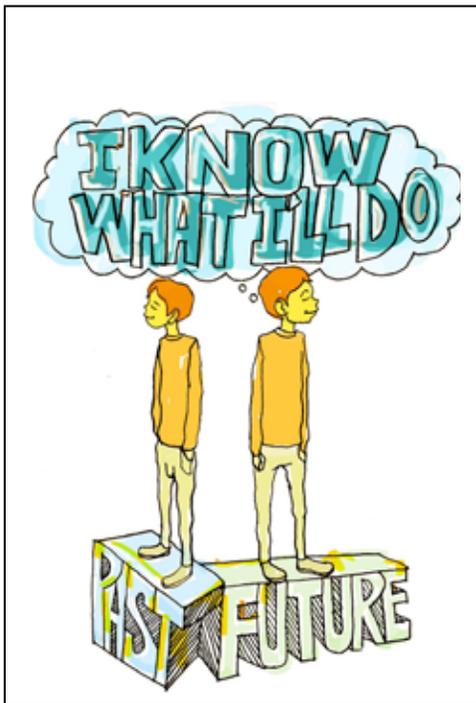
One of the key factors for Kurt and others in moving out of the crossroads into self-authorship was the recognition that reality is beyond one's control but one can control one's reaction to it. Kurt explained:

It is not that you get to control the circumstances of events happening to you; I've tried to stop that and [instead] control how I think about it. … I try to control events less, and control my perception of them more. What other people think is still a motivating thing for me. There are times when I am extremely confident, and then what people think doesn't matter. It is the power of my conviction. At that time, I am going to do it, it is going to happen. In the mode I am in right now, I am concerned about what other people think, but not to gain approval for myself. It is more where I am in a whole learning process. I have a great relationship with my boss. A lot of times I'll ask him how he'd play something. I want to know what he thinks. But it's not who I am, I'm not basing my identity off it. It is not for gaining self-worth, just for getting resources. What makes our relationship solid is that we have an understanding -- he'll come to me with the same thing. We ask what each other thinks. It is a positive mutual understanding. We aren't looking for each other's approval. My boss is not concerned about what other people think -- he doesn't define his worth on that. I take a lot of that from him -- he's a positive role model. (3 p.181-82)

Kurt relies more heavily on his internal voice here while still acknowledging that what others think does matter. He is seeking external perspectives to gain a deeper understanding rather than to support his self-worth.   In self-authorship, the internal voice coordinates external

influence rather than being controlled by it. Kurt's boss models this for him, becoming a good partner in mutual exchange with Kurt.

Learning Partnerships

Kurt's story conveys the complexity of the journey toward self-authorship. My participants' collective stories from their college and post college lives reveal key factors that help adults reframe their assumptions about knowledge, self, and relationships. I organized these factors into the **Learning Partnerships Model**[4&5] that I offer as one approach to support adults' growth toward self-authorship. Three components of the model support learners' current assumptions. These include respecting learning thoughts and feelings, encouraging them to use all their life experiences as opportunities for growth, and collaborating with them to analyze and solve their own dilemmas. In addition, three components simultaneously challenge learners to expand their current assumptions. These include emphasizing complexity of work and life rather than simplistic solutions, drawing out learners' personal authority, and working interdependently to share authority and expertise to solve complex problems. In order to promote self-authorship, educators must engage learners in making sense of their experiences rather than just having the experience. Moreover, educators must work interdependently with learners to enable them to create their own meanings from their experiences rather than educators making sense of their experiences for them.
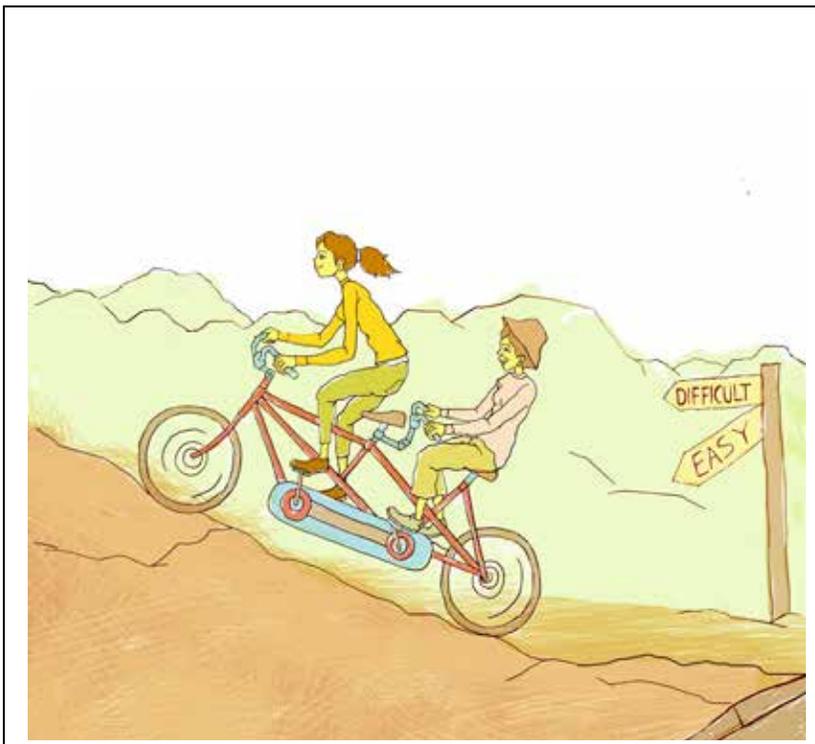
I have likened the Learning Partnerships Model to a tandem bike ride in which the front rider directs the journey and pedals hard to make it happen while the back rider provides encouragement and emotional and practical support. In traditional classroom teaching educators tend to take the front seat rather than placing learners in charge of directing their own learning journeys. When learners take the front seat the experience is more likely to help them encounter the dilemmas and hard choices that necessitate them to develop their internal voice. Having a learning partner on the back helps them share their experience and reflect on, analyze, and make sense of it in richer and more complex ways.

Many colleagues in higher education have used these learning partnerships in classroom and co-curricular settings with impressive results[6&7]. These six components, integrated into a philosophy of learning and the educator-learner relationship, assist learners along the developmental journey to stand apart from their current assumptions and potentially develop more complex ones. Respecting learners' thoughts and feelings inherently entails respecting their current developmental assumptions, which tailors the partnership to the learners' development. The mutual partnership enables shifting along with learners as they reframe their assumptions. Incorporating these dynamics into all educational and informal learning experiences, and offering a holistic educational experience as Lifewide Education also advocates, helps adults integrate their assumptions about knowledge, self, and social relations. What I hope is evident here, however, is that learning and development require far more than offering experiences - even lifewide experiences. Learning and development requires making meaning of experience - a process that can be facilitated and enhanced in the company of good empathetic learning partners.

References

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