An Integrated Approach to Teaching Self-Determination

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As a fledgling TVI with very little special education experience, much of my time has been spent deciphering acronyms: IEP, ETR, IDEA, and of course, the ECC. The ECC (Expanded Core Curriculum) is chock full of acronyms in its own right. Teaching at the Ohio State School for the Blind, I immediately became familiar with O&M (Orientation and Mobility) and DLS (Daily (or Independent) Living Skills) as they were instructional staples built right into our students' class schedules. When I finally saw a list of the ECC written, I recognized most of them and was able to see those skills reflected in the reality of my students' daily lives.

Yet I was caught extremely off guard as I glanced to the bottom of the ECC and saw the phrase "self-determination" listed ninth (of nine). It was like glancing down to the bottom of the U.S. Constitution and seeing "freedom" written, much like an

afterthought. To me, self-determination is the entire point of education in a democratic society. A student might be able to cross the street, but without self-determination, they have no reason to do so. Essentially, "Self-determination means taking charge of one's life." (Browder, Wood, Test, Karvonen & Algozinne, 2001, p. 233). When it comes to educating students with visual impairments, what could be more important than that?

Of course, as I learned more about the development of the ECC and the way it is meant to be implemented, it became clear that this is not a hierarchical list. No one seems to be arguing that one skill is somehow more valuable than any other. These are all interrelated domains that piggyback off of each other and manifest themselves in myriad ways in the lives of people with visual impairments (Allman & Lewis, 2014, p. 16). Even so, I couldn't help but think that because it is almost always listed last, and it is a much

more nebulous concept than many of the other domains of the ECC, teachers might not be giving self-determination a fair shake. Think of the time and effort students put in learning assistive technology and orientation and mobility. Do they log equal hours exercising their right to self-determination? Research shows that they do not. Based on the results of their 2004 study, Robinson and Lieberman concluded that "opportunities for self-determination are not being adequately provided to students with visual impairments" (p.363). Agran, Snow and Swaner (1999) found that although 77% of teachers they surveyed believed self-determination was either "important" or "very important" for their students' well-being, 55% left self-determination skills off some or all of their IEPs. In addition, 59% of teachers felt that actually *discussing* self-determination with their students was either "not important" or "moderately important". Furthermore, it has been shown that students with visual impairments generally lack autonomy (compared to their sighted

peers) and have fewer choices in their lives (Wolffe, Sacks & Tierney, 1998, p. 477). As it turns out, self-determination was not even officially listed as a part of the ECC for visually impaired students until 2003 (Allman & Lewis, 2014, p. 26).

Part of the issue is that when self-determination *is* taught, the implementation is often painfully ironic. Yes, self-determination is the amalgamation of several interrelated components (assertiveness, self-advocacy, empowerment, problem-solving, goal-setting, etc. (Allman & Lewis, 2014, p. 26)) that need to be overtly taught, modeled, and practiced with visually impaired students (who are less likely to learn these nuanced social skills through casual observations (Sapp & Hatlen, 2010)). However, one of the most common pitfalls of teaching self-determination is that as soon as the lesson on "empowerment" or "goal-setting", (for instance), is over, students return to their desks- to worksheets, to multiple choice tests, to standardized writing prompts, and to

business as usual in a environment where they have little control over their own destinies. As Browder et al. (2001) note, "Learning skills related to self-determination is important, but these skills are meaningless if the students' environments do not allow the use of these skills" (p. 238). Despite some attempts at reform, most schools still operate in ways that stifle ingenuity, eradicate difference, and ultimately, remove student choice from the equation. Alfie Kohn (1993) writes, "The educators who shape the curriculum rarely bother to consult those who are to be educated" (p. 10). Regardless of educators' best intentions, the current reality of schooling is one in which students and teachers acutely feel the pressures of standardization and the curricular mandates that come with it. However, if we want to encourage students to be self-determined, they cannot be passive recipients of knowledge; they should be engaged in actively making meaning for themselves. Student choice (regarding what and how they learn) should be a

structural and fundamental part of the way we educate all students, especially those with visual impairments.

But just how much choice is appropriate? For Wehmeyer (1998), "Self-determination should not be equated with absolute dominion, nor is promoting self-determination equivalent to allowing chaos." Obviously a balanced approach is important. It seems that perhaps a more useful question then, is: What *kinds* of choices should students be making? Should they get to choose what kind of party to have at the end of a successful unit, (pool or pizza!?) or should we let them have a real say in the kinds of reading, learning, thinking and producing they will undertake in said unit? And if we allow students to determine for themselves what they want to learn and how they want to create meaning from it, what if we don't like the outcome?

These questions have gnawed at educators for centuries as

they have pondered what *counts* as knowledge worth knowing, which forms of expression are valid, and who gets to choose. From Plato, who thought that writing was an "external crutch" that "led to the deterioration of human memory" (Gee, 1988, p. 196) to traditionalist defenders of the Great Books who believe that "To mess with the canon [is] to mess with civilization itself," (Krystal, 2014), to those who continue to nominate Bob Dylan for the Nobel Prize in Literature every year, everyone has an opinion about what counts as literacy. This battle continues to rage across continents, across university campuses and across elementary school hallways. It's the five-paragraph essay versus the graphic novel versus the PowerPoint versus the finger painting. Of all communicative systems we use to make meaning, (written, visual, spatial, tactile, gestural, audio, spoken, etc.) which are worthy of a spot on the syllabus?

This is a question that has certainly weighed heavily upon me. Like Harste (2010), I conceptualize literacy as broad and all encompassing- "as all of the ways that humankind has for mediating their world" (p. 29). Because of this, I've always made ample room in my classroom for multimodal expression. Even so, I'd feel inexplicably guilty after assigning a project in which students were required to write and film a commercial, for instance, only to discover another teacher had assigned a lengthy, conventional research paper down the hall. I was always afraid my students were missing some of the rigor and real-world preparedness a more traditional approach affords. After some consideration though, I think that both my conservative counterparts and I missed the mark. In each instance, both the form and content were dictated *for* students rather than *by* students. My multimodal assignments, (although generally flashy in the sense that I incorporated new media and technology), were still tightly controlled, teacher-driven

directives that offered students limited opportunities for self-determination. As Cope and Kalantzis (2010) note:

> We can use computers to re-create traditional, transmission pedagogies that embody a mimetic relationship to knowledge: absorb the theories, practice the formulae, learn the facts, appreciate the greats of the canon, internalize the socio-moral truth that others have deemed will be good for us... the learners' relationships to knowledge and the processes of pedagogy have not necessarily changed in any significant way. (p.88)

Therefore, it is not so much about chucking the five-paragraph essay for the podcast, but about granting students a measure of autonomy within the process of knowledge construction. It's making the switch from isolated, packaged lessons about self-determination to actually weaving self-determination into the fabric of classroom

life.

I'll be the first to admit that the prospect of this paradigm shift is nerve wracking. For those of you who are scared stiff at the notion of what this might entail, let me offer a practical example. Last year, my 12th grade English class of students with visual impairments engaged in a unit of study which focused on loneliness, isolation, and transience during the Great Depression (with a focus on John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*). As a guiding instructional framework, I relied upon what Dorothy Heathcote has coined "Mantle of the Expert" (Heathcote and Bolton, 1995). This approach involves teachers and students working together within an imagined context, acting as if they are a team of experts in a profession, hired by some imaginary client to fulfill an objective. For our purposes, the students and I took on the role of expert museum curators, hired by the Smithsonian to develop a new exhibit on hobo

culture during the Great Depression. Acting as a successful team of museum curators, the students were no longer students, burdened by the compliance and conformity generally thrust upon them. Even though we were just pretending, the students took on the task of curating this museum with the gravitas of true professionals. Brian Edmiston (2014), who has done extensive work in this field, sheds light on this phenomenon. When working as experts in a fictional context, "People may develop not only deep expertise in relation to whatever curricular areas shape goals and intended outcomes but also a changing view of their selves and their agency" (p. 233). To be clear, the task was imaginary in nature, but the amount of self-determination the students were able to exercise was very real.

For example, there was no need to require a research component for this unit. The students collaboratively determined for themselves what needed to be researched and did so without

coercion. We watched video interviews of former hobos, read letters and journal entries, listened to Woody Guthrie and other musicians of the era, and even sat around campfires and practiced hopping train cars (using tables, chairs, etc.). After they had immersed themselves quite extensively in the content at hand, the students-as-curators began the work of collaboratively designing their exhibit. By the time they were done, they had filled our museum space (the school's multipurpose room) with impactful, multimodal narrative moments that came to life as the rest of the students in the school visited. Bobby engineered a 3-D audio environment, in which listeners joined a young hobo as he jumped his first train with a seasoned elder. Katie authored a series of diary entries and photographs as if she were a young woman who had left home to seek better fortunes out west. Andrea showcased fictional letters she had written between a young boy and the family he left behind. Randy wrote, directed, and starred in a film in which a transient

teenage boy was serendipitously reunited with his father after years of mutual wandering. Joshua built a life size 3D recreation of a hobo camp, utilizing several full size Christmas trees, a guitar, and a painted cardboard campfire (among many other things). He brought the scene to life by acting the part of a hobo, imparting life lessons on the children that visited. Each contribution was as unique as the student who created it. The multimodality of this unit grew organically, as each student-curator gravitated to a medium that best fit their authorial purpose.

It may seem counterintuitive, but the more autonomy the students were granted, the more rigorously they engineered their own learning trajectories. Traditionalists may wonder if perhaps Joshua did nothing more than create a diorama-on-steroids or if Bobby simply wasted a week recording train whistle noises. Maybe a research paper would have been more worthwhile, after all. As I

am always prone to worrying, this thought crossed my mind a time or two as well. So, as the unit came to a close, I decided to ask the students what they learned throughout the process. It was Joshua's response that both shocked and reassured me. "Grammar," he replied. As it turns out, Joshua (who was 20 years old at this point) confessed that he had never really addressed conventions in an assignment in his school career thus far. He had pretended to proofread and peer-edit writing pieces, for instance, but he never saw the point (until now). All of a sudden, the presentation of his final product mattered to him, and he made sure what little writing his exhibit contained (signs that were hung from trees that listed the "Rules of Hobo Life" and the script for his hobo character) was polished. Believe it or not, that giant diorama did more to hone his grammar skills than any worksheet

ever did.

This goes to show that when they are positioned as competent and allowed to exercise real self-determination within the classroom and the curriculum, students will rise to the occasion. Henry Giroux (1987) once wrote, "To be literate is *not* to be free, it is to be present and active in the struggle for reclaiming one's voice, history and future" (p.11). As teachers of the visually impaired, we must insist that our students take up this struggle for self-determination, each and every day, within and beyond the walls of our classrooms.

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