

Internal Transitions: Self-Authorship and Identity Development in the First Year

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Research Questions

- How do first year students in an international liberal arts university experience self-authorship (located in Egypt)?
- What curricular experiences in the first-year program foster self-authorship development as identified by this population of students?
- What implications can be made about programming and activities that enhance the development of self-authorship in first-year university students?

Rationale

Self-authorship is inherent in the goals of higher education:

- Mission statements of 21st Century institutions emphasize skills of analysis, problem solving, evaluation, critical thinking and social integration (Chan, Brown and Ludlow, 2014; Baxter Magolda and King, 2007; Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2011). These skills characterize **self-authored** individuals.
- Understanding self-authorship allows educators to create transformative learning experiences that enable students to make-meaning from their environment to build modes of thinking that impact their behavior and values.
- First year is a transition – educators must intentionally capitalize on momentum of transition to build identity. Years 18-25 are foundational in cognitive and personal growth: they are spent in classrooms. We must understand and optimize these years.
- Higher education often provides formulas for success (Baxter Magolda, 2001), rather than capacities to author action and ideas. This is problematic: in real-world contexts, problems are not pre-scripted, cannot be addressed using a set of learned formulas. There is a need for enabling self-authorship in higher education.

Purpose

- To contribute to self-authorship and student development theory
- To investigate self-authorship processes of ethnically diverse students
- To understand the curricular experiences in the first year program that students viewed as relevant in enhancing self-authorship development
- To recommend interventions in first-year programming that can enhance self-authorship

Problem

- Higher education often focuses on academic/cognitive development of students (Baxter Magolda, 2001), leading to compartmentalization of academic and student affairs (Bloland, Stamatakos and Rogers, 1996). Need for integration.
- Need for further research on educational environments that enable self-authorship (Baxter Magolda and King, 2004, Pizzolato, 2007, Hoefler, 2008)
- Need for research on impact of curricular events on first-year, which is critical in retention, engagement and success (Barefoot et al., 1998; Upcraft et al., 2005, Barton and Donahue, 2009)

What is Self-Authorship?

Self-authorship is *“simultaneously an ability to construct knowledge in a contextual world, an ability to construct an internal identity separate from external influence, and an ability to engage in relationships without losing one’s internal identity”* (Baxter Magolda, 1999, p.12).

- Generating and coordinating one’s own beliefs, values, and internal loyalties, rather than depending on external influences for shaping one’s thoughts.
- Thinking about feelings and relationships, instead of being subject to them.
- Being concerned with issues of personal integrity; aligning actions with values.

Components of Self-Authorship: 3 Dimensions

- *Epistemological*: viewing knowledge as contextual and uncertain vs. absolute; knowledge mutually constructed; beliefs arrived at after careful evaluation and interpretation of information.
- *Intrapersonal*: choosing values vs. adopting those of others, after careful consideration of different perspectives; actions reflect values; having sense of self-worth; need to satisfy internal identity vs. approval of others.
- *Interpersonal*: understanding vs. adopting views of others; healthy social interactions; absence of pressure to appease others.

Progress of Self-Authorship: Characteristics and Behaviors

Following Formulas

- Conforming to authorities, binary thinking, knowledge is absolute, owned by authorities
- Following rules, studying to pass, seeking approval of others, seeking formulas

Crossroads

- Realization formulas do not always work, multiple perspectives exist, tensions to self-define, disequilibrium
- Questioning authorities, observing ambiguities, dissatisfaction with formulas

Becoming the Author of One's Life

- Confidence in one's voice, need for internal satisfaction, internal compass
- Reflection, speaking one's mind, evaluating multiple perspectives

Internal Foundations

- Grounding in personal identity and beliefs, management of external influences, inner wisdom
- Flexibility in dealing with conflicting views, no sense of threat from differences, satisfaction, aligning actions with beliefs

Literature Review

- Overview of student development theory
- Theoretical paradigms
- Higher education in promoting self-authorship
- The first year
- Assessment of self-authorship

Methods

- Quantitative Phase: Self-authorship survey, 50 participants
- Qualitative Phase: Semi-structured interviews
- Participants: 50 beginning sophomore students, 29 females, 21 males, Egyptians, traditional college age and circumstances
- Research site: [American University in Cairo](#), [First year program](#), liberal arts (Baxter Magolda and King, 2007)
- Data Analysis: quantitative (non-parametric), qualitative (grounded research, interview summaries, coding), integration

Quantitative Findings: Survey Results

Section	Mean	Mode	SD
Capacity for Autonomous Action (intrapersonal/ Interpersonal)	3.29	4	1.19
Problem Solving Orientation (interpersonal, epistemological)	3.68	4	1.03
Perception of Volitional Competence (intrapersonal)	3.32	4	1.13
Self-regulation in challenging situations (intrapersonal)	3.07	4	1.18

* Survey responses from 1 to 5, 1 indicating less evidence of self-authorship and 5 indicating more

Qualitative Findings: Themes

- **Developmentally Effective Experiences**
(Baxter Magolda and King, 2007; provocative moments, Pizzolato, 2005; dissonance)
 - Exposure to new beliefs, cultural backgrounds, or unfamiliar situations
 - Conflict
 - Exposure to emotionally challenging situations
 - Exposure to conflicting values
- **Context**
 - Curricular
 - Co-curricular
 - Social/Family
- **Student Response**
 - Disengagement
- Reflection
- Action indicating internalization of self-authored ideas
- Decision to conform while disagreeing
- **Stages of Self-Authorship**
 - Trusting External Authority
 - Tensions with External Authority
 - Entering and Leaving Crossroads
 - Self-Authorship
- **Subskills of Self-Authorship (integrating quantitative data)**
 - Capacity for autonomous action
 - Perceptions of volitional competence
 - Self-regulation in challenging situations
 - Problem-solving orientation

Examples: Crossroads

My friends in school aren't the same as in the university. Now when I think about it, I don't know why I was friends with them. We didn't have anything in common anymore. When we were children we were close, but when we grew up, we became different people. It was just a habit from the beginning of school till we graduated... And when I talk to new people, they don't know me, so I can be different and more outgoing." Yara

"I was just listening to the discussion and wasn't interacting. But I started to realize that there are such different opinions and they're all so convincing. Everyone has their own reasoning that they are getting worked up about." Karim

Example of Omar from a small town studying in the big city – social awareness.

Examples: Self-Authorship

- Organizing rallies to protest unjust laws
- Restructuring the Freshman orientation to accommodate more diversity
- Ending a relationship because of differing values

RQ1: How do first year Egyptian students in an international liberal arts university experience self-authorship?

- **Areas of consistency with existing model**
 - Components of self-authorship (three dimensions)
 - Progress of self-authorship (stages and provocative moments)
 - Common themes
- **Areas of Variation**
 - Consistent evidencing of entry into crossroads at first year, rather than using external formulas (not consistent with Baxter Magolda, 2001)
 - Cultural circumstances leading to provocative moments, facilitating self-authorship
 - Being privileged in a developing country
 - Multicultural education
 - Political Turmoil
 - Effectiveness of Externally catalyzed situations
 - Variation in expression of self-authorship: not aligning actions with beliefs – family structures that encourage subordination to elders (WITH SOME EXCEPTIONS)



RQ2: What curricular experiences in the first-year program foster self-authorship development as identified by this population of students?

- First year courses and pedagogies – learning communities
- Class discussions that encourage listening and analysis
- Features of Learning Partnerships Model (validating capacity to know, situating learning in student experience, mutually constructing knowledge)

RQ3: What implications can be made about programming and activities that enhance the development of self-authorship in first-year university students?

- Potential of the first year in facilitating self-authorship
- Intentional articulation of self-authorship outcomes
- Value of student-centered pedagogies

Directions for Future Research

- Cultural variation in development of self-authorship
- How religious beliefs are folded into a self-authored identity
- Ways of sustaining engaged learning throughout the university years (“gentle art of stepping back” Day and Lane, 2014)
- Impact of models of prior schooling on self-authorship
- Impact of turmoil and instability
- Quantitative development tools

Conclusion / Reflections

- Self-authorship important in preparing students in an unpredictable world: social, economic and political crises
- Paradox of employers looking to higher education as a preparation ground for professionals

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