Self-assessment, self-direction, self-regulation and other myths
Deconstructing the fallacy of the adult learner

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The responsibility for self-regulation

• A cornerstone of professional autonomy
  • Both a privilege and a responsibility

• Manifests in two forms
  • "Authorities" set standards and address breeches of standards by members
  • Individual members ensure personal maintenance of competence

Archetype of the self-regulating professional

• Reflect regularly on daily practice
• Self-assess gaps in knowledge or skill
• Seek opportunities to redress gaps
• Invest energy to learn (or relearn)
• Incorporate new knowledge into practice
• Repeat

(Handfield-Jones, et al, 2002)
Today's talk

• Identify assumptions in this model of the self-regulating professional
• Briefly examine the evidence for each of these assumptions
• Discuss implications for conception of self-regulation
• Construct a more sophisticated understanding of the phenomenon

Problematic assumptions

• We use reflection to look for gaps
• We find gaps when we look
• We try to address gaps through learning
• We incorporate new information into practice

We use reflection to actively search for gaps
The self-protective role of reflection

- Presumption that reflection on practice is used to expose gaps
- But reflection often used to protect self-concept
  - Eg. gamblers’ interpretation of losses (Gilovich, 1983)
  - Eg. surgeons’ reflections on bad outcomes
  - “It’s a one time thing, it just happens a lot”
    - Suzanne Vega

Value of self-protective reflection

- Such re-interpretive reflection important
  - Depressed people have more “accurate” interpretation of their role in events
    - Lab-induced “learned helplessness” model of depression
  - Self-efficacy leads to success
    - Confidence to persist in face of initially negative feedback
    - Willingness to keep trying in difficult situations

Implications for practice change

- “Rose colored glasses” approach to reflection understandable and necessary
  - Not just a “selfish” activity
  - Important for ability to function and succeed
- But
  - May get in the way of self-improvement
  - How much rationalization is too much?
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We find gaps when we look for them
The rhetoric of self-assessment

• Almost every article on self-assessment begins with the same basic sentence:
  
  “The ability to self-assess is vital to the concept of professional self-regulation”

• Cornerstone of many professional “Maintenance of Competence” programs

The literature on self-assessment

• Hundreds of articles
• Many literature reviews
• One conclusion:

  **Self-assessment ability is generally poor**

Three key patterns of data

• Little or no relationship between externally generated scores and self-assessed scores
• All but the very highest performers tend to overestimate ability
• Worst offenders are those in lowest quartile of performance
Why is self-assessment so bad?

- Kruger & Dunning (1999): “Unskilled and unaware”
  - The skills required to know whether you are performing well are also the skills required to actually perform well.

University students' performance on a grammar test

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University students’ performance on a grammar test

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Kruger and Dunning 1999

The “Lake Woebegone Effect”

- Everyone thinks they are above average
  - Eg. driving
  - Eg. self-assessment

- Kruger and Dunning (1999) explanation:
  - Poor performers don’t know what a good performance looks like
  - Form of domain specific “perceptual deficit”
Those most in need of improvement are those least likely to know

For any given skill, 25% of us are in the bottom quartile of performance

Those of us who are in the bottom 25% think we are above average

So whose job is it to tell us?

Implications for self-regulation

We use reflection to look for gaps

- Self-reflection is often “self-protective”
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We try to address gaps through learning

We incorporate new information into practice

Problematic assumptions

We use reflection to look for gaps

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- Self-assessment largely ineffective
- We try to address gaps through learning

- We incorporate new information into practice
We try to address gaps through learning

The motivation to learn

- Assumption that the “adult learner” is motivated to fill gaps in knowledge / skill
  - Motivation comes from recognition of the value of learning the information / skill
- But where does assumption come from?

The theoretical support

- Malcolm Knowles
  - “The Adult Learner”
- Anders Ericsson
  - Expert Performance
- Bereiter and Scardamalia
  - “Surpassing Ourselves”
But…

• Think about last conference attended
• How did you select sessions to attend?
  • “Wow, thank goodness they have a session on that, I am really poor at that and should find out how to come back up to speed.”

• Evidence that health care professionals attend CE events that confirm what they already know
  (cf Miller, 2005)

The flaw in the theories

• All theories of adult learning / expertise focus on the reasons why people learn
  • Areas where we excel
  • Areas where we have an interest

• Our own reflections focus on times we chose to learn
  • “I am here aren’t I?”

The flaw in the theories

• Little or no research or theory on why people DON’T learn
  • Areas where we struggle
  • Areas that do not interest us much

• Few examples in our own heads of times we chose not to learn or gave up
  • “Wouldn’t it be fun to learn how to play the guitar?”
Regehr’s axiom of learning

- LEARNING IS NOT FUN
  - Learning **fun** things is **fun**
  - Learning **hard** things is **hard**
  - Learning **boring** things is **boring**

The decision to learn

- Decision to learn/change is “cost/benefit” analysis
- Sometimes “cost” of outweighs benefits
  - Decision to avoid rather than engage in learning
- “Because it is the right thing to do” is seldom a sufficient motivator
  - (back to self-justifying reflection)

The adult learner redefined

- Differences between adult and child learners:
  - Children have lots of energy
  - You can make children do things
- Regehr’s axiom of adult learners:
  - *The older we get, the less willing we are to exert the energy and the fewer people there are who can tell us we have to*
Implications for self-regulation

- For any given skill, 25% of us are in the bottom quartile of performance
- Placing the responsibility for improving areas of weakness on the individual professional may produce an unbearable burden
- So whose job is it to make us do something about it?

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- We resist learning in areas of weakness
- We incorporate new information into practice
We incorporate new knowledge and skills into practice

Translating knowledge to practice

- Surprisingly little research in the CE literature regarding implementation of learning in practice
- When we do look, the data are worrisome (e.g., Davis et al., 1999)
- Efforts to address this tend to focus on: “What works best?”
  NOT: “Why doesn’t this work?”

Translating knowledge to practice

- Easy to underestimate difficulty of incorporating learned activity into practice
  - Sounds logical and sensible in the “class”
- But …
  - Must recognize spontaneously when it is valuable (cf. Elman, 2004)
  - Must have confidence to implement (cf. Kennedy, 2004)
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    - Most CE learning fails to change practice

Summary so far...

- Many factors involved in “formal” practice change
  - Must see your way as inadequate
  - Must see new way as better
  - Must see that the difference is worth the energy required to learn the new way
  - Must see how to incorporate the newly learned way into your practice

- Many of the assumptions built into the “self-regulation” version of this process are questionable at best
Better models of maintenance of competence?

• Self-administered objective tests of knowledge and skill with profile identifying areas of relative high and low performance

• Requirement to generate and justify an annual learning plan based on profile results

• “Guidance counselors” to help incorporate data regarding poor performance into self-concept without loss of self-confidence

Better models of self-regulation?

• Knowing when you are over your head
  • Knowing when to slow down / look it up / refer
  • Shifting from knowing-in-action to reflection-in-action

• Innovating in practice
  • Problem solving as a form of self-directed learning

• Teamwork and shared responsibility
  • For safe and effective practice
  • For “self-regulation” and feedback

Advancing health care education and practice through research

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