Self-Directed Behavior and Observational Learning in Classrooms Serving Native Hawaiian Students

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In relatively recent years, educational research has taken a closer look at the traditional teaching styles of indigenous populations. The results of these studies have shown that traditional teaching practices in these cultures significantly differ from the pedagogy that is applied in formal education, particularly in the United States. One type of teaching practice that has been studied in many indigenous cultures is observational learning (Maynard x; Rogoff x; Chun x). Even more recently, educational research has focused on self-directed learning. These studies focused on the effects of and promotion of the encouraging students to take more responsibility and ownership over their learning. Unlike observational learning, relatively little research has studied self-directed learning from an indigenous perspective. The purpose of this paper is to synthesize the literature on self-directed learning and to examine this from the indigenous perspectives of teaching. Specifically looking at how observational learning influences self-directed learning.

Research shows that observational learning is highly valued in many indigenous populations (Rogoff, 2003; x; x). Rogoff’s (2003) research noted that these indigenous modeling techniques differed from other forms of observational learning in that it often involved little to no verbal communication between the expert and the learner. She described what she called “intent participation” as the commonly observed, but often overlooked, process where young children intently and keenly observe adult activities in which they will eventually be expected to participate. More often children in indigenous populations have the responsibility of contributing to adult and family
work. They are often present in these activity settings as “legitimate peripheral participants” (Lave & Wenger, 1991), ease-dropping or listening-in on the adult activities. Although these children are not directly involved in the activity and the adults do not directly communicate with the child observers, the adults expect the children to pay close attention and to contribute as a collaborative participant when they are ready. Children are expected to know when to pay attention and what to pay attention to. In doing so, they learn the activity and become more involved. [Add examples from research in several indigenous cultures].

Although this method of learning does not involve directly working with the experts, this concept speaks to Vygotsky’s theory, which states that through guidance from a more competent member of society, a learner is able to master a new skill (Vygotsky, 1978). Even in non-verbal, observational learning an expert is necessary to model the activity to the learner. The child must have the opportunity to observe the activity and may spend time acting out the activity in play in order to practice that skill. This play may also involve other, potentially older or more experienced, children that assist the learner (Maynard; Rogoff). [Add examples from Maynard’s and Rogoff’s work]. Therefore, acquiring the skills needed for student-directed learning occurs through the observation of others and their social interactions.

In considering traditional methods of learning commonly used in indigenous cultures, we can see how teaching styles such as modeling or observational learning can lead to self-directed learning. In intent participation, these children are gaining the skills needed to accurately assess the important aspects of what they are observing and where to direct their attentions. Deciphering for themselves which actions are essential for them to know and how intently they should be observing. These children are also
learning to evaluate their own skill level in order to determine when and to what extent they are able to participate. It is expected that the learner will decide when he is ready to become involved and when to take on a more complex role in the activity. Therefore, the skills that are developed from engaging in intent participation may lend to skills needed for the development of self-directed behaviors.

To further understand the concept of self-directed learning, we must first look at how it is defined in the literature. Educational research uses many terms to describe self-directed behaviors in the classroom setting, such as student-directed learning, self-regulated learning, and autonomy. Most of these studies describe a sense of students’ independence and ownership in learning. Thanasoulas (x) described learner autonomy as the shifting responsibility of learning from the teacher to the learner. Their study looked at the development of learner autonomy in language learning. He noted that autonomy may be considered as “a departure from education as a social process, as well as in terms of redistribution of power attending the construction of knowledge and roles of the participants in the learning process.” Using Benson & Voller’s (1997) article he identifies various ways that the term autonomy is used, such as the ability of learners to study entirely on their own, to apply skill for self-directed learning, and to determine the direction of their own learning.

Atencio’s (x) article considers the difference between structured autonomy and guided participation. This study observed students engaged in a math lab in which the teacher allowed the students to communicate with each other and work as a group to solve the math problems. The students were learning to solve problems using their set of skills with minimal guidance from the teacher but with the support of their fellow students. [Elaborate].
Stefanou, Perencevich, DiCintio, & Turner’s (2004) article focuses on ways of supporting autonomy in the classroom and the effects this may have on students’ engagement and motivation. They define autonomy as “students’ need for latitude over decisions in school.” They argue that autonomy support has often been interpreted merely as a choice. Often, offering meaningless choices to the students rather than allowing opportunities for academically significant choices.

In this study the researchers separated autonomy support into three categories: organizational, procedural, and cognitive. Organizational autonomy support included teachers allowing students to make decisions on environmental procedures such as agreeing on rules and choosing the due dates of projects. Procedural autonomy support involved the students’ ownership of form, such as having a choice over the media used to present projects. Cognitive autonomy support involved the students’ responsibility in the learning process. This included teachers questioning students about their thought process, requiring them to support their point, and to evaluate their own conclusions as well as others’ conclusions. This study found that cognitive autonomy support more likely than organizational or procedural may lead to long-lasting effects on motivation and critical thinking.

The Department of Education in Hawaii has added self-directed learner as one of six General Learner Outcomes (GLO), which were developed as a standard for all students to strive to achieve (x). The Hawai`i state DOE defines self-directed learner as “the ability to be responsible for one’s own learning.” Students are rated on three areas: Setting priorities and establishing achievable goals and personal plans for learning; planning and managing time and resources to achieve goals; and monitoring progress and evaluating learning experiences. Teachers are given the responsibility of promoting
this development in their classrooms. Some research has shown that fostering this development in their students increases their motivation and engagement. In implementing this standard in the classroom it would first be important to consider cultural differences in education, especially in a multicultural area such as Hawai`i.

[Add additional research on Hawaiian traditions of teaching and observational learning and the concept of T_n_.]

Many studies have looked at the effects of encouraging self-directed learning and the promotion of autonomy in the classroom. However, more research is needed in defining and understanding the role and value of self-directed behaviors particularly in indigenous populations. This could impact culture-based education in theory and practice. [Expand]

This is an extremely rough draft! I just wanted to get the concepts and direction down and will clearly expand on all of areas and add in a few more areas at a later time.

There are three main topics in my paper that I’m attempting to synthesize: literature on observational learning, indigenous perspectives on teaching, and self-directed learning.
Are these three topics too much to try to synthesize in one paper? If so, which direction should I go? What should be eliminated?

How should these topics be organized? Does it make sense to start with indigenous perspectives of observational learning then move into self-directed learning?