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 own 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

Kruger and Dunning 1999
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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”
Implications for self-regulation

- 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?
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Problematic assumptions

- We use reflection to look for gaps
  - Self-reflection is often “self-protective”
- We find gaps when we look
  - 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 try to address gaps through learning**
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- We try to address gaps through learning
  - 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 (eg 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