Moving Toward Self-Authorship: Investigating Outcomes of Learning Partnerships

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This qualitative study investigates how the Learning Partnerships Model (LPM; Baxter Magolda, 2001, 2004a) could be operationalized in the context of an academic advising retention program. The findings focus on what epistemological outcomes emerge for students who entered the program as formula followers. Findings suggest that although students likely will not self-author in one semester, there are specific changes (e.g., beliefs, cognitive interdependence, and affect regulation) that emerge as precursors to subsequent self-authorship development.

One common goal across academic and student affairs contexts is constructing environments to support increasingly more complex cognitive student outcomes in which students think in ways that consider multiple perspectives on what is right or wrong. In academic affairs these efforts have focused on pedagogical shifts into more constructivist techniques whereby students are actively engaged in sense making, rather than receiving knowledge from instructors (e.g., Appel-Silbaugh, 2006; Bekken, 2005; Egart & Healy, 2004; Yonkers-Talz, 2004). Similar strategies are evident in student affairs programs that engage students in reasoning in ways that help them take ownership of their decisions and promote further development of decision-making skills (e.g., Jacobson, Kelleyhan, Ponikvar, & Stolz, 2006; Piper & Buckley, 2004).

Studies of the impact of such programs showed that participants became more adept at reasoning through situations interdependently rather than relying on authorities to tell them what to do (Appel-Silbaugh, 2006; Bekken, 2005; Haynes, 2004; Jacobson et al., 2006; Piper & Buckley, 2004). Participants also placed increasing emphasis on figuring out what they believed, what their values were, and what sorts of responsibilities they must take for their own action. These outcomes imply that students were developing cognitively and epistemologically. Cognitively, students were developing new methods for thinking through situations and making thoughtful healthy decisions. Epistemologically, students appeared to change the way they thought about the nature of knowledge; they began to see that what they should do, and what counted as a good idea, what was right or wrong was not an absolute, but socially constructed.

Cognitive and epistemic complexity are not new goals in higher education, but within the category of student goals there is a new specific epistemic outcome for institutions and programs to facilitate: self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Kegan, 1994). Self-authorship comprises three dimensions: cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal. Self-authored people employ complex cognitive processes of meaning making in ways that recognizes the socially constructed nature of knowledge (cognitive) while also keeping in mind their own beliefs, values, and goals (intrapersonal) in balance with maintaining healthy relationships (interpersonal). Documents
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outlining desirable student exit outcomes share goals of enhancing problem solving skills, critical thinking, and the ability to live in a democratic multicultural society (American College Personnel Association [ACPA], 1994, 2004; Association of American Colleges and Universities [AACU, 2002]). Self-authorship seems an ideal goal to work toward because it should allow students to achieve these goals not as separate skills, but by developing an understanding of how cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal dimensions are interrelated.

The attractiveness of self-authorship as a potential outcome of student participation in a program has not gone unnoticed (e.g., Bekken, 2005; Egart & Healy, 2004; Haynes 2004; Piper & Buckley, 2004). Seemingly in anticipation of such attention, Baxter Magolda (2001) outlined a heuristic for promoting self-authorship development in undergraduates. This heuristic, the Learning Partnerships Model (LPM), comprises three principles: (a) validate students as knowers, (b) situate learning in students’ experiences, and (c) define learning as mutually constructing meaning. Learning partnerships should engage students in active learning that values their contributions (validation principle) and coaches them toward taking greater degrees of responsibility for learning and knowledge construction (mutual construction principle), all in the context of students’ experiences grappling with relevant content (situation principle).

As both self-authorship and the LPM are relatively new, there is little empirical evidence supporting the effectiveness of the LPM in facilitating college student development of self-authorship. The majority of the literature on learning partnerships takes the LPM as a framework for understanding existing practices designed to promote cognitive, intrapersonal, and/or interpersonal maturity (Egart & Healy, 2004; Hornak & Ortiz, 2004; Piper & Buckley, 2004; Yonkers-Talz, 2004). Egart and Healy described student development in a structured urban leadership internship program. Although their honors students were adept at classroom learning, the challenges they found in experiential learning at their internship sites were significantly different. In conjunction with their supervisors, they began to cope with the dissonance in ways suggesting movement toward self-authorship. Taken as a representative example, Egart and Healy quoted Jessica describing her development, “It makes you sort out what’s important, what’s not, how you felt about it, what you think, how you’ve changed. . . . and then you just look back and figure out okay, now how am I?” (p. 147). Students’ learning in interpersonal interactions forced them to reconsider who they were and how knowledge was constructed—all characteristics of movement toward self-authorship.

According to Baxter Magolda (2001, 2004a, 2004b) one reason why participants in her longitudinal study of ways of knowing did not develop self-authorship until after college graduation was that college and universities tend to provide so many formulas (e.g., plans and black and white answers, directives, and policies) for success that students did not have to think about how to get what they want or why they have the goals, beliefs, and/or values they do. Because college students were able to turn to university documents, advisors, and programs to get “the answer,” in line with Kegan’s (1994) theoretical work on self-authorship, cross-categorical meaning making was reinforced and rewarded. Students identify categories of being and behavior (e.g., good student, good daughter, good study skills). Through their ability to locate and follow appropriate formulas for achieving these categorical labels, college students are able to self-regulate toward categorical goals, but they are not challenged to identify and understand
meaning making beyond categories, or to understand their attraction to or implications of working toward particular categorical labels.

The literature suggests that learning partnerships propel students toward self-authorship by creating contexts whereby formulas for success are not readily available. By compelling students to make meaning without formulas, students consider what an alternative to formula following might look like and how to engage in that kind of knowing. Movement away from formula following is necessary, but it is not in and of itself self-authorship. Jessica was moving toward self-authorship by considering who she was, but she was not yet self-authored in that self-authorship involves the ability to enact internal foundations—internally defined beliefs, values, and goals (Baxter Magolda, 2001). Jessica was still developing an internal foundation.

The fact that students in existing literature on learning partnerships have not developed self-authorship is unsurprising for two reasons. It is possible that they did not self-author because although they participated in innovative programs, the programs pre-existed the LPM. The programs may not have been true learning partnerships then, as the framework was applied to the pre-existing program rather than the program being designed to operationalize the LPM. A more likely explanation, however, is that self-authorship development in college students is still an emergent area of study. Initially all discussion of self-authorship has suggested it develops in adulthood (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Kegan, 1994). Only more recently has there been empirical work to investigate whether some traditional aged college students might display such a way of knowing prior to college graduation (Creamer & Laughlin, 2005; Pizzolato, 2003, 2004, 2005; Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004). This body of work has shown that students could develop self-authorship in late adolescence when they have had to consistently struggle to create meaning because of the obscurity of formulas for how to make sense of who they were in a community where they were visible minorities. What self-authorship looks like, how it is catalyzed, and how it is measured in traditional aged college students are issues still under investigation.

In line with Baxter Magolda’s (2001) earlier claim that most college students are not developing self-authorship because they have not been asked to interdependently make meaning without formulas, this literature suggests that the first step toward self-authorship is movement away from formula following. After relinquishing a belief in absolutes and formulas (The Crossroads), students must then actively seek out new ways of knowing and deeper self-understandings (Becoming the Author of One’s Life) and how to use this internally defined sense of self in the construction of knowledge and maintenance of healthy relationships with others (Internal Foundations). This three-phase journey describes the major steps toward self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2001) but does not elucidate the changes associated with movement along the phases. Without such an understanding of such changes, it is difficult to talk about student development in learning partnerships in ways other than whether or not students self-authored or were moving toward self-authorship. What does moving toward self-authorship mean?

To investigate these questions we examined developmental changes in students participating in a retention-focused academic advising program (the STEP [Support to Enhance Performance] program) modeled after the LPM. By studying student development in a program designed to operationalize Baxter Magolda’s (2001) LPM, we aimed to describe
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student development in a learning partnership at a micro level. Such an investigation should allow for identification of measurable outcomes to be used in program evaluation, as well as in clarifying the ways in which students are progressing epistemologically as they move toward self-authorship. In short, we aimed to identify outcomes other than self-authorship, but which appear to be precursors to self-authorship, for students participating in a learning partnership program.

METHOD

This was an exploratory, qualitative study of student epistemological development during an advising program designed as a learning partnership. As the literature on learning partnerships is new and heretofore has focused exclusively on self-authorship as an outcome of learning partnerships, an exploratory qualitative, grounded theory study seemed most appropriate given our interest in clarifying diverse student outcomes of participating in learning partnerships.

Sample

Participants were recruited for an advising program, STEP, at a large, public Midwestern, research university. Karen, the STEP advisor, initially contacted the first author about self-authorship and high-risk students. STEP was then revised according to Baxter Magolda’s (2001) LPM and served students in academic difficulty in one of the university’s colleges. These students were in one of two academic statuses: (a) lack of satisfactory progress in the major ( < 2.0 semester GPA), or (b) academic probation ( < 2.0 cumulative GPA). The college sent all eligible students a letter informing them of their status and requiring them to attend an initial meeting with Karen, where they decided whether to participate in STEP.

In January 2005, 37 students were eligible to participate in STEP. Twenty-two students elected to participate in the study reported here, and 18 of these participants also agreed to participate in STEP. The findings reported here reflect these 18 students. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 41 ( \( M = 23.05, SD = .43 \) ). Participants were predominantly male (78.9%). All class years were represented, but the majority of participants were seniors (50.0%; juniors, 3.3%; sophomores, 11.1%; first years, 4.6%). Participants were racially diverse (African American or Black = 31.6%, Asian = 5.3%, Latino or Latina = 10.5%, Other = 10.5%, White = 42.1%).

The Program

The STEP program provided regular one-on-one sessions with a professional advisor, Karen. Session frequency varied by student and was based on student needs, with most students attending formal sessions every three weeks. The STEP curriculum was flexible in that it could be tailored to individual student needs, and it included topics such as goal setting, time management, study skills, and career exploration. In addition to teaching students specific academic success skills, Karen also purposefully worked on helping students develop skills for how they made sense of situations, made planful decisions, understood themselves, and balanced competing expectations of them from important others (e.g., parents, peers). The following subsections describe how STEP functioned as a learning partnership.

Validating Students’ Capacity to Know. STEP was designed with the assumption that knowledge is complex and socially constructed—assumption one of Baxter Magolda’s (2001) three key assumptions of the LPM. Consequently Karen did not suggest there was a formula for success. Instead she approached students as important authorities. She solicited students’ ideas, rather than telling students...
how to modify their behaviors or what to do in regards to choosing a career or major. By inviting students to construct their own plans for success, and by taking their contributions seriously, Karen worked to validate students’ capacity to know.

Situating Learning in Students’ Experiences. In addition to helping students see themselves as capable learners, STEP was predicated on the notion that the self is central to knowledge construction—students’ identities are important influences on how knowledge can and should be constructed and to what ends. Sessions were planned around students’ needs and focused on helping students identify who they were, who they wanted to be, and how to make plans based on these goals. Karen helped students integrate identity goals and knowledge construction.

Define Learning as Mutually Constructing Meaning. As students worked on individualized plans for success, ran into obstacles, and found success, their advisor coached them but never told them what to do. Karen demonstrated her expertise while also coaxing them to notice their own authority through her invitations to explore motivations behind their behaviors, make plans for future similar obstacles, consider how to transfer their skills into other situations, her queries into their process, reminders to incorporate particular behaviors, and reflections on progress. Through this work she helped students see that they shared authority and expertise and that learning was about mutually constructing meaning.

Procedures

Demographic information was collected from students volunteering to participate. Data for the study were then collected in two distinct ways: session taping and interviews. Every session students had with their advisor was audio taped and transcribed verbatim.

In addition to these sessions, students participated in two audio taped 1-hour, individual semi-structured interviews with a member of the research team. Common guiding questions allowed for investigation into student perceptions, experiences, and processing strategies in ways that were consistent across participants, but the semi-structured nature provided space for exploration of each participant’s unique issues (see Miles & Huberman, 1994, for discussion of semi-structured interviews). The interviews focused on students’ experiences in college with specific probes designed to understand students’ experiences and their sense-making strategies (e.g., “Could you describe a specific academic challenge you’ve faced here?”; “Why do you think you experienced this challenge?”; “What went through your head when you found yourself in this situation?”).

Grounded theory was used to make sense of the data, because it can be used to elaborate on existing theory given that elaborations are derived from “systematically gathered and analyzed” data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998a, p. 12). In this study we aimed to elaborate on and integrate the literature on self-authorship and learning partnerships specifically and on epistemic development more generally. In line with grounded theory, patterns, themes, and codes were constructed from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998a, 1998b). Grounded theory via constant comparative analysis seemed an appropriate method for code building and data analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998a, 1998b), because the goal of this study was to theorize about “plausible relationships” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998b) between learning partnerships and student epistemological outcomes. Multiple researchers participated in the data analysis process in an investigator triangulation effort to establish trustworthiness. At work meetings researchers checked interpretations for bias and
appropriate support for interpretations and code building.

**FINDINGS**

Collectively the findings from this study clarified the developmental changes students displayed during their participation in a learning partnership in two ways: (a) by clarifying dimensional relations (i.e., between the interpersonal, intrapersonal, and cognitive dimensions) and (b) by outlining early movement toward self-authorship in students.

**Relations Between Epistemological Dimensions**

At the start of their participation in STEP, the students were coping with academic difficulties and were interested in finding solutions to their problems. When asked what he was interested in working on Dave said, “I don’t know exactly where I want to go…. I was actually going to ask you if you had any suggestions of things I could do like surveys or something.” Seeking a survey to tell him what he should major in, coupled with his use of “exactly,” implies that he was looking for the one right major. And when his advisor asked him to think about choosing a major by considering his interests, Dave repeatedly said, “I don’t know.” Thinking about what he enjoyed and incorporating it into decision making was a novel idea to Dave.

Dave’s desire for a formula for determining what to do and who to be was echoed in other participants’ early comments. Carla relied on STEP to figure out “what my options are.” Ben depended on his advisor to help him figure out how to take action and what kind of action to take in improving his academic standing. Taken as a representative sample, these students’ comments suggest that they entered STEP with formula-following personal epistemologies. Participants believed that:

(a) knowledge was received from authorities or authority created documents such as surveys or tests, (b) their job was to listen to and learn from authorities, and (c) that knowledge was certain — there was a right answer or way to do things. These beliefs are consistent with early epistemological orientations of absolute and transitional knowing (Baxter Magolda, 1992), received knowing (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986), and dualism (Perry, 1968).

**Intrapersonal and Interpersonal Challenges Prompting Dissonance.** Although they sought formulas, the participants also entered STEP with questions about how to cope effectively with externally imposed pressures. The intensity of pressure participants were experiencing pushed them into a psychologically uncomfortable space where they questioned who they could be, who they wanted to be, and who could determine the answers to these questions.

Ben experienced much external pressure from his family and his home community. After five different majors, he settled on economics because his “previous grades in economics were higher than other things here, and it seemed like something that was working.” But his parents questioned his ability to finish and told him he would have to pay for college. In the face of these changes and pressure from his community to return home, Ben wondered if he should continue.

It’s something that all the people in my family have done. I would be the fifth generation to take it up, and if I didn’t, I’d have 90% of the people close to me and who are important to me telling me I was a fool…. Not only is it a natural progression for me to go into the family business, but people that I grew up with down there, asking, praying for me to come in there, and part of their motivation is that with my dad being his age, he
might retire in another 10–14 years, and then where would they be. . . . they’re obviously concerned, and these are people who I do have love for and am concerned about.

Here Ben clearly articulates the pull he feels to fulfill a tradition and hope of important others in his life despite the fact that he could not picture himself enjoying taking over his dad’s job.

The question of how college fit in with others’ expectations of them was not unique to Ben. Nadia struggled with her family to be able to live on campus, when her family’s cultural beliefs dictated that she live at home. Luke repeatedly mentioned how the “negative attitude” of friends and family made him question whether he could be successful in college. In addition to their doubts, Luke described his struggles as a first generation student. In these students’ struggles and in those of other participants, intrapersonal challenges (challenges to their sense of who they are, can be, and should be) seemed most salient to them; participants mentioned such challenges exclusively when asked about obstacles to their academic success and achievement of personal goals. These intrapersonal challenges did not emerge from self-reflection but rather through interpersonal conflicts where an important other or group called into question who the students thought they could be.

*Falling Short of The Crossroads.* These moments of questioning who they were or could be or wondering if they might need new ways of viewing themselves or making decisions seem to illustrate a developmental phase Baxter Magolda (2001) labeled “The Crossroads.” Students at The Crossroads begin to feel uncomfortable with their ways of knowing and seek ways to alter their epistemologies in ways that will allow them to better cope with the complexity required by the situation. Ben and Luke were clearly dissatisfied with their current situations and were looking for effective coping and sense-making strategies. They were in the midst of an “evolving awareness of own values and sense of identity distinct from others’ perceptions” (Baxter Magolda, 2004b, p. 13). They also, as Baxter Magolda claims is typical of The Crossroads, were becoming aware of the limitations of depending on others for self-definition—as Ben questioned the value of complying with expectations that he return home to work in the family business when his own goals and interests did not lie there. Luke and Ben were becoming more aware of a disconnect between who they wanted to be, how they wanted to engage in learning, and how they perceived expectations held up for them by others. Given that The Crossroads is a time when students begin to question and recognize that they must take responsibility for figuring out who they want to be and how they want to construct knowledge. At first glance it may appear that these students were at The Crossroads. Further examination suggests this is not the case.

Ben, Luke, and other participants were experiencing intense intrapersonal tension (Who do I want to be? Who can I be?) brought about through interpersonal dissonance. Although they were able to accept that there could be multiple ways of viewing a situation, the students fell short of a Crossroads experience. Luke could see that what his home community expected of him (to drop out) was one way of understanding his collegiate experience and that there were definite factors that made this seem like a strong possibility (e.g., lack of support, first generation status). He also knew his collegiate experience was a potential pathway to success. And Ben clearly saw that there were at least two ways for him to determine what to identify as a “good” career choice. He could move home and fulfill community expectations, thus serving the
people he loved. Or he could work toward his personal goal of working at a Fortune 500 company.

If these students were truly in the midst of a Crossroads moment, the next step—the hallmark of The Crossroads—would be for the students to “take responsibility for choosing beliefs . . . [and] crafting own identity” (Baxter Magolda, 2004b, p. 13). The students in this study saw a need to take responsibility, but in doing so, they seemed unable to take full responsibility. As students sought a new way to make sense of who they could or should be, they sought to extricate themselves from externally defining relationships only to attempt to construct a new dependent relationship with Karen. Ben said, “I need that final push for someone to say, ‘Well it might be this.’” Ideally students should be able to develop healthy relationships with authorities that emphasize interdependence, but these students entered relationships with their advisor not to engage in a mutual process of figuring out how to balance competing expectations, but to figure out just what to do.

Cognitive Skill Development Foundational to Intrapersonal and Interpersonal Issue Resolution. Students brought their intra- and interpersonal concerns with them to STEP, and for many students, committing to and even setting academic goals was unfathomable without first resolving the dissonance they were experiencing in these other dimensions. As they brought these concerns to STEP and clearly emphasized their desire for formulaic solutions, the major obstacle to their resolution of how to manage and make sense of competing expectations surfaced. The students’ development along the cognitive dimension was not yet advanced enough to allow them to effectively grapple with the issues with which they were consumed. Consequently Karen began her work with them by helping them develop these cognitive skills.

When students came to their first meeting with Karen she began these sessions by listening to the students’ stories about how they came to be in academic difficulty. The stories students told shared a theme of chaos. The students were typically balancing full time course schedules with work (78.9% worked, 42.1% worked more than 20 hours/week). Many were also pursuing school without financial and/or emotional support from home. These factors, coupled with insufficient academic preparation for college, led students to feel like they were being challenged in so many ways that they did not know what to focus on or how to work on a single arena (e.g., pursuing their academic goals) without throwing another important arena (e.g., family relationships) into chaos. Karen reflected their feelings back, asking if students were in fact experiencing confusion related to identity or interpersonal issues. She then engaged the students in active problem solving, involving them in activities to encourage them to see themselves as capable of making decisions that require balancing conflicting positions.

Ben’s case clearly illustrates this process. His account of how he came to be in academic difficulty ended with a sense that he was confused and overwhelmed: “My question now becomes, is it right for me to finish up here at [name of institution]?” Rather than provide specific advice on what to do, Karen simply began to get Ben to problem solve.

Maybe you need a way to pull those thoughts together in terms of making a list of different options you might have, and look at the pros and cons and factors behind each option, and we can explore a little bit of that today, because ultimately your decision on where you’re headed is going to provide you with all that motivation to do whatever it is that you decide.
After this exchange, Ben seemed interested in trying Karen’s suggestion, but quickly fell into an old pattern of questioning whether he could actually make a change that was satisfying to him: “I can’t entirely say that my heart is in econ. I don’t know too many people who are thrilled about econ, but it’s a definite possibility.” Karen reeled him back in with explicit direction: “Well let’s start kind of at the beginning,” followed by, “Just why did you decide to attend college in general?” By drawing Ben into telling more about his motivation to come to college and then following him through his various choices and stumbles, they were able to clarify what his initial goals were and to re-examine them in the present and in relation to the pressures he was feeling.

Throughout his participation in STEP Karen engaged Ben in collaborative problem solving, and he was increasingly able to participate in the process. At the start of the term, when asked to explain his thinking, he consistently responded with his father’s opinion. Only with prompting could he begin to articulate what his thoughts might have been.

Ben: I wound up having to talk to my father on several occasions, and he never had faith in the advertising program, and he basically knew several people in the program who were saying it was very long hours and very low pay, and bottom line, I could make more money working for him.

Karen: Okay. That’s what your dad says. What do you say?

Ben: I didn’t.

Further prodding from Karen led to Ben’s statement that advertising was not his “niche,” but a rationale for this statement was never identified, implying that he was having trouble separating how he could think about himself and make decisions from his father’s beliefs.

Ben’s tie to his parents was strong, and he consistently brought this up when talking through his own decisions. As time progressed he recognized how his relationship with his parents influenced his decision making: “I definitely want to make my parents happy, but at the same time I see how unhappy [dad] is, and I see the things he has to deal with on a day-to-day basis—increased liability, increased problems.” In addition to seeing the tension between quality of life and pleasing his parents, Ben noted that if he chose quality of life, he wanted to make this choice in a way that honored the work of his community.

That’s what my greatest fear is—these people who I care about are going to think that I’m too good for them. And I don’t want that to happen, because I’m a very humble person, and I obviously place a lot of importance on what people think of me and how I’m perceived, and I have to put myself first.

At this point, Ben was able to identify who was influencing his decision making and why. Additionally, he seemed to recognize the importance of allowing himself and his feelings to have a more active role in his knowledge construction processes.

Later in the semester Ben shifted away from making statements about a need for independence in decision making, “I have to put myself first,” to trying out new ways of decision making that enacted this possibility. He began to view his family as important players in his decisions, but not as dictators of what to do and why. Instead he began to speak about how to help everyone “negotiate and understand that there’s more at stake than the business.” And with time he was able to figure out what to do to help facilitate such negotiations: “I guess the question becomes, the next series of conversations with my parents
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are going to be, ‘Okay where are you going to be?’” Such shifts in the ways students spoke about and enacted their knowledge construction processes during their STEP sessions were consistent across participants. Nadia also was struggling with family pressure to fulfill particular expectations when she was unsure that such expectations were truly right for her. She started off the semester talking about her tendency to forget herself in making decisions: “I push myself to go the extra mile just so that the other person can be happy and be pleased and stuff, and I know that I’m not thinking of myself.” As she continued in STEP she made claims about how it was important for her to “be my own motivation,” but such statements were quickly tempered in later sessions by statements such as, “I just want to find the best route not to hurt people and to get what I want.” Similarly Rob started off the semester describing how easily influenced he was by his father’s disinterest in his academic experiences. After identifying how he allowed his father’s lack of interest to influence the degree to which he thought he could be competitive with his college peers, Rob was able to identify how to cope with his resulting frustration: “[Believing I can create change] kind of relaxes me and let’s me say, ‘Okay how can I fix that?’”

Epistemic Shifts. These shifts in who students considered important in knowledge construction and how they engaged in knowledge construction are suggestive of interesting epistemic shifts. Broadly the participants were moving away from viewing knowledge as definitive and received from authorities, to seeing knowledge as contextual and to seeing themselves as one of the important players in the knowledge construction process. What is interesting, however, is the epistemological path the students took in developing this contextual view of knowledge construction. Theories have consistently described epistemic development as progressing along from formula following, through a stage of intense subjectivism, and finally into a space where self, other, and context are all important factors that must be considered in the knowledge construction (Baxter Magolda, 1992; Belenky et al., 1986; Perry, 1968). In this literature, as participants began to see the limitations of following formulas and received knowing, they adopted an extreme attitude of anything goes, where I can believe one thing, you can believe another, and the difference is expected and unimportant because we are all different. The shortcomings of such an extreme position were ultimately realized and replaced with a view that what counts as truth or right is determined by context and culture. In our participants the subjective period was exemplified in statements like “I have to put myself first” and “I have to be my own motivation.” This exclusive consideration of self was short-lived and seemed to almost immediately give way to a more contextual view of knowledge, represented by a shift in language that implied that balance was necessary, as when Nadia spoke about trying to get her way and also not hurt others and when Ben talked about negotiating with important others to make the best decision regarding this future.

The brevity of signs of subjectivism is curious because previous research suggests the period should be significantly longer (Baxter Magolda, 1992, Belenky et al., 1986; Perry, 1968). Although we certainly support existing statements that, given the complexity of epistemological development, extensive development is unlikely within the span of a single semester, we suggest that perhaps the implementation of the LPM (Baxter Magolda, 2001) may have helped students develop more rapidly than expected by connecting epistemological development skills to particularly important real life situations in the midst of which students found themselves. Via lessons about how to evaluate situations from multiple
perspectives and how to include their own perspective in the evaluation, students began to see that what counted as right or wrong, good or bad, or possible or impossible depended on the perspective. They also began to see that they had personal goals and that it was okay and possible to include these ideas into the knowledge construction process. Through Karen’s careful questioning about why they were evaluating their situations in the way they were, they began to more readily consider themselves and how to negotiate between competing expectations than they did at the start of STEP.

Because students were under pressure to change their ways of knowing so they could resolve inter- and intrapersonal dissonance and because they were participating in a program designed to purposefully equip them with the skills to make sense of this dissonance, it seems possible that they showed more rapid development. Such consistent movement across participants suggests that, although they recognized a need to make changes to their current way of knowing through intra- and interpersonal challenges, their desire alone did not constitute a Crossroads moment. Despite the dissonance experienced, the students had not yet developed the cognitive skills to take full responsibility for their intrapersonal and interpersonal development. Through their work in an advising learning partnership, however, Karen was able to coach them toward cognitive interdependence—toward recognizing that they could successfully negotiate conflicting expectations in ways that were satisfying for them but also considered others.

Understanding Outcomes of the STEP LPM: Precursors to Self-Authorship

Cognitive interdependence in turn gave way to a marked increase in skills for decreasing interpersonal dissonance. Such changes were significant and indicative of movement towards self-authorship, but were not representative of developed self-authorship. Clarification of these changes and their relation to epistemological development illustrate outcomes of student participation in learning partnerships that may be precursors to self-authorship development.

Cognitively students made two particularly important changes to their epistemic belief systems: (a) belief in the controllability of outcomes—attributions for success and failure are rooted in an interaction between self and environment rather than as exclusively internal or external, and (b) belief that the self is important to knowledge construction and decision making.

Belief in the Controllability of Outcomes. In terms of the former, many students entered STEP believing that they were at the mercy of an institution in which they were not privileged. Luke illustrated such a position when he spoke about how he did not have the same support or resources as students from an “all White town and went to high school with friends and friends’ parents who been to college.” Because “they been to college and they know what goes on,” Luke rightly saw himself as approaching college from a less than enviable position. Luke certainly faced challenges as a first generation student but he also appeared paralyzed by his situation. Despite participating in a federally funded TRIO retention program in his first year, he had not tapped into the program’s resources. Nor had he met with any of his instructors. And he withdrew from his friends when it came to issues related to success in college. Without support and feeling overwhelmed by his own lack of privilege, Luke attributed his collegiate difficulties exclusively to the fact that he was different and that this was an immutable fact.

Other students were in similar situations where their attributions were singularly rooted
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in problems with either themselves or with their environment (e.g., poor preparation, bad or unhelpful professors, lack of family support). Jon spoke of his lack of preparation as the sole cause of his difficulty. Jonah claimed that his inadequate preparation led to his downfall: “I wasn’t really prepared. . . . No one really sat down with me and explained anything to me about college. It was just like I came here and I came.” Still other students made comments about themselves as learners that suggested they saw their own immutable abilities as the cause of their struggles. Kevin described college as hard because he has “never been good at taking classes” because “philosophizing isn’t my thing.” According to Kevin, he cannot do things that are not applied right away, and ideas and learning for the sake of learning is something he is not good at. Similarly Carla described her math challenges as insurmountable because she never “gets it” and she is just not good at math. Whether internal or external, participants began the term with attributions they felt were disadvantageous and unchangeable.

Data showed that as students progressed through the semester, their attributions changed. Luke began to see how he could alter his own behaviors and find groups of students struggling with similar issues. Carla participated in an enrichment program that helped her develop math skills. Jonah began to see that although he was not well prepared for college there were things he could do to enhance his achievement: “I think I don’t go about achieving in the right way. I guess I’m just kind of expecting everything to be there. . . . I mean I have to make the change.” And Kevin found that if he could “allocate time to do the assignments and get prepared for class,” he understood more, in spite of not liking philosophizing.

These changes in attributions are indicative of changes to important underlying epistemic beliefs. Students shifted from believing that the question of “Who am I?”—a question about self-knowledge—is something fixed that they can discover through an objective test or directive from an authority to seeing that who they are or could be was not fixed but based on emerging understandings of their talents, values, goals, and environmental constraints. This change represents a change to two beliefs about what counts as knowledge: (a) a belief in the tentative rather than certain nature of knowledge, and (b) a belief in the source of knowledge being something developed through reasoning rather than absorption from authorities.

Self as Central to Knowledge Construction and Decision Making. Extrapolating on the second changed belief, students also began to see that the self was central to knowledge construction and decision making. Reasoning was viewed not as merely attending to practices and processes of logic, but rather as a careful process of combining logic and personal goals, beliefs, and values. For example, Ben began to consider how to discuss options about his future role in the family business, and he said he needed to help everyone “negotiate and understand that there’s more at stake than the business.” Through this and subsequent statements, Ben implied that determining what he should do required viewing the situation from multiple perspectives. To merely reason from the business perspective left out his goals, shunted his possibilities, and might negatively impact the business if he was never happy in the job. Employing logical reasoning processes from multiple perspectives seemed the better way to make this decision in a way that honored himself and those important to him.

Such a perspective emerged in other participants as well. Layla began to consider what she really wanted and how she could merge basic reasoning skills that helped her
figure out what she was good at with tasks she truly enjoyed so she could find “something that I WANT to do for the rest of my life.” And Rob spoke about the effects of an epiphany.

I was doing the same stuff everyday . . . and I stopped and asked myself, ‘What am I really doing here?’ And I wasn’t helping to— I mean everyone here in this program has the same goals—everyone wants to help the environment. Everyone wants to save the streams, and I was working on this project . . . I looked around and really they had me doing these maps I could have been doing anywhere and they really weren’t about the environment, and so that is my new goal. I wanted to find something where I was actually doing something that was pro-environment.

Here Rob exemplifies a shift from following formulas laid out by others to recognizing that such behavior was not intrinsically satisfying to him. He, as did other students, began to place increasing emphasis on incorporating self-knowledge and goals in their meaning making.

According to Baxter Magolda (2001) engaging students in learning partnerships should help them view the self—their ideas, feelings, beliefs, values, and goals—as central to knowledge construction. Rather than seeing knowledge construction as formal, directed by others, and separate from themselves, students should begin to see knowledge construction as a process that involves integration of reason and self-knowledge. Such a view is consistent with self-authorship and the ultimate student outcome goal of learning partnerships. Participants in this study made clear progress toward seeing the self as central, as evidenced by student comments about figuring out what they wanted and using these ideas in decision making. At first glance then, it appears that the students were showing signs of self-authorship, in that they were using self-knowledge with contextual knowledge to make sense of situations, and they made these changes through pivotal disequilibrizing moments that challenged them to reconsider who they were and commit to making changes—an apparent Crossroads (Baxter Magolda, 2001).

Closer examination, however, reveals something other than self-authorship as the students’ dominant epistemology. In incorporating multiple perspectives (including their own) into their meaning making, students certainly emphasized the potential importance of self in knowledge construction, but this importance was tempered by a still-emerging internal definition of self. Ben sought to negotiate in a way that recognized multiple perspectives. Layla worked to figure out what she wanted. Rob wanted to find work that meshed with his environmental activism beliefs. Although seemingly rooted in a contextual view of knowledge coupled with internally defined beliefs, values, and goals, when pressed to articulate what they wanted and/or why they aspired to find jobs that fit with what they believed in, participants were significantly less clear. Rob, for instance, talked about how the program (his major) was pro-environment, that environmental activism was good, and that was what the program was about. In essence then, Rob sought not to enact internally defined beliefs, but rather to find a match between career and the ideology he signed up for of by choosing an environmentally focused major. Across participants the reason behind their work to achieve a particular goal was based in an ineffable attraction, a fit with their perception of their major’s ideology or enjoyment of a related activity.

Given the importance of internally defined goals, beliefs, and values to self-authorship, the
fact that participants seemed still in the process of self-definition implies that self-authorship was not achieved. Instead the common epistemological outcome appeared to be similar to Perry’s (1968) “commitment foreseen.” In this position students see that grappling effectively and satisfactorily with relativism requires a commitment to values, beliefs, and goals that one uses to navigate through the haze of relativism. According to Perry, commitment requires an active choice regarding one’s values and how to enact them. Participants in this study seemed to know from this position because they valued multiple perspectives—suggesting a belief in relativism—and they valued commitment (e.g., Rob’s desire to find pro-environment work), but they had not yet actually discovered what commitments meant to them. Rather they seemed to think they could sign up for a particular set of values. So although they actively made choices regarding what they wanted to value and how to enact these values, they were still figuring out the content of that to which they were committing.

By way of the LPM then, students appeared to make changes to their meaning making that should prime them for subsequent self-authorship development. Students experienced intense inter- and intrapersonal dissonance that required them to make cognitive changes in order to cope with this dissonance. In the process of developing these cognitive tools with Karen, students saw that Karen believed in using multiple perspectives, and they believed their own goals, values, and beliefs were important to consider in meaning making. Through practice in considering multiple perspectives students made changes to their beliefs about the nature of knowledge. They began to see knowledge as tentative rather than certain and constructed through reasoning rather than reception. Consequently students’ attributes changed and they began to take more responsibility for their learning and identity outcomes.

THEORETICAL SUMMARY

Although not self-authorship, student adoption of a commitment foreseen epistemological orientation suggests movement toward self-authorship and effectiveness of the STEP LPM. Based on our data we propose a model of development in the space between formula following and self-authorship. Although there are existing theories on the cognitive dimension of epistemic development prior to self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 1992; Belenky et al., 1986; Perry, 1968), these theories have never explicitly spoken to dimensional relations (interpersonal, cognitive, intrapersonal) prior to the most advanced epistemic orientations, or they have tended to describe what individual stages might look like without empirical evidence for if and how students actually move between the detailed orientations (Kegan, 1994).

Our participants began STEP with what Kegan (1994) would consider a cross-categorical sense of meaning making. Our participants could see a variety of categories and fret about how they fit into the category. What type of son or daughter were they? What type of student were they? But although they saw categories, could recognize that they belonged in multiple categories, and that they could perform within these categories in qualitatively different ways, they faced a crisis of meaning. This crisis of meaning came when the categories did not match up—for example, when what it meant to be a college student conflicted with what it meant to be a member of one’s family. In the face of these conflicts students saw that they could not be “good” at both categories simultaneously, and so they experienced intense interpersonal dissonance.

Although they wished to decrease their
psychic discomfort, actual relief could not emerge until the students developed the cognitive skills to recognize that the many categories to which they belonged were related, and that to effectively balance the competing expectations, they had to actively engage in meaning making rather than relying on others for decision and sense making. This shift in the way of knowing required that students believe they could affect change in their lives and what they thought, felt, hoped for, believed, and valued mattered—even if it flew in the face of what important others thought, felt, hoped for, believed, or valued. As students developed these cognitive skills they moved into Kegan’s (1994) fourth order of consciousness. This order is associated with the beginnings of self-authorship. Here students begin to see connections across categories and aim to balance competing expectations and categories based on intrapersonally important beliefs, values, and goals. What is important to note here, however, is that the early epistemic moves we saw in our participants in this order were not yet self-authorship, but rather movement toward self-authorship in terms of development of a sense of self that could ultimately give rise to a crisis of meaning with the qualities of Baxter Magolda’s (2001) The Crossroads—the first phase of self-authorship. In other words, before students could experience The Crossroads they needed to have an autonomous intrapersonal sense of self in preparation for movement toward the internally defined self that characterizes self-authorship.

The distinction between autonomous and internally defined is important to note. By the end of their participation in STEP our participants were developing autonomous senses of self. They had solid ideas of who they wanted to be—in terms of career choice, type of son or daughter, community member, or friend. They developed commitments based on what they wanted, hoped for, and valued, and these commitments were independent of what others wanted of them insofar as the commitments were the result of negotiating between parts of the systems of being in which they found themselves. But as of yet these commitments and senses of self were not internally defined. Just as Rob independently chose to be pro-environment because he thought it connected with important values

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**FIGURE 1. Moving Toward Self-Authorship: Proposed Model**

**Epistemological Orientations**

- **Cross-Categorical Sense Making**
  - (3rd Order of Consciousness)
- **Systems Sense Making**
  - (4th Order of Consciousness)

**Crisis 1**

- Interpersonal Dissonance
- • Development of cognitive skills
- • Development of intrapersonal autonomy

**Crisis 2**

- **The Crossroads**
  - Systems + Internal Foundations → Self Authorship
he held, these students identified ideas they hoped to live up to, and they chose the path they thought was right based on these commitments, but their understandings of what they were choosing to be and why they were choosing to be it were largely externally defined (e.g., by the ideology of a group they joined). In their development of an autonomous sense of self they created the developmental opportunity for a Crossroads moment in the future, when they wonder why they chose this particular path or what it means to be pro-environment other than recycling and “saving the streams.” Although not yet self-authored, or at the point of The Crossroads, the students’ participation in a learning partnership model of advising moved them into position for subsequent development of self-authorship.

Thus it seems that, based on our data, student movement toward self-authorship might be catalyzed by interpersonal dissonance, and that although development of cognitive skills associated with self-authorship may help students relieve this dissonance, intrapersonal development likely will lag behind, and that it is through intrapersonal development students will move fully into the three phases of self-authorship development. Our theoretical proposition is depicted in Figure 1.

LIMITATIONS AND AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

There are a number of limitations to address with this study. First, the majority of participants were seniors. Operating under the assumption supported by the college student development literature that older college students are likely to be more epistemologically developed than their younger peers (e.g., Baxter Magolda, 1992, 2001; Belenky et al., 1986; Perry 1968), further exploration of possible differences in epistemological development by age and experience could illuminate potential differences in practice when working with incoming versus exiting students. Second, although the study provides insight into the development of self-authorship among college students in academic crisis it does not indicate whether such change improved the students’ academic outcomes. Studies with a longitudinal perspective are necessary to determine if and how learning partnership model interventions impact the academic and psychosocial outcomes desired by participation in post-secondary education. Third, by virtue of STEP, all of the participants were from the same program, in academic difficulty either for lack of satisfactory progress or academic probation, and participating in an intervention program. The uniformity of academic difficulty across the sample raises the question of whether or not college students not in crisis or participating in a structured program designed to facilitate epistemological development are likely to evidence similar types of change. Additionally, all the students in this study self-selected to participate. Random assignment of students to conditions (STEP or no STEP) would allow for investigation of the impact of the STEP program, or others like it, on student development, thus also testing the generalizability of the model proposed here. This study focused on sense-making and problem-solving skills in a specific domain and did not observe whether or not students generalized those skills to other domains. Further research would benefit from attention to how, when, and why students generalize these skills to other areas of their lives and what practitioners can do to facilitate such generalization. Finally, future research should begin to examine student development in diverse learning partnership programs designed or revised in light of the LPM principles. Without this research it will be difficult to understand how self-authorship can be fostered across the spectrum of student
affairs contexts and what types of student gains may be expected at the semester, year, and complete college education levels.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Clearly the evaluation and study of an intervention program has multiple implications for practice and the development of interventions on college campuses. The STEP program was designed around three subsections that were based on Baxter Magolda’s (2001) key assumptions of the LPM. In regard to the first of these subsections, the findings support the need for interventions to be situated in the real life experiences of students. Therefore, the design of the program must be flexible enough to attend to the different challenges individuals may be dealing with in order to accommodate the development of a variety of skills needed to address their unique situations. Using life experiences of students as a conduit for developing necessary sense-making and problem-solving skills to resolve dissonance appeared to promote more rapid development toward self-authorship and complex epistemological orientations. By encouraging students to explore who they were and what they wanted for their lives Karen helped them to identify themselves as central to knowledge construction and continue the process of internal self-definition.

Second, through the development of cognitive tools Karen encouraged students to understand learning as mutually constructed meaning. She focused on assisting students to further develop the ability to recognize multiple perspectives, knowledge as tentative, and the self as central to knowledge construction. The development of these cognitive skills enabled students to resolve the intrapersonal and interpersonal challenges that often served as barriers to their academic success. As students experienced changes in their cognitive skills and epistemic beliefs they began to take more responsibility for their learning and identity outcomes. In other words, by focusing on the development of cognitive tools for coping with various forms of dissonance students are ushered toward problem solving that integrates their own and others’ perspectives and allows them to take responsibility for and control over their life choices. Karen’s probes and queries into the students’ motivations, thought processes, and reflections prompted them to recognize that they were a valid authority in their own lives.

Third, operating on the assumption that knowledge is socially constructed, the STEP program sought to validate students’ capacity to know. To facilitate this learning, findings from this study and previous research (Pizzolato, 2004, 2006) support the importance of not utilizing pre-scripted strategies with students, but using probes and questions that prompt students to engage in meaning making and cognitive interdependence. This technique helped Karen unseat students from their reliance on formulas and external authorities and begin to incorporate themselves in knowledge construction while developing an internal sense of self.

Finally, although the study’s findings suggest that more than one semester is necessary for self-authorship development, it does demonstrate that (a) important change prior to self-authoring is able to take place; and (b) such change requires ongoing practice, support, and time to occur. Thus it seems that another important implication for practice is related to administration of such programs such that staff are provided with appropriately sensitive tools for qualitatively or quantitatively measuring smaller changes than complete development of self-authorship and that training is ongoing and responsive to staff needs in making sense of student development.
CONCLUSION

Through clarifying what students’ developmental processes might look like as they move towards self-authorship, we build on the literature regarding what multi-dimensional epistemic development (intrapersonal, interpersonal, and cognitive) may look like as college students move toward self-authorship. Such clarification should be helpful not only in understanding the interplay between these dimensions prior to self-authorship development—a topic heretofore unexplored in the student development literature—and in identifying an important assessment mishap. Well-intentioned researchers and practitioners may be overly eager to identify self-authorship development when in fact students are experiencing the first crisis of meaning regarding the mismatch between their cognitive skills and the interpersonal dissonance resulting from cross-categorical thinking. We suggest here that this is an important developmental space and precursor to self-authorship, and that if researchers and practitioners can differentiate between this crisis and Baxter Magolda’s (2001) Crossroads, researchers and practitioners can work together to more effectively promote and measure student development of self-authorship.

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