
**Teachers can learn to
become more self-
directing, positive, expert,
and visionary.**

Joy or Misery in the Classroom

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Standing still in any profession is difficult. We either learn and grow or we suffer from burnout, stress, depression, and physical illness, dying a little each day. Since others can't relieve these negative symptoms for us, we must learn to direct our own growth to reduce the misery and increase the joy in our work.

For several years we have been researching ways in which people of all ages learn on their own. As a result of this research, we have developed *The Self-Directing Professional*,¹ a one-day workshop that prepares practicing teachers for designing and directing their own personal and professional development using experiences and resources on the job.

We begin by describing the characteristics of days of joy and misery in the classroom. Such a list for a good day typically includes a skillful professional performance; students' eager participation; evidence that what is taught is learned; parents' and students' appreciation; colleagues'

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recognition and respect; warm, positive interactions; and a feeling of well-being and hope for the future. A day of misery would include opposite characteristics: an incompetent, disorganized teaching performance; student resistance; complaints from parents and colleagues; feelings of failure and tension, and so on. Figure 1 lists the sources of joy and misery.

The workshop includes a number of activities to help teachers attain positive characteristics and conditions in their professional lives and in their classrooms. The activities include:

—*Personal and Situational Analysis.* Recall recent personal and professional events that made you happy or unhappy. Identify the sources of each experience and clarify the roles you and others played in initiating the event.

—*Designing Perfect Days of Joy and Misery.* Design and plan activities for a day of perfect joy and one of perfect misery, including acts to avoid or pursue to make each day a reality.

—*Creating a Vision of Excellence.* Create a personal image of the most desirable personal and professional future: how you would like to change in one, three, or five years.

—*Selecting a Valued Personal or*

Professional Goal. Select one of the many goals implicit in your vision and make a commitment to pursue excellence in that particular area of activity.

—*Developing a Personal Goal Attainment Style.* Analyze your present preferred learning style, study additional methods for attaining goals, and select methods to make your style more powerful.

—*Creating a Plan of Action.* Design a plan for attaining your goal, applying the features of the learning style you have chosen, and using the resources available on the job.

—*Forming a Collegial Team.* Form teams with at least two colleagues for sharing commitments, monitoring each other's progress, and providing assistance when necessary. (The team continues after the workshop as a support system for group members.)

—*Negotiating a Learning Contract.* Write a contract to follow your plan and attain your goal. Then negotiate your contract with members of your collegial team. (The contract is based on a ten-step self-education process.)

The workshop encourages both personal and professional goals, but teachers report the greatest success in eventually fulfilling their commitments when they begin with a personal goal that involves vital rather than trivial life concerns.

But why bother? This task merely increases teachers' overwhelming responsibilities. It is important enough to command the effort required? There are at least eight reasons for saying yes:

1. *Shape or be shaped; influence or be influenced.* The less self-directing we are, the more vulnerable we become to external influences on our behavior. The more skillful we become in self-direction, the more we can shape our own futures in spite of such pressures.

2. *Meet the challenge of change.* Rapid changes in society require new responses. Self-directing people who strike a balance between clinging to the past and chasing fads can shape these future shocks into opportunities for growth.

3. *Learn and be active throughout life.* Most people find jobs, but few find the work that best expresses their

interests and talents. Self-directing people search out their potential and develop it throughout their lives. Our jobs may be determined by others but we can select our work and develop it ourselves.

4. *Become more independent and enterprising.* When we learn to be self-directed in personal and professional matters we also learn to face the psychosocial challenges of self development: to achieve autonomy, initiative, industry, identity, and generativity.

5. *Deal effectively with the crises of life.* Self-directed people think ahead, plan a course of action, and prepare for contingencies. Reactive individuals respond to what is happening at the moment and often become controlled by it. Common human experiences can be devastating influences in our lives or desirable growth opportunities, depending on our skill in managing our lives.

6. *Have a positive influence on your own and others' lives.* For better or for worse, the behavior you model influences the behavior of

others. You can systematically and beneficially urge others—your children, students, and colleagues—to be more self-directing by demonstrating self-direction in your own life.

7. *Do your job better; be successful; gain recognition.* The person who regularly improves and becomes more expert will be recognized and appreciated by peers, subordinates, and supervisors.

8. *Reduce stress; increase well-being; actualize your potential.* Stress is caused by effort without success, feelings of helplessness, low self-esteem, and life without hope or pleasure. Through self-direction you can plan strategically for success, take more control of your life, feel a greater sense of well-being, and justifiably anticipate a hopeful future. We can choose to become self-directing, positive, expert, and visionary—and we can make that choice a reality. ■

¹ For more information, contact Challenge Education Associates, 4140 Golf Drive, North Vancouver, B.C., Canada V7R 1A3.

Figure 1. Sources of Joy and Misery



JOY

Competence: Feeling skillful and knowledgeable; sensing pride in continuing improvement.
Efficacy: Solving problems as they arise; feeling challenged and a sense of achievement.
Influence: Feeling responsible and self-determining; able to influence important decisions.
Efficiency: Capable of organizing demands and events; using time productively for work and leisure.
Affiliation: Feeling included, appreciated, and valued as a contributing member of school community.
Confidence: Feeling optimistic about a hopeful and predictable future.
Healthfulness: Feeling energetic and enthusiastic; stress is a positive catalyst.



MISERY

Incompetence: Feeling incapable of doing what is expected; sensing futility and embarrassment.
Ineffectiveness: Being overwhelmed by perplexing problems; feelings of inadequacy and failure.
Impotency: Feeling helpless, victimized; dependent on others to make important decisions.
Inefficiency: Feeling hurried and overwhelmed by trivial demands; seldom productive at significant tasks.
Alienation: Feeling excluded, ignored, in conflict with warring camps; feelings of enmity.
Insecurity: Feeling bewildered and confused; the future is uncertain and hopeless.
Dis-Ease: Feeling tired or in pain and emotionally distressed or bored; stress is debilitating and constant.

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