

# Participatory Pedagogy: Inviting Student Metacognition

Nicola Simmons  
*Brock University*

---

## CONTEXT OF ACTIVITY

I teach higher and adult education, including adult developmental psychology, and like to invite my students to be aware of their cognitive processes. I see this as central to being an adult learner. One strategy I have developed is engaging students in creating course outcomes and content. I hope to help students become more aware of, more involved in, and better assessors of their own learning; in short, to examine their learning through a metacognitive lens.

This example is from a Masters of Education class, *Exploring Approaches to Professional Development*. The class is typically quite small (up to 20 students) but I have used it in groups of 50 students at the undergraduate level as well.

## THE APPROACH

The course follows Siemens' (1984) participatory pedagogy (see syllabus excerpt) to invite students to co-construct the course process, including choosing course readings and creating grading rubrics:

A participatory pedagogy is one that does not fully define all curricular needs in advance of interacting with learners. Learners are able to contribute to existing curricula .... Multiple perspectives, opinions, and active creation on the part of learners all contribute to the final content of the learner experience. (Siemens, 1984, n.p.)

You will be actively involved in shaping the course. Topics will reflect areas participants wish to explore; readings will be chosen by participants as well as the instructor. Each topic is expected to serve three purposes: to enhance our own professional development, to contribute to the professional development of others in the group, and to contribute to our understandings of theoretical frameworks and perspectives about professional development.

As Biggs (2011) notes, student course co-ownership helps engage students in deep learning; it also builds their awareness of their learning processes. The first assignment, for example, asked them to

Articulate your intended learning during this course, including a focus for personal and professional development. What will your development focus be?  
What will you do to realize your plan?

This engages students metacognitively as they take responsibility for their learning path and prepares them for the final assignment, a reflective ‘portfolio,’ in which they synthesize their learning over the term:

Create a creative and critical summary of your changing perspectives and reflections throughout the course, integrating readings (both assigned and others). Discuss your key learning, referring to course and outside experiences. Exemplary projects demonstrate critical analysis, synthesis, and self-evaluation. Can be any format (paper, song, performance, art; format negotiable). Addresses:

- What theories help you?
- What have you learned?
- How can you use that?
- How have you changed?
- How do you know?

Each of these prompts invites consideration of the learning and development process and supports students in acquiring habits of mind that will allow them to approach future courses with a metacognitive lens. This has also led to their growth as scholars: One year, many of the students engaged in a self-study that included conducting a literature review and creating questions to guide our reflections. The result of that work was several conference presentations and a peer-reviewed paper (Simmons, Barnard, & Fennema, 2011) that outlined the transformative learning resulting from the student co-constructed course.

What was fascinating to me were the ways the course process built not only students’ metacognition about their learning, but also about their teaching. One wrote

*I told my colleagues the story of this course and they were moved to consider new ways of doing culminating projects. Why isn’t there more choice? Why do we tell students what they must produce to demonstrate their own learning? Why don’t we add the additional layer of asking students to find the best way to demonstrate their learning?*

### LESSONS LEARNED

Developing metacognition is not a pain-free process! One student described the transformation during the process from fear to increased confidence.

*Activities were out of my comfort zone and there were times that I struggled with the unknown ... I was able to see the value once I moved beyond the frozen fear of uncertainty to ask myself “What did I want to gain from this course? How did I learn when pushed out of my comfort zone?” I had to be transformed into a student who was open to this new concept and new territory for learning...[where] mistakes ... would not be judged but instead used as stepping stones toward learning.*

Instructors should be mindful of the importance of support throughout the process. Just as the students are invited to be metacognitive about their processes, it helps if the instructor is transparently metacognitive about the overall course path. For me that looked like saying things like “this may be new for you, but I’d like you to consider trying it” and reassuring them that discomfort was a sign they were onto something good!

---

The course format continues to unsettle students but also transform them into metacognitive learners, and I finish with one student's illustrative words:

*I remember thinking at the time that the final project was the most difficult task that I had encountered ... I really had to ponder ... how my journey through the course could be effectively captured and conveyed ... It continues to personify my journey through work/life, the choices we make when we meet resistance or the paths we take ... how we travel the road is for our choosing.*

#### REFERENCES

- Biggs, J. B., & Tang, C. (2011). *Teaching for quality learning at the university: What the student does*. Maidenhead, UK: Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press.
- Flavell, J. H. (1979). Metacognition and cognitive monitoring: A new area of cognitive–developmental inquiry. *American Psychologist*, 34(10), 906-911.
- Siemens, G. (2008). *New structures and spaces of learning: The systemic impact of connective knowledge, connectivism, and networked learning*. Paper Presented for Universidade do Minho, Encontro sobre Web 2.0, Braga, Portugal, October 10. Available online at [http://elearnspace.org/Articles/systemic\\_impact.htm](http://elearnspace.org/Articles/systemic_impact.htm)
- Simmons, N., Barnard, M., & Fennema, W. (2011). Participatory pedagogy: A compass for transformative learning? *Collected Essays on Learning and Teaching*, 4.
-