# CHAPTER A3

# To Each According to Their Needs:
# thoughts on dealing with emergent learning needs

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## SUMMARY

This chapter concentrates on needs which emerge during learning, the various ways in which they are regarded by the learner concerned, and their constructive resolution. The writer distinguishes between needs which the learner has no difficulty in declaring; needs about which the learner may feel some embarrassment; needs of whose existence the learner is clear, but whose nature they cannot quite specify; and needs of which the learner is unaware, calling for helpful reporting of them by others. He offers suggestions about how to resolve each category of need, and outlines an example of a scheme in which self-managing learners might be assisted to cope with their learning needs as they emerge.

## BIOGRAPHY

John Cowan studied civil engineering at university. For the first seven years of his employment he concentrated mainly on designing structural steelwork, and progressed to designing reinforced concrete structures over a similar period. He next became an academic, first as a lecturer, and then as the creator of the largest departmental resource-based learning unit in the UK. He was a pioneer in promoting self-assessed learning and reflective practice by undergraduate students. During his academic career, he served as an educational consultant in the UK, and for the British Council in Third World countries. After 14 years he moved to the Open University as Scottish Director and became increasingly pro-active there as Professor of Learning Development. At this time, he also served as an academic auditor in the UK higher education sector. On formal retirement he joined the course team for the social sciences degree at the University of Highlands & Islands Project. He went on to undertake an increasing number of commitments at Edinburgh Napier University, tutoring business students with a focus on their continuing professional development. He has just concluded three years devoted to virtually tutoring students of English as a Foreign Language in Taiwan, assisting in the development of their critical thinking.

# INTRODUCTION

The idea that learners need to identify and manage their emergent learning needs is a core tenet of lifewide learning. How learners recognise such needs and how these needs arise are important questions worthy of examination. Learning needs, as distinct from predetermined intended learning outcomes, may arise and be recognised at any point in the learner's activity. It is relatively rare for them to be known at the outset, and even if they are 'known' the need will often change as learning proceeds. I am here taking a learning need to be an issue which must be resolved fairly soon in order for the learning in hand to progress satisfactorily and be put to use.

In this chapter I examine the needs which emerge for an individual learner during the learning process, which they threaten to thwart. I also outline strategies for their constructive resolution. Individuals' learning needs can arise in programmes wholly directed by teachers, or in programmes that involve an element of learner-directed learning, such as problem- or project-based learning, or in everyday life as they pursue something that they have realised they wish to accomplish or have to learn. Such emergent learning needs may be resolved autonomously, or on the initiative of a teacher, or through peer interaction, depending on circumstances. Although the initiative for resolution of learning needs will vary with each learner- or teacher-directed situation, the features of the four distinct conditions which describe the learner's significant attitude to a particular need (Garry & Cowan 1987) seem independent of the responsibility for learning.

## DIFFERENT WAYS OF PERCEIVING LEARNING NEEDS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS

In this chapter I distinguish between four ways in which learners may feel about their emergent learning needs. I have called them:
- Declared needs
- Undeclared needs
- Unformulated needs
- Unperceived needs

A declared need for learning is one to which the learner is committed, regards as important, and has already formulated, and willingly declares in pursuit of the assistance they desire. For example, at the time of writing, I had recently moved from Microsoft to an Apple Mac. I couldn't find how to key in the £ symbol. I phoned my youngest grand-daughter who immediately instructed me. My need was declared and met with the help of a knowledgeable third party. In the absence of this help I might have turned to an on-line community such as the Apple Support Community.

Learners generally have no problem about resolving an openly declared need, because they don't mind telling other people about the help they seek. They usually hope and indeed expect that such openness will lead directly to the assistance they desire. With a need regarded in this way, the support which the learner seeks is simply specific and competent assistance, usually in the form of instruction or explanation will suffice.

An undeclared need for learning is also one of which the learner is aware, regards as important, and has already formulated in terms of the learning outcome which they seek. But it is something which the learner is reluctant to declare other than in circumstances where they will feel comfortable in exposing their inadequacy. For example, I had been shown by my articulate and technologically expert son-in-law how to open up and use multiple desktops on my Mac. I soon discovered that I had forgotten parts of the process, and could not make it work. Too embarrassed to phone my patient and courteous son-in-law and admit my ineptitude to him, I let the need lie - until during a visit from my daughter (the expert's wife), I felt able to reveal this difficulty, with which she speedily assisted me. Typically learners are sensitive for various reasons about airing undeclared needs, which they will only confide to someone whom they feel they can trust not to be shocked. When a need is regarded in this way, the support which a learner wishes to receive is competent assistance within a relationship where there will be no embarrassment on disclosure of their need.

An unformulated need for learning entails the identification of an aspect of competence in which the learner believes or hopes that improvement should be possible and is desirable, although they cannot be specific about the precise nature of the outcome desired. For example, I purchased my Mac during a period of severe illness, which precluded my attendance at the training which they offered me in a local centre. I have the nagging and probably accurate conviction that I am not making best use of the available facilities on this machine. Like Milne's character who kept on failing to discover what Tiggers like for breakfast (Milne 1928), I yearn to sample new possibilities wherein I may happen on useful suggestions which I can see will enhance my usage of my Mac. But I don't quite know what I am seeking. I can only specify that I want to find anything which will make my (technologically inept) use of the Mac more effective. Clearly I should find out how to book delayed attendance on the training event to enable me to carry out my searching? And/or perhaps join the Apple Support Community where there might be lots of people like me being helped by people who are more knowledgeable and expert in the use of the technology. Recognising unformulated needs can simply emerge from listening to or observing others in a community of practice.

Unformulated needs call for exploration and identification of potential ways in which to develop, whose precise nature is not as yet known to the aspiring learner. When a need is regarded in this way, the learner seeks support which first gives structure to their searching and tasting, until they somehow find that the search is progressing successfully. Often the newly defined need can then be treated as a need in my second or first category.

An unperceived need is a weakness of which the learner is blissfully unaware, which only a third party can identify and report, and the reporting of which usually jolts the learner into immediate action - or adamant rejection! Many have been shocked to learn of their eye contact in groups being biased to the left, or of their use of sexist language with the male pronoun predominant, or even of the need for more punctuation or fewer words in many long sentences in order to eliminate ambiguities. Naturally I cannot quote a personal example of a need which I have not yet perceived. No doubt my friends or family could provide many apt examples of weaknesses I could well eradicate. But I myself don't yet perceive them, although while editing this chapter, it occurred to me, as it may already have occurred to others, that the frequent occurrence of certain keying errors, such as 'youirs' for 'yours', has long suggested the unreported and unperceived need to improve my keyboard accuracy!

Unperceived needs only move on to a learner's agenda when they are heard and believed and classed as significant by the learner. When a need is not discerned in this way, effective support for the learner takes the form of frank, non-judgemental and objective reporting of what the observer has observed, leaving it then to the learner to decide if and how to react to the now perceived need.

## CATERING FOR LEARNING NEEDS ACCORDING TO HOW THE LEARNER REGARDS THEM

Since needs can be held by learners in different ways, they can accordingly call for different approaches to their resolution. As the way a need is regarded is only known to the learner, it should be appreciated by all directly concerned that the learner will have to inform the decision about how best to resolve the need concerned. This may often entail the learner searching on Google or accessing an information source, or approaching or being approached by a helpful person, or engaging with a group of people like an interested on-line community. Such resorting to assistance need not require the learner to lose control of their learning. The facilitative transaction may well be undertaken in the spirit of truly learner-directed learning, which should give complete authority to the learner to select and pursue appropriate needs and aims. The process would then accord with Gibbons' definition of self-directed learning as 'any increase in knowledge, skill, accomplishment, or personal development that an individual selects and brings about by his or her own efforts using any method in any circumstances at any time' (Gibbons 2002, p2). Within this description, the arranging of assistance may be at least partly devolved to a directive facilitator.

In the case of a declared need, the learner is already content for the need to have become transparent. They will already have articulated their desired learning outcomes in a form which should permit the arranging or selection of suitable remedial learning activities or experiences. The learner may require and will surely welcome competent advice about the most suitable form and source of assistance to enable their need to be resolved to the standard to which they aspire. Thereafter it should be possible for the experience to be self-managed. This engagement can usefully involve the learner's specification of the criteria against which they will monitor and judge their progress and eventual achievement (Cowan 2010).

A suitable sequence of events in the case of an undeclared need is rather different. There are advantages if the learner already has some appreciation that they may have different attitudes to their various emergent learning needs, and should react accordingly. Thus, if they are aware that they have a need which they have been reluctant to declare, they can plan to their own satisfaction how best to find someone with whom the need can be raised, and who might then be able to assist. If they are a participant in a formal learning scheme, a facilitator may already have been allocated and their services taken up confidentially by the learner, if they are so inclined. Where the learner is unsupported by an arranged facilitator, they may well be advised to seek out a critical friend who is remote from their class, workplace or circle of everyday acquaintances. For they will find that it is often much easier to declare a learning need to a relative stranger, than to someone whom they know. The declaration on which consequent resolution of the need will depend will then usually rely heavily on the frankness of the relationship with a trusted and congruent person with whom communication is possible and welcome. The role of the second person is to listen empathically, on occasions to contribute

something relevant to their own experience congruently, and in all of this to have unconditional positive regard for what they are being told (Rogers 1969; Cowan 2013).

An unformulated need can often be approached effectively, at least in the initial stages, in a group of kindred spirits (Cowan & Garry 1986). Once common ground in terms of a vaguely defined need or family of needs is established, it can be useful to address the pursuit of these needs collaboratively in a group activity akin to an action-learning set (McGill & Beaty 1995; Cowan & Garry 1986). Members can share suggestions and together explore the potential of some of them for some of the group, in a real 'community of inquiry' approach (Garrison & Anderson 2003). The role of the facilitator in such a situation is initially to outline possible mechanisms for generating constructive interaction and feedforward, then quickly to facilitate the early stages of these exchanges, and soon afterwards to bow out without themselves having contributed pro-actively. Once the learner has identified a feasible choice of potentially appropriate assistance, their actions will normally proceed as for an initially perceived need, possibly in collaboration with peers.

## AN EXAMPLE OF POSSIBLE PRACTICE

For most learners, even while committed to an assessed programme, the full personal agenda will probably have begun from several diverse aims, from prior experience and from developed abilities. It will therefore have generated various emergent needs at a particular point in the learner's development.

In this section I offer a suggested outline for an almost imaginary activity in support of learners who encounter emergent learning needs during their planned development activity, whether it is within an accredited programme (Cowan 2006),  or involves taking part in a scheme to attain external professional accreditation as for the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (Francis & Cowan 2008), or occurs in a lifewide learning enrichment to formal course provision (Jackson 2011), or if they are simply concerned to promote their own general professional or personal development.

Let us then postulate a situation in which students are offered an opportunity, in parallel with their degree studies, to exercise stewardship of their own development, and to demonstrate to themselves and in their CVs that they can do so. The features of this plan can, I hope, readily be adapted to other circumstances, ranging from activity fully within a degree programme, to one completely outwith it.

Learners are asked in advance of the introductory workshop to tentatively identify perhaps six aims taken from outwith the specific subjects of their course. These might perhaps be two personal aims ('Improve my life balance'), two professional ones ('Develop interview skills') and two related to study ('Improve the efficiency of my web searching'). The workshop experience which follows should then be enhanced for each participant by being relevant to some of their tentative aims.

The introductory programme comprises an introductory three-hour face-to-face workshop. The need for their aims to be Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound is explained, justified and stressed in terms of SMART goals (Francis & Cowan 2008), coupled with the suggestion that, as they pursue such goals, learning needs will emerge for them,

which they may regard in different ways. In groups of perhaps five to eight, participants are then given a fictional outline plan for development, which might have been prepared by someone in their situation. They are asked to make helpful feedforward comments to the imaginary writer, offering suggestions for feasible improvement. These comments are posted on a flip-chart, and in due course participants circulate to see what other groups are suggesting, and to learn from that. There follows a brief discussion centering in general terms (and using these examples) on the characteristics of 'good' plans and 'effective' suggestions for improvement.

After an informal break to allow thoughts to settle, there follows a brief input on monitoring and evaluation, as being processes in which one should describe one's own targets and criteria objectively, and in similar terms. The reason for so doing is that individuals engaged in self-managed development should be able to judge their performance objectively, by comparing performance directly with criteria (Cowan 2010). The organisers now present another fabricated document in which someone akin to the participants has set out a claim for self-directed development as if it had been undertaken recently, in a similar context. Again groups discuss and post helpful suggestions for improvement, and circulate to see what others have come up with. Again there is a brief general discussion of the processes involved, facilitated to ensure the desired focus.

In the final part of the workshop, participants are shown a video clip in which a 'student' who has just completed the programme writes to someone starting out on it, instancing the learning needs which emerged for her, and how she dealt with them. Participants are asked to briefly discuss what they will take from this experience and advice.

Participants are given the suggestion that they should soon take time to formulate and set out their plans for the first period of their development, while the workshop suggestions are still fresh in their minds. If they have formed helpful associations with peers during the activity, they may wish to arrange to share their draft plans with each other, and to exchange helpful suggestions. They then disperse.

It is then generally helpful to arrange some structuring for what follows in the longer term. Facilitators may suggest fairly regular meetings of groups (chosen by participants), following a voluntary exchange of plans and notes of progress to date, again being charged to offer helpfully formative comments amongst self-chosen peers. Facilitators can expect and should be willing to structure these meetings, and respond within them to enquiries of a generic nature, usually about how to achieve particularly demanding goals, or how to measure progress. Particular plans and comments are not discussed here.

When the process should have reached its (initially declared) deadline, participants should prepare a self-assessment of their progress and achievements, and submit it to a peer for audit. As a preparation for self-directed development after graduation, the development should be self-assessed and then audited (Cowan 2006); and so the role of a peer should be to point out any aspects of the plan in which data has not been available, or where the data describing performance is not compatible with the criteria (Cowan 2004). It should then be left to the learner to decide what action, if any, to take - and if the self-assessment should be modified. It has been the experience of teachers in schemes of this nature that the iterative and formative interchange between peers leads naturally to benchmarking of highly acceptable standards within a group (Cowan 1988; Boud & Falchikov 2006).

# FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

A number of questions, identified below, frequently emerge in this sort of process. In the following section I provide short versions of the answers which I tend to give, drawing on my own experience where relevant. Notice how many of the points which are made encourage self-management, in one form or another, rather than dependence on facilitation or tuition.

Q  Why not trust in a motivated person to look for and achieve their desired development, without all this formalism and fuss?

- Commitment to the discipline of a previously accepted structure for a learner is like adherence to a training schedule for an athlete; it sustains motivation, establishes habits, and occasions prompting by self and peers (Schön 1991).
- Much informally self-managed development is not monitored objectively against self-determined criteria, with adverse effects from both optimistic and pessimistic self-evaluations. This risk is tactically precluded in a scheme as described.
- A structure which encourages peer interaction is beneficial for both parties in exchanges (Cowan & Garry 1986).

Q What if the learner cannot resolve a need, even with facilitative assistance?

- Seek advice from peers who have had such a need, and who have overcome it.
- Be prepared to accept that maybe this need cannot be resolved by this learner; this possible judgement should be explored and if justified, should be accepted and faced up to, in a revised plan and aim.

Q What if needs are proving overly stressful?

- This suggests a rethinking of programme aims, to get demands down to a workable level.

Q Is there potential for reflective journals, when engaging with learning needs?

- Very much so.  When a learner engages in reflective writing (Cowan 2009), especially if they can arrange for this to be facilitated, they are well placed to examine their feelings and values constructively (Schön 1987). A journal in which the learner regularly engages in reflection-for-action (anticipating forthcoming challenges and thinking though how to cope with them) (Cowan 2013; Schön 1991), and/or on reflection-on-action (reviewing progress to date, and thinking about what can be learnt from that for next time) (Moon 2004; 2006) can be found so valuable that many students subsequently keep such journals privately, outwith any programme structure (Cowan & Cherry 2012).

# A CLOSING THOUGHT

When our learning or development falters because we have encountered a learning need which we must resolve in order to progress, we should not regard this as an indication of weakness on our part. Rather it is simply a sign that we are making progress into unfamiliar and worthwhile territory.


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