Heutagogy

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The term heutagogy was first coined by Stewart Hase and Chris Kenyon in 2000 as an extension to andragogy and means self-determined learning. Its foundations are constructivism and humanism, along with capability, open-systems thinking and complexity theory. It came about because of the founders' dissatisfaction with education and training systems based on antiquated concepts of learning and teaching principles. It is clear that we are in a new age of learning emancipation, where there is instant access to copious information and easy communication with others. No longer is the guru standing at the head of the classroom necessary in order to learn. Since 2000, there have been a large number of papers written both by the originators of the concept and by educators around the globe. As discussed later, action research has both theoretical and practical ties with the concept.

Heutagogy is based on the fundamental assumption that people are capable learners and they learn when they are ready and not when the teacher thinks they should be. Thus, the focus is on learner-centred learning, where the learner has increased control over the content and the process of learning. This is compared with teacher-centred learning, where control of task and content is completely in the hands of the teacher. According to heutagogy, children are excellent learners before they go to school, where their skills are hampered by a system that relies heavily on the teacher, the curriculum and assessment rather than the experience of the learner. Heutagogy is concerned with great learning rather than good teaching.

Recent advances in neuroscience have increased our understanding of how the brain works and how people learn. On the basis of this, heutagogy seeks to redefine what we mean by learning. The most common definitions of learning have to do with knowing or knowledge acquisition, and the psychological definition has for a long time been that learning involves a change in behaviour.

Instead, heutagogy differentiates between acquiring knowledge and skills, which are otherwise known as competencies, and deeper learning. People often acquire knowledge or a skill that has no value beyond itself. For example, a person may repeat a skill in familiar circumstances, but the real test is when the competence is required in an unfamiliar situation (what John Stephenson and colleagues call capability). However, sometimes and for reasons that are not altogether clear, we have an experience that leads to all sorts of new insights that clearly involve an interaction of many networks that became activated. In this case, one is able to use one’s skills in a new, challenging situation, or new knowledge results in a new theory or way of seeing the world.

What is important here from a heutagogical point of view is that this may lead to a whole new...
set of questions, behaviours and needs on the part of the learner that go beyond the set curricula, lesson plan or workshop programme. The teacher will not be aware of this change in the motivation of the learner, this shift in interest. Thus, the curriculum, assessment and learning process need to be flexible in order to cope with the changing state of the learner.

**Heutagogy in Relation to Action Research**

Action research provides a methodology and a set of techniques that are well suited to heutagogical principles and comes from a similar philosophical stable. As an emergent process, action research provides an opportunity for participants to reflect on what they have learnt following the acquisition of new data and to rethink what needs to be done next. The identification of new questions and new ways of seeing the world is central to action research, as it is in heutagogy.

Action research also provides an opportunity to explore the new learning, usually in a participatory process. This is particularly valuable in dealing with complex situations. However, given that researching new ideas is so easy with the massive resource that is the Internet, other people do not necessarily have to be involved. There is also ample opportunity for participants to explore particular areas of interest.

Thus, action research can be used as a teaching method at any level of education and training as an alternative to teacher-centric approaches. The teacher becomes a facilitator of the process rather than guru, and learning is placed more in the hands of the learners.

Heutagogy claims that children are already competent learners before they go to school, where the capacity is dulled by inflexible curricula and the teacher-centric process. Action research provides a process to rekindle this ability to learn and for people to become effective lifelong learners and better reflective thinkers.

**Stewart Hase**

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See also

- Action Learning
- co-generative learning
- constructivism
- humanism
- Lewin, Kurt
Further Readings


