Chapter III

Making Choices:
The Need for Teachers

We do not need competency skills for this life. We need incompetency skills, the skills of being effective beginners. (Vaill, 1996, p. 81)

Introduction

This chapter is concerned with the importance of achieving control of one’s own learning, of learning to learn, why it is that teachers are a good thing, why too many choices or choices presented at the wrong time are a bad thing, and beginning to explore some alternative approaches to control, which provide the seed for the approach to learning environment design that forms the third part of the book.

Kinds of Choice

This enquiry is concerned with choices about what to do next to bring about learning. Choices may relate to many aspects of the learning experience. A non-exhaustive list might include:
• choice of subject;
• choice of learning activity/task;
• choice of resources (e.g., books, articles, Web sites, etc.);
• choice of people with whom to engage in learning;
• choice of medium through which to learn;
• choices inherent in or determined by the nature of the subject (for instance, when learning about education, a learner may choose to adopt a stance based on behaviourist, cognitive, or constructivist principles);
• choice of location;
• choice of attitude to take (e.g., sceptical, exploratory, excited, clinical, top down, bottom up);
• choice of method;
• choice of means of evaluation;
• choice of level; and
• choice of time (timeframe, amount of time spent, choice of when to engage).

Each kind of choice implies a different set of skills, predispositions, criteria and purposes, and each will be subject to a different array of constraints that limit those choices. Each choice may be made, to a greater or lesser extent, by the learner and/or some other (typically the teacher). Only some of those choices will have a material effect on a learning trajectory. However, the overall gestalt will be manifest in a learning trajectory over time, which will be unique and distinct for each learner, even though some of the choices will be common and/or shared with other learners.

**Why is Choice so Important?**

Recognising that this is a dramatic over-simplification of a complex process, within a traditional view of institutional education it is possible to see a continual and perhaps continuous series of changes in the amount/degree of choice available to the learner (Figure 3.1).

In early education, it is usually expected and accepted that learners are not sufficiently schooled to be able to recognise the most appropriate choices to make about their own learning, at least for most of the things that are considered to be educationally important. This is an interesting perspective given that much of what
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