

Linking thinking, Candy 2014

Phillip C Candy is an Australian professor and a scholar who specialised in self-directed learning in a digital world and widely promoted the benefits of lifelong learning. During his active period, he held many roles including the directorial role of educational strategy on the national level for the National Health Service in the UK. His work *Self-direction for Lifelong Learning: a Comprehensive Guide to Theory and Practice*, 1991 helped establish self-directed learning as a field. This 2014 book-ish report is part of his operation as a National Research Fellow at the Australian Department of Education Science and Training. It carries a similar spirit to his interests and seeks to help understand the impact of information and communication technologies on learning. In the report, Candy proposes "a new model of SDL, identifying the six major conditions that must be met for people to be able to participate in the digital world" [1]. I will briefly review the report and compare a few of its chapters to my current understanding of the topic. Points that caught my interest most can be sorted under three topics: 1) Candy's take on learning, 2) the problem of navigating the unknown in self-directed learning, and 3) the problem of building sustainable online learning communities.

Candy's view on learning steps beyond approaches that see learning as an isolated activity, beyond cognitivism, constructivism and so on. It is more close to social theories of learning. In a chapter on accessing collective wisdom, he cites Scriven saying 'knowledge is no longer located in one individual mind, but is acknowledged as being spread and shared between communities of learners, the computer becomes a cultural artefact that has its place in this distributed model of intelligence. We could see this as a step toward the learning theory of connectivism, the theory which reacts to massive information spread and information overload and in which computers are legitimate actors of learning in a network. Candy's take on learning respects these aspects. His proposed view on self-directed learning is highly relevant today as it's ready for the internet era and what we understand as information literacy is a crucial part, or maybe prerequisite, of it.

To note an example, he devoted a chapter to an overview of information behaviour strategies when locating information sources. It is interesting to see he did that for the specific needs of self-directed learning because in self-directed learning projects we seldom know what we need in advance. For me, this is one of the most striking things about self-directed learning and a problem that should be incorporated into educational practice. Finding strategies to navigate in the unknown is an important part of self-directed learning, but I bet that now it's becoming a basic skill because when known information can be relatively simply retrieved, unknown information that is knowable becomes valuable [2]. Interesting thing is that it's not even a skill, but more of an attitude to tackle uncertainty. Action research methods are needed because we cannot know what to do in advance and we are only able to judge backwards as we discussed in one of our lessons on learning society. I find entrepreneurship education to be an interesting source to understand what the right attitudes mean here. Risk management and innovation management have a long history in such pursuits and both seem to be accessible to people from other fields as well even though they are immensely competitive.

We already mentioned that Candy puts a strong emphasis on the social aspects of learning. Candy saw an opportunity for learning in new forms of communication. He thought of the development of ICT communication as being increasingly similar to how we communicate in real life, which could eventually lead to the virtual reality that is so often talked about now. One way how internet benefits learning is by speeding up communication. Another thing Candy mentions are allowing for virtual communities to arise and potentially forming learning communities. Users were originally able to communicate only in one on one settings but they are increasingly able to communicate in groups and on a massive scale.

Candy distinguishes three kinds of online virtual communities: 1) communities that arise autonomously around shared interests, 2) communities sponsored by agencies and government, 3) communities led by commercial actors like customer support communities and so on. Even though he carried on the early internet ethos of openness, he pointed out the potential pitfalls of such digital space. He understands the internet as being a real space with real consequences, hence the high opportunity for online communities. This is very close to the idea of living Onlife that makes no difference between what is traditionally seen as a digital world and the physical real world. At the same time, he seems to understand both worlds as very separate as if the online world was there to merely support our offline lives. It is completely understandable given the year 2004. What he understand well were some potential consequences of the shift that lead to the need for some form of self-regulation and security restrictions to take place. While nowadays the internet gets increasingly regulated by countries and relevant stakeholders, I would argue it still brings massive openness to our lives and the spirit of openness is there. I can see how I could be more critical regards the openness of the internet, but it's not my goal now. The self-regulation of communities is an interesting take for me because communities are regulated by community platform providers and community founders unless we talk about special kinds of communities.

Candy argues learning communities are difficult to develop in any context. By 'develop' I understand to build them, run and keep them sustainable. It was never easier to gather people of the same interest in the same place so there is no problem to build community. What is hard is to make them sustainable and useful for their members for long periods. Candy mentioned some of the basic dimensions of such online communities very well. He mentions some of the requirements on both social and technical dimensions of online communities, stresses the importance of a sense of belonging which is perhaps the most important part of the sustainability of a community and talks about accessibility.

What I personally lack in his report is a deeper look at the relationship between the communities' self-regulation to learning and its socio-technical dimensions in the online environment, a thing I became interested in lately. Even though he makes few claims that may lead to the relationship, he seems to see self-regulation as an open-ended problem and does not dig in much. For example, he mentions that solitary learner needs scaffolding and at the same time he mentions that communities of practice might not suit individuals but there is no link to the concept of peripheral participation in situated learning theory, which is very related

and stands for what could be understood as scaffolding in communities of practice with right self-regulation of communities. I would like to outline the link short very shortly without much detail.

Communities' self-regulation is by no means part of building a sustainable learning community. Members of the community must care for each other which is especially important for the new unexperienced members who need scaffolding and regularity and so on, usually mediated by other, more experienced members. My intuition is that self-regulation in communities requires high awareness of such needs by its members and likely needs proper incentives and a feeling of responsibility for the members to participate in the governance. A sort of human nature reveals in the problem of self-regulation of communities because communities hardly build such ethos without the leadership provided by the founders of the community while founders usually feel these incentives by the nature of founding the community and by simply owning the responsibility which is not true for most members. To fight the need for self-regulation, communities usually build sort of teams recruited of active members which are not scalable enough. An interesting, special kind of community is decentralised autonomous organisations, (DAOs) because the governance rules, members' incentives etc. are made visible and directly embodied in the technology running the communities potentially allowing for more scalable learning communities. Even though these types of communities are yet to be understood, I still believe leadership is a vital part of any community to function well and arises naturally when something matters to people so self-regulation is unlikely going to be ground between members completely, but it's interesting to think about.

Conclusion

The report is an unexpectedly readable and actual take on self-directed learning considering the development of ICT. I should acknowledge that I misread the book cover and thought it was published in 2014 without taking notice until writing the review. I suggested his view on learning was close to what I consider to be novel today. His view on the individual is highly relevant and Candy in the report opens many directions I find important despite many discrepancies with today's world such as understanding online services merely as a support for offline life when we can nowadays see billboards around cities selling API products which manifests the exact opposite: offline for online and tech only.

Citations

- [1] 'Philip Candy - Hall of Fame Class of 2020'.
<http://halloffame.outreach.ou.edu/inductions/hof-2020/candy/> (accessed Nov. 02, 2022).<http://halloffame.outreach.ou.edu/inductions/hof-2020/candy/>
- [2] J. Neumann, 'Addressing Uncertainty, an overview', *Reaction Wheel*, Feb. 17, 2022.
<https://reactionwheel.net/2022/02/addressing-uncertainty-an-overview.html> (accessed Nov. 02, 2022).

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