

# HELPING STUDENTS MAKE THEIR WAY TO ADULTHOOD

## GOOD COMPANY for the JOURNEY

*By the time they graduate from college, most students still have not achieved the kind of self-authorship that would allow them to think independently, make choices, and pursue their dreams. What can we do to help them develop this capacity before they graduate so they can make the most of their college experience? One way, says the author, is to be better company.*

BY MARCIA B. BAXTER MAGOLDA

**S**UCCESSFUL JOURNEYS, even short ones, require good company. This point was reinforced for me in a recent visit to the Hawaiian Islands, where my spouse and I participated in an excursion called “Maui Downhill.” Maui Downhill was a thirty-eight-mile bicycle trek from the ten-thousand-foot summit of the Haleakala volcano to the ocean’s edge—the key word here being downhill! The tour company provided us with bicycles, helmets, a van to follow us and collect those who might not make the trek, and a guide who would ride in front of our ten-member group.

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Robert, our guide, explained how to lean into the hairpin turns, how to follow his hand signals to slow for turns and let traffic pass, and how to use our brakes effectively (particularly important on a downhill trip). He reminded us not to let the scenery distract us. Most important, Robert emphasized that we were in control of our own bicycles and thus our own and others' safety. Our journey was complicated because we shared the winding mountain road with automobile drivers who were also enjoying the scenery. Robert emphasized our role in the safety of the trek, noting that our varying weights affected our speed and that our attentiveness and risk-taking behavior mediated our ability to control our own bicycles. Yet Robert allowed us to use our judgment and trusted us to act responsibly. We realized the complexity of our trek as we successfully rounded the first hairpin turn. A rider not associated with our tour had just missed the turn and gone over the edge of the mountain. We stopped briefly as Robert assisted the park rangers in rescue efforts. Although Robert reported upon his return that the rider would recover from his injuries, our heightened sense of danger prompted us to pay more attention to Robert's hand signals. Robert's good company resulted in our safe arrival at the ocean's edge four hours later.

The journey into adulthood is equally thrilling and even more treacherous than the downhill bicycle trek, and good company is hard to find. The early years of the journey into adult life are particularly difficult because they are marked by profound transformation—transformation from reliance on external authority to

taking ownership and responsibility for one's life. This transformation to self-authorship requires constructing one's own internal self-definition to guide one's life and relations with others in the context of external influence. Being good company for literally thousands of students, all of whom are on different journeys, is a complex challenge. My longitudinal study of young adults' development has taught me a great deal about being good company for college students on their journey toward self-authorship. I share their wisdom here to help educators conceptualize what good company looks like.

In his book *In over Our Heads*, Robert Kegan describes self-authorship as the capacity to author, or invent, one's own beliefs, values, sense of self, and relationships with others. Self-authorship encompasses the multitude of expectations educators have of college students. Educators strive to promote critical thinking, appreciation of diversity, and mature actions both on campus and beyond. Educators want students to acquire knowledge, learn how to analyze it, and learn the process of judging what to believe themselves. Educators want students to appreciate diversity and engage in civil interactions. Educators want students to make wise choices about alcohol use and dating behavior. These are expectations for complex ways of constructing knowledge, one's identity, and one's relations with others that would make campus life healthier and prepare graduates for productive participation in adult society. Educators hope that students will integrate these ways of knowing, being, and interacting with others into the capacity for self-authorship—the capacity to define their own beliefs, identity, and relationships internally.

Mark, one of the participants in my longitudinal study, captures the essence of self-authorship with this comparison:

You're in some sense a piece of clay. You've been formed into different things, but that doesn't mean you can't go back on the potter's wheel and instead of somebody else's hands building and molding you, you use

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your own, and in a fundamental sense change your values and beliefs.

Going back on the potter's wheel, using your own hands to reshape values and beliefs, requires a substantive transformation—the shift from reliance on external authorities as the guiding force of knowledge and self-definition to an internal sense of self as the guiding force that grounds the construction of knowledge, self, and relationships.

Unfortunately, Mark and his peers in the study did not experience this transformation during college. As I reported in *Knowing and Reasoning in College*, finding out what the authorities thought—a way of knowing I called “absolute”—absorbed most participants upon entrance to college. It wasn't long before most realized that authorities did not have all the answers. Participants became transitional knowers, adopting authorities' views in areas still believed to be certain and following authorities' lead in areas believed to be uncertain. Most remained transitional knowers throughout college, continuing their reliance on external authority. A few participants adopted an independent way of knowing during their senior year, assuming that most knowledge was uncertain and that people chose to believe whatever they felt best. Only two of eighty participants adopted contextual knowing, or viewing knowledge as relative to a context, and judged based on evaluation of relevant evidence. Participants in these latter two ways of knowing, despite having adopted assumptions about knowing consistent with self-authorship, had not developed the capacity to invent their own beliefs. Instead they joined their transitional counterparts in following external formulas for success. They followed curricula and cocurricular involvements they were told would lead to ideal jobs. They accepted jobs their colleges and parents judged as desirable. They attended the graduate or professional schools that would net prestigious futures. Many felt pressure to follow the formula of marrying and having children after college. Thus participants left college having made little progress toward self-authorship—a circumstance that is typical, according to

research on college student development by Patricia King and Karen Kitchener, described in their book *Developing Reflective Judgment*.

Not achieving self-authorship made the journey into adulthood unnecessarily treacherous. Having become adept at functioning within the control of external influence, participants were now expected to manage external influence instead. In their work lives they were expected to function independent of authority, make mature decisions in complex contexts, and effectively negotiate among competing interests. In their personal lives relationships built on meeting others' needs became contexts for balancing their own and others' needs. Having to structure one's own life, or as one participant put it, no longer having a syllabus to tell you what to do, led to the awareness of the need for self-authorship. I called this phase of the journey the “crossroads”—the place where participants recognized that they needed to shift from external to internal authority but were unsure how to do so and afraid of the costs involved. Incongruence between externally driven career choices and their values led to financially draining career changes. Incompatibility of their values and relationships led to difficult renegotiations or divorce. Struggles to achieve internal authority led to seeking professional therapy. It was not until the mid- to late twenties that my participants were able to return to the potter's wheel and become the authors of their own lives. Doing so moved their voices to the forefront to guide their relations with others, making possible mature relationships in which all parties' needs are considered. Because young adults are expected to function independently in important positions in society and participate in mature relationships with partners and children soon after college, it is crucial that colleges promote this transformation during college. Like the rider on the bicycle trek, my longitudinal participants are likely to recover from their injuries; yet avoiding the injuries is a more responsible approach.

The stories of my longitudinal participants in the ten years after college reveal why self-authorship was

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not achieved during college and how it was promoted after college. Together these two insights illustrate how college educators can be good company for the journey toward self-authorship. A primary reason self-authorship remained elusive during college was the lack of emphasis on developing an internal sense of self. Students learned disciplinary content and processes for thinking about it and applying it. It was not until after college, however, that their employers and graduate educators stressed that their thinking, knowing, and applying their perspectives to their work all hinged on their internal values and how they defined themselves. The crucial role of adults in providing guidance and good company while participants construct internal definitions is evident in the postcollege stories that are shared further on in this article. Inviting the self into the educational process requires moving away from the traditional forms of teaching and control-oriented forms of organizing student life that prevail on many campuses. Being good company for journeys toward self-authorship requires new roles for educators and learners.

Robert's role as a downhill bicycle trek guide exemplified the nature of these new roles. Robert invited us into a mutual partnership aimed at making our trek enjoyable and safe. He shared his expertise about the terrain, bike mechanics, the interaction of the two (for example, the importance of not letting go of the brakes when in downhill terrain until you are off the bicycle), and the complexities of cycling with a group of strangers in unfamiliar surroundings. He offered, but did not impose, his experience. Robert guided us and intervened if he felt it necessary. He also made clear, however, that each of us was responsible to ourselves and to the other riders for controlling our bicycles. He gave us time to practice in the parking lot before starting downhill and trusted that we were capable of making the trek. Each of us left the mountaintop aware that our thinking and behavior would play a central role in the nature of this journey. The stories of my longitudinal participants clarify these new roles by revealing a framework for good company that promotes self-authorship.

### GOOD COMPANY: CREATING THE CONDITIONS TO PROMOTE SELF-AUTHORSHIP

**P**ARTICIPANTS occupied diverse contexts during their twenties. Many pursued graduate or professional education in varied disciplines and types of institutions. Their employment settings included business, human services, education, and government. Leadership

roles, volunteer work, and family responsibilities also framed their lives in unique ways. Analyzing the influence of these multiple contexts on participants' journeys toward self-authorship yielded a framework of the conditions necessary for promoting self-authorship. Despite diversity across contexts, environments that promoted self-authorship consistently operated on *three key assumptions*. The environmental characteristics stemming from these assumptions modeled the expectation for self-authorship.

First, these environments conveyed *that knowledge is complex and socially constructed*. In course assignments, job responsibilities, or volunteer roles, participants were faced with multiple interpretations, ambiguity, and the need to negotiate what to believe with others. Andrew reported encountering this assumption in graduate school:

Something that added a lot was dealing with the different cultures and the people from different countries and backgrounds . . . with different opinions. A lot of things we're taught in business are from an American perspective. Well, that's not necessarily the best and most correct way. In fact, at least in the manufacturing environment, we're getting our rear ends kicked. The Japanese have a much better approach that seems to be working. They challenged a lot of what we took as standard. They even argued with some of the financial theories, which supposedly aren't one of the things that you debate. But it was really good. We had people from communist countries that just had a very different perspective. And a lot of what they said made sense from the type of situations they were dealing with.

Andrew's professors encouraged this debate, emphasizing the importance of students developing reasoned perspectives and belief systems. Like Robert, they offered their expertise but acknowledged that learners' multiple perspectives contributed to understanding complexity. This complexity modeled the epistemological growth—development of the capacity to wisely choose from among multiple alternatives—needed for self-authorship.

Framing knowledge as complex and socially constructed gave rise to the second assumption—*that self is central to knowledge construction*. Just as Robert encouraged us to bring our own perspectives to the bicycle trek, participants were encouraged to bring themselves into their learning, work, and relationships. Alice's master's program emphasized choosing counseling styles

compatible with one's personal philosophy and using that philosophy to guide interactions with clients. Alice described it like this:

The hands-on experience through my internship has made me realize nobody else is in this room with me when I'm doing this counseling session. And so, for me to be clear on these issues, I need to figure them out for myself. Not to say that I'm ever going to figure them out, but to know where I stand on them and to think them through. It's you and your client sitting there. I feel like if I'm not sure where I stand or I'm not clear on what the issues are and what the arguments are both ways and process that myself, then I don't see how I can be of any help at all to this client. So I think that's really encouraged me to do that.

Environments that encouraged participants to define themselves and bring this to their way of being in the world modeled the intrapersonal growth, the internal sense of self, needed for self-authorship. Examples of self as central to knowledge construction existed across contexts, from writing legal depositions to making complex business decisions.

The third assumption—that *authority and expertise are shared in the mutual construction of knowledge among peers*—created environments in which participants were invited to actively share expertise. Robert modeled this assumption in sharing his expertise while inviting us to use our collective expertise. Ned found this assumption central to his work selling chemicals for paper machines. Ned needed to share authority with his boss and with numerous others:

There are a hundred different people analyzing it from their perspective. So you've got the guy running the machine, who has no education but he's been there for 35 years and he knows this machine and he's thinking, "Don't some college boy come tell me how to run this thing." And then you've got the mill manager, who's been to 49 other mills and probably is not aware of the specific details of how his mill runs. And then you've got the process engineer, who is intimately familiar with his piece of the pie, but not the big picture. So I have to assimilate all that data and kind of filter it. You've got to have the right filter on when you're talking to the specific person.

To succeed, Ned needed to construct knowledge with diverse people, integrate perspectives, and arrive at sound decisions. The invitation, and necessity, to participate as equal partners in this mutual construction modeled the interpersonal growth, or development of the ability to function interdependently with others, needed for self-authorship. These three assumptions were tightly linked in environments that were most effective in promoting self-authorship.

These three assumptions were usually not explicitly stated. They were instead enacted through the approach educators, employers, or other adults took to interacting with the longitudinal participants. This approach parallels and extends *three principles for educational practice* that I initially identified from college experiences that aided students' intellectual development (which I reported in *Knowing and Reasoning in College*). These three principles were further supported by an observation study I conducted (reported in *Creating Contexts for Learning and Self-Authorship*) in which their use in college courses promoted students' intellectual development. Stories of participants in their twenties provide further evidence that these three principles help educators across settings join learners at their current developmental place in the journey and promote movement toward self-authorship. Thus they translate the three assumptions into educational practice.

The first principle, *validating learners' capacity to know*, was evident in employers' soliciting employees' perspectives and trusting their judgments as well as in educators' interest in learners' experiences and respect for their beliefs. Sandra, a social worker, experienced this validation from her supervisor:

[My supervisor] was terrific. He built my confidence; he trusted me, never second-guessed me. He forced me to explain my reasons. That trained me to do this for myself. I had to think about it, so I got better at it. I knew he would ask. He trained me to do it on my own; thus I made better decisions. He had confidence in me, so I did too. It was a precious gift.

This validation invited participants into the knowledge construction process, conveyed that their ideas were welcome, and offered respect that boosted their confidence in themselves. The second principle, *situating learning in learners' experience*, was evident in educational and employment settings that used participants' existing knowledge and experience as the basis for continued

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learning and decision making. Kelly's graduate education courses modeled this principle:

The professors use more of our knowledge. The feeling that I get from the professors is that they accept me as a professional. They expect me to come to the class with all this knowledge. And they're going to take that knowledge and expand on a part of it and make me see a different avenue of a part of my knowledge. Like just last night, he was pulling things out of each one of us differently and actually tying it all together to make us see a point. And it's nice to be treated like I've got knowledge. . . . It makes me feel more confident. The respect that I feel from the professors makes me more comfortable to maybe go out on a limb and say something that I might not be so sure of. Their respect helps me to get more out of the class.

Participants perceived the use of their current knowledge and experience as a sign of respect; it simultaneously gave them a foundation for enhancing their learning or work.

The third principle, *mutually constructing meaning*, involved educators or employers connecting their knowledge to that of the participants to arrive at more complex understandings and decisions. Gavin described how his boss used this assumption to help Gavin learn to think for himself:

It's really nice to know that I can just say, "Mr. Smith, I'm having trouble with—I don't understand this." He doesn't always give me the answer. A lot of times he'll throw back questions like, "Well, what do you think about it?" He always tries to get you to answer it yourself. And if he feels differently, he'll tell you. I'm still kind of nervous just because I feel like what I'm asking him is

going to be stupid or silly. But he never makes you feel bad. His method of getting people to learn is he always thinks that if you're a bright enough person you really do know the answer or it's easy enough for you to find out. If we disagree, then he says, "Well, if that's the way you see it, do it your way and if it works out let me know." . . . It gives me the impression that if my mindset is that I'm going to do it my way, I can do it that way. If it doesn't work, I'll tell him. And a lot of times he'll say, "Well, you'll feel a lot better with yourself because you tried it." So it's a very, very relaxed atmosphere with very, very professional people. They just know how to—it's like they're being a mentor. It's neat.

Gavin's boss used numerous forms of mutual construction. He helped Gavin reflect on his own ideas and expertise to think his work through. When Gavin needed help, his boss provided it without making Gavin feel incompetent. When Gavin wanted to try something a different way, his boss supported trying it even if he disagreed. Even when Gavin did make mistakes, his boss still encouraged him to try out his own thinking in order to feel better about himself. Mutual construction welcomed participants as equal participants in knowledge construction, helped them clarify their own perspectives, and helped them learn how to negotiate with others.

These three principles helped promote self-authorship by modeling it and providing participants the kind of support they needed to shift from external to internal self-definition. Because participants were at varying places along the journey, the company they needed varied accordingly. Situating learning in learners' experience and mutual construction of meaning helped educators and employers connect to and stay in tune with participants' development. Mutual construction helped educators and employers understand participants' journeys, an important part of being good company.

## GOOD COMPANY: EDUCATORS' TRANSFORMATION

THE FRAMEWORK of the three assumptions and three principles for being good company requires new roles for college educators and learners and a new relationship between the two. The journey toward self-authorship revealed how *three dimensions of development*—how we know or decide what to believe, how we view ourselves, and how we construct relationships with others—were intertwined. How we know or decide what to believe, or the *epistemological dimension*, is often the primary focus of college and usually the purview of academic affairs. How we construct relationships with others, or the *interpersonal dimension*, is often viewed as the purview of student affairs and is generally focused on students' getting along in community settings. How we view ourselves, or the *intrapersonal dimension*, is viewed as important but is not the central focus of academic or student affairs. Participants' journeys through their twenties showed that self-authorship requires growth in all three dimensions. Adopting contextual assumptions about how to know (via evaluation of evidence and choosing the best knowledge claims) was insufficient for self-authorship because participants lacked an internal sense of self, or identity, from which to choose what to believe. This intrapersonal dynamic also meant a shortcoming in the interpersonal arena; participants' constructed relationships with others to please others, with insufficient regard for their own needs. Without an internal sense of self, participants' beliefs, identity, and relationships were defined by others. Good company during their twenties helped participants make the shift to internal self-definition from which negotiation with others to form mutual relationships was possible, opening the way for self-authorship in all three dimensions of their development. The crucial role of the intrapersonal dimension for self-authorship requires that educators take up this dimension as a primary focus.

The framework calls for a mutual partnership between educator and learner characterized by mutual respect and active exchange of perspectives. The educator role in this partnership focuses on introducing

the complexity of learning or work, inviting learners to bring their sense of self to learning or work, teaching learners how to work through complexity, affording learners autonomy, and respecting learners as adults. The learner role in this partnership involves active engagement in learning or work, taking initiative and responsibility for one's learning or actions, reflecting on one's sense of self, and participating in the mutual construction of meaning. A mutual respect between educator and learner would enable meaningful exchanges that keep learning connected to learners' progress on the journey toward self-authorship. The brief quotes provided here, as well as the extensive narratives I include in *Making Their Own Way*, convey the nature of these new roles and relationships.

Constructing this partnership in the curriculum and cocurriculum is crucial to promoting self-authorship during college. Pedagogy using this framework emphasizes the uncertain nature of knowledge and the role of learners in deciding what to believe. Readings and class discussions introduce multiple perspectives and controversy. Class activities and assignments help learners analyze multiple perspectives and practice judging their validity. Instructors model establishing and defending their own positions, showing students how to develop frameworks for authoring their own views. Class discussion focuses on bringing students' views into the dialogue and giving them opportunities to practice using existing knowledge to refine their perspectives. Assignments emphasize articulating and defending one's view and refining one's belief systems. Involving students in decisions about class organization, assignments, and evaluation practices is another way to challenge reliance on external authority.

Promoting self-authorship in the curriculum is essential yet insufficient. Cocurricular efforts, arenas where students more naturally see their sense of self as central, must also offer good company for the journey. Career and academic advising are arenas in which educators guide students in decision making and are therefore ideal grounds for promoting self-authorship. Envisioning the advising relationship as a mutual partnership means that both parties take an active role. Rather than telling students what courses to take or

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what careers are best, advisers introduce students to the complexity of academic and career options. Advisers help students navigate this complexity with tools for exploration and structures for decision making. They emphasize the importance of exploring one's own values to guide these choices, and they help students work with the pressure of external forces on their decisions. This adviser role gives students meaningful responsibility for exploring and making academic and career choices. The active role for students is engaging in self-reflection, constructing internal values and beliefs, exploring reasonable options, managing external influences, and making their own decisions. This same role works in student leadership positions, campus employment, living arrangements, and student organizations (in *Making Their Own Way I* provide an extensive discussion of mutual partnerships in these contexts).

Colleges must offer a new kind of partnership to prepare graduates more effectively for the self-authorship demanded by contemporary society. Encouraging learners to "control their own bicycles," educators could offer guidance, advice, and intervention, as appropriate, yet still allow the learners to take the lead in directing and managing the journey. Experience in mutual partnerships also enhances learners' ability to construct mutual relationships, a crucial component of effective participation in

adult community life. Mutual partnerships mean giving learners more control and responsibility for their journeys and lives. They mean reducing external control and enhancing internal self-authorship. Transforming higher education in this way makes it possible for learners to navigate the crossroads during college instead of finding them on the horizon after graduation.

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