

**A Personal Formative Narrative:
Applying Self-Authorship and the Reflective Judgment Model to My Personal History**

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After reading about several student development theories and related topics, a few theories have resonated with me as I thought about my personal experience. In particular, King and Kithcener's Reflective Judgment Model and Baxter Magolda's elements of self-authorship aligned the most with my thoughts and feelings on this conversation. To begin, I will explain my history with education growing up before college, as an undergraduate, and now as both a higher education professional and a graduate student.

I credit my devotion to lifelong learning and academic excellence to two things: (1) my parents' interest in my academic success and their reactions to my brother's academic failures, and (2) my enrollment in private, Catholic institutions from Kindergarten through high school whose mission statements were predicated on the principles of lifelong learning and academic success beyond the boundaries of school walls. The morals taught at home lined up well with a Catholic education—additionally, I grew up in a town where graduation outcomes at the secondary and postsecondary levels for students out of the public system were not to my parent's standards.

As a result of my academic success from an early age, I was able to attend most of these institutions on scholarship or with some level of financial assistance—which is important because I would not have been able to attend without that. I often speculate about what would have happened if I was not a strong student and could not receive merit aid, particularly about how this would have affected my parents' perception of myself and the public school system. As a result of having financial outcomes tied to my academic performance, I was expected to succeed. Thankfully, I had always been referred to as a “gifted student” by family and teachers—which doesn't correlate with my intelligence as much as it shows that I am a good test taker, a fast reader with a quick and strong recall, and work well under pressure. I didn't have to work very

hard in high school; I coasted my way to the top of my class, while also participating in six extracurriculars. I had friends who would joke about my “genius” status, when really I was simply good at being able to balance my time and energy in a way that allowed me to take on more than the average student.

When it came time to attend a postsecondary institution, I chose the University of Massachusetts, Amherst (Go UMass!) and my initial major of choice was Computer Systems Engineering; in my introductory level electrical engineering course, I was one of 15 women in a lecture hall of 140 students. As a member of the Commonwealth Honors College, I also participated in a Residential Academic Program (RAP), which meant that I applied and was accepted into a community floor of fellow engineers, allowing my education to expand from the lecture hall to the residence hall. It was a wonderful experience, as I often participated in study groups with my peers; being able to ask your next door neighbor about the multivariable calculus homework that was due in an hour was a great boon.

As a result of this residential experience, and the experience of being a board member of our House Council (a group dedicated to planning building and area wide events), I became a Resident Assistant (RA). I was so involved in residential life that I was elected Co-chair of the RA council, won RA of the Year, and taught a 300-level education course for prospective RA candidates when UMass made the shift from Residential Life to Residential Education. The sense of community I had with my residents and colleagues was amazing, and I am still in contact with many of my former residents to this day.

After my first year of college, I realized that I needed to change my major. I loved engineering and I still do. It was a formative part of my high school career as a member of the Robotics and Computer Teams; however, I didn't see myself working as an engineer long term,

especially when it was clear to me even as a student that I would not be respected in the workplace as a woman because I wasn't respected in the classroom. When I told my parents of this decision, it was one of the first major fights I had ever had with them. Because I had been the "easy" child, the academic overachiever who acted much older than she was, my parents had both assumed that I would give into their objection and remain in engineering. Instead, I took a two-day long aptitude test at a research center in Boston, at the request of my father, to prove that I should be doing something else. It was around that time that I also began to question the belief system that I was raised with and began to develop my own personal set of beliefs, something that also did not assist in alleviating any friction and tension.

From that point on, I was an English major with a minor in Multicultural Theater Practice, and my plan was to become a highschool teacher. I had passed the required Massachusetts Test for Education Licensure (MTELs) on my first try and was prepared to enter the workforce after college—except that I didn't become a teacher after college; one year after graduation, I began working for the Boy Scouts of America full time as a District Executive, responsible for program, financial, and personnel management. It wasn't until March of 2020 that I made the shift into higher education by taking a position at Northeastern in the Department of Political Science as an Administrative Assistant. Even still, I did not start the Master of Education in Higher Education Administration program until September of 2021.

Enrolling in this program was nerve wracking: for the first time in a long time, I was nervous that I wouldn't be accepted into something, that my grades weren't good enough or that I wouldn't be able to find a strong set of recommendations. And for the first time in a long time, I was elated and excited to learn. Receiving the acceptance letter was one of the moments I am most proud of in my adult life. Continuing in this program has also shown me that I have finally

found where I should be. This work is interesting and I enjoy learning again; and of even greater significance to the personal beliefs I have developed and aligned myself to—this work is important and worthwhile.

The overarching piece to this story that connects all of these moments together is in the way I was assessing pre-existing notions about people and power that were taught to me by my parents. Additionally, at the same time I was critically thinking about my own thoughts and opinions outside of learned behaviors, the nation began to hold these conversations at a large scale as well. It is clear to me now that I had not begun the process of self-authorship, until my second or third year of college. The shift from uncritically accepting the beliefs and values of external authorities—in this case, my parents—to developing those beliefs and values internally marked the beginning of my journey to self-authorship and the timing of this shift aligns with Baxter Magolda's research (2008) on this topic: "self-authorship evolves when the challenge to become self-authoring is present and is accompanied by sufficient support to help an individual make the shift to internal meaning making" (p. 271). College presented both the challenge and the opportunity to make this shift.

In further examining Baxter Magolda's three elements of self-authorship—learning to trust their internal voices, building an internal foundation, and securing internal commitments—I could easily pinpoint where in my undergraduate career I first experienced each of these elements. The first is marked not only by its outcome of learning to trust the internal voice, but also by periods of "confusion, ambiguity, fear, and even despair as individuals struggled to analyze and reconstruct some aspect of their beliefs, identity, or relationships in various contexts" (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 280). Having my views externally created and validated led me to believe I was a hyper-conservative Christian. Attending a liberal arts research university created such an

intense cognitive dissonance that I spent most of my first year questioning everything I thought to be true. There were many moments when I didn't even have the words to describe that feeling, so the term Baxter Magolda offers of "shadowlands" feels incredibly apt.

The second element, building an internal foundation, occurred the strongest when I was taking a theater course with Judyie Al-Bilali, one of my most beloved teachers. After taking an introductory acting course with her, I loved her class and teaching method so much I took a significantly more intense theater course with her. After beginning the work of self-authorship, this class helped me build my foundation. I spent time with wonderful creatives from around the world, of many different races, cultures, and social identities. And for every moment they challenged my beliefs as much as I challenged my own, I was met with a support structure that allowed me to reflect in a safe and welcoming space. This course didn't teach me or give me any strong beliefs. Instead, it allowed me to critically think about why and how I should create my own personal belief system. This experience is the core of this element: after trusting the internal voice, the internal foundation is a reflection of a framework on how to react to the world around us and incorporates feedback on these systems as they form (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 280).

The third element of self-authorship, securing internal commitments, was something that I experienced in my later college years as a junior and a senior. This element is characterized as moving from understanding internal commitments to living them and "integrating internal foundations and infrastructure with their external personal realities" (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 281). Having both an established internal foundation and an established and visible role on campus as a leader in residential life gave me the confidence to enact and live in accordance with that foundation. It was also fulfilling to see that in my work I was assisting others on the first two elements of this process. There were many long nights in the common room where I engaged in

constructive conversation with my first-year residents, many of whom were having a crisis of conscience—the likes of which I went through in my first years as well.

This concept is also reflected in and a part of King and Kitchener's Reflective Judgment Model. The Reflective Judgment Model is also applicable through early childhood as well as adulthood, and is broken down into "seven consistent patterns that describe how people approach complex issues and defend what they believe to be true" (Love & Guthrie, 1999, p. 42). The seven stages can be broken down into the following developmental levels with clear transitional periods: pre-reflective (1, 2, and 3), quasi-reflective (4 and 5), and reflective (6 and 7). Similarly to Baxter Magolda's elements of self-authorship, I can pinpoint exact moments and periods of my life and experience with education that align with this model, even back to my childhood.

The first developmental level, pre-reflective, was my experience in middle school and high school. The progression of this level encompasses three stages: (1) where belief is only created with personal experience, (2) personal experience is not enough but authority figures are absolutely correct and those that question them are wrong, and (3) no one could possibly have an answer to every question at every moment and some uncertainty is expected and justified at this level (Love & Guthrie, 1999, p. 44-45). As a child in private, Catholic schools, I was relying on my parents to establish my opinions. And since at this level, firsthand experience is also seen as correct and certain, my experience had no conflicting opinions, people of different backgrounds, or differences of any kind which meant I could not move forward in the stages of reflective thinking until those structured beliefs were challenged.

As I described with self-authorship, the challenge to my belief system came in the form of college itself. The next developmental level, quasi-reflective, encompasses the next two stages: (4) belief with certain isn't always possible and is tied to the individual as an abstraction,

and therefore cannot be used to describe external issues, and (5) while knowledge with certainty is not possible, context informs and determines what is known, thus allowing someone to make distinctions between those abstractions (Love & Guthrie, 1999, p. 46). Collectively, these two stages explain the behavior of identifying an issue but being unable to solve it, thereby asserting a position but not yet justifying (Love & Guthrie, 1999, p. 44). This was exactly the kind of space I found myself occupying my first two years of college, particularly as issues of social justice and equity were being brought to the forefront of my campus and the attention of national news. Those situations pushed me to identify the issue, see it in my immediate community and on a larger scale—but it still took some time for me to be able to think critically about those issues and my relationship with them.

The cognitive dissonance I have described here and in reference to self-authorship, pushed me into the third and final level of development, reflective thinking. This level encompasses the last two stages: (6) critical thinking and construction of ideas is imperative to the process of creating and attaining solutions to complex problems, and though knowledge is uncertain, it can be understood with context and evidence, and (7) “although an absolute reality cannot be assumed, one can synthesize interpretations of evidence and opinion into reasonable, cohesive, and justifiable conjectures” (Love & Guthrie, 1999, p. 47-48). Though I was likely in a transitional period from quasi-reflective to reflective towards the end of my undergraduate career, I would qualify that I only firmly found myself inhabiting this level in the last 2 years, as I grew both professionally and academically.

In synthesizing these two theories of development with my personal history, another clear idea emerges that both Baxter Magolda, and King and Kitchener explain: despite having three elements from beginner to advanced self-authorship and distinct levels and stages in the

Reflective Judgment Model, individuals are not existing in a single point or level of these theories. Thought, judgment, and opinions are too complex to be delineated on a linear scale. A person does not operate day-to-day at the highest level of complex problem solving; experience, task demands, and personal and environmental factors affect which level an individual is operating within (Love & Guthrie, 1999, p. 49). Furthermore, self-authorship is cyclical by nature; though motion toward self-authorship may occur, the trajectory is not linear and is also based on personal characteristics, experiences, challenges, and support available (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 281).

With this in mind, I feel comfortable and assured that I am on the right path towards critical thinking and self-authorship. Without the knowledge of these theories, I had felt like I was behind in developing these skills. Additionally, I was often asked to explain my thoughts and opinions on these ideas and never had the right language to describe my experience. Baxter Magolda, and King and Kitchener have not only given me a tool for both vocalizing and understanding my experience, but also a tool to evaluate how I examine problems and the forming of opinions in the future.

References

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