

Possible Selves and Our Students

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Possible selves, a concept from the field of psychology, provides us with a useful way to examine our students' choices. Markus and Nurius (1986) first introduced it as a concept that could help us better understand the complex area of self-knowledge as developed in self-concept research. They also argue that possible selves can provide a possible link between cognition and motivation. Possible selves are imagined views of our future self and as such encompass our hopes and fears and our goals (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

In summarizing their ideas about possible selves, Markus and Nurius write,

Possible selves represent individuals' ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming, and thus provide a conceptual link between cognition and motivation. Possible selves are the cognitive components of hopes, fears, goals, and threats, and they give the specific self-relevant form, meaning organization, and direction to these dynamics. Possible selves are important, first, because they function as incentives for future behavior (i.e., they are selves to be approached or avoided) and second, because they provide an evaluative and interpretive context for the current view of self (1986, p. 954).

It is their connection to the future, i.e. selves to be approached or avoided, that are of particular interest to those of us working with students.

Possible selves are based on "representations of the self in the past and they include representations of the self in the future" (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954). However, these are not any set of fantasy or generic roles. "Instead they represent specific, individually significant hopes, fears, and fantasies" (p. 954). In other words, for our students possible selves might be "me as a study abroad student" or "me as a fluent English speaker."

Although our possible selves are individual and based on past experiences, because they are developed socially, other people can influence our possible selves. Possible selves "are the direct result of previous social comparisons in which the individual's own thoughts, feelings characteristics, and behaviors have been contrasted to those of salient others" (p. 954). Possible selves can help self-concept become dynamic by providing a "direction and impetus for action, change, and development" (p. 960). Thus, two individuals may both feel a strong need for achievement but "the dynamics of action that follow as a result of these needs depend on the particular possible selves" (p. 961). In this way possible selves can be related to agency or the lack thereof. For example, Markus and Nurius argue that a lack of agency on the part of one individual could be due to the presence of a negative possible self giving "a cognitive form to an individual's fears and insecurities but [not containing] strategies or self-scripts for how to escape them" (1986, p. 962). This is in keeping with motivation theory which sometimes views motives as an individual's tendency to approach positive incentives (goals) or avoid negative ones (threats). "Possible selves represent these motives by giving specific cognitive form to the end states (goals and threats)" (p. 961).

Since its introduction, the concept of possible selves has been used widely. It has been used to examine the relationship between possible selves and delinquency (Oyserman, & Markus, 1990), the effect of life domains on girls' possible selves (Curry, Trew, & Hunter, 1994), the psychological well-being of university students (Cameron, 1999), and the evaluation of antismoking messages among college-age smokers (Freeman, Hennessy, & Marzullo, 2001).

And possible selves has been used within the language education. In a study by Kanno (2003) it was used to help interpret the negotiation of bilingual and bicultural identities of Japanese returnees (kikokushijo) and has been used along with the concept of imagined communities to show how language learners

(Anderson, 1991) can "expand [the] range of possible selves" and open up possibilities that might not exist otherwise (Kanno & Norton, 2003). Further developing Norton's work on investment in language learning (2000), Norton and Kanno write that identity "must be understood not only in terms of our investment in the 'real' world, but also in our investment in possible worlds" (Kanno & Norton, 2003).

In addition, Pavlenko and Norton interweave the concepts of possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986), communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), and imagined communities (Anderson, 1991) as they look at how these notions of imagined communities "h[ave] great potential for bridging theory and praxis in language education" (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). Although they are primarily looking at the notion of imagined communities as it relates to identity, they point out that the theory of possible selves could provide a link between motivation and behavior. They end the article urging that we, as language teachers, think of ways that our classrooms can become "places of possibility for students with a wide range of histories, investments, and desires for the future."

Cornwell & Sung (1999) reported on two students, Ritsu a "lazy" student who although she wanted to study abroad often came to class late and just slid by without applying herself. It was uncertain that her dream would come true. And Michie a bright, bubbly student who lost her confidence upon entering the third year program and started referring to herself as stupid. Although her dream was to become a flight attendant, she took a job in the banking industry upon graduation. Possible selves can provide alternative explanations to these anomalous situations such as "lazy students" who want to study abroad or successful hard working students who start to see themselves as "incompetent or stupid."

While not all possible selves come to fruition, in this case these two students, who could have been easily labeled lazy and unconfident, have been successful in achieving their possible selves. Ritsu has gone on to graduate from a four-year university in the eastern United States and Michie has left her banking job and is now a flight attendant training for an international airline and is based in Southeastern Asia (Cornwell & Sung, 1999).

Markus and Nurius feel that possible selves may help reconcile some of the conflicts existing among self-concept theories such as "whether the self is a distorter, whether the self concept is stable or malleable, whether there is one true self or many selves, and what the nature of the relationship is between the self-concept and behavior" (1986, p. 963). They go on to suggest that possible selves may be a major factor in determining individual differences.

More research is necessary to better understand possible selves and to learn how possible selves may help teachers better work with students, especially those that do not fit the norm. Such research will also help the concept of possible selves avoid being seen as a common-sensical, layperson's concept that is of little use to researchers in the area of motivation, individual differences, or language education.

¹Self-concept is a global term referring to "the amalgamation of all of our perceptions and conceptions about ourselves which give rise to our sense of personal identity" (Williams & Burden, 1997, p. 97).

References

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