Self-Directed Learning: The Explorer Personality

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Abstract

Self-directed learning has a history as old as human history. Learning assumes much of what may be known must already exist and in part, the process of learning is a path of discovery. The first to know is always a self-directed learner who can be compared to the original explorer who by courage and taking risks follows un-charted courses without the aid of maps. It is the first explorer who gathers first knowledge, draws the first map, and provides first guidance for those that follow. Every culture has its explorers suggesting there is a personality trait of self-directedness not bound by cultural dynamics. The personality trait of the self-directed explorer is a personality trait that tends to "break-out" from the physical boundaries imposed by the land-locked masses intent on the status quo. Every organization needs self-directed "explorers" as *leaders in learning* in developing a learning culture that enhances organizational development.

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Bandura (1997) writes, "Organizations are changed by the behavior of individuals. Hence, the impact of socio-structural [sic] factors on organizational performance is mediated through motivational and learning mechanisms operating at the individual level" (p. 472). Individual performance is still an individual responsibility, even though it is impacted by team performance. Likewise, team performance is impacted by individual performance. The metaphor of a basketball team is useful in understanding that the team score is reflected by the team playing ability, but individual scoring which contributes to the team score depends on individual practice at shooting buckets. An organization's learning culture similarly reflects the accumulated effects of individual learning. However, not all learners are the same. Just as every basketball team needs an above average shooter to win games, every learning organization needs *leaders in learning*. These leaders, like explorers, have "break-out" personalities that influence and motivate others in developing a learning culture suitable for self-directed learners.

Research into self-directed learning has focused on two major components – process and personality. The *process* component includes research on the learning process, methods, goals, teacher-student interaction, and more. Danis (1992) notes those who consider self-directed learning as a process contends SDL "is mostly related to extrinsic aspects of learning and self-instructional procedures" (p. 167). Knowles, for example, focused on process with research contrasting andragogy and pedagogy. Although Knowles paralleled the work of Allen Tough, Long (1988) notes "Tough and Knowles were dealing with different dimensions of the teaching-learning transaction" (p. 38), Tough emphasizing the individual and Knowles emphasizing process.

Because both components of research – process and personality – are significant, the popularity of research continues because usability and application of SDL is still emerging. Malcolm Knowles in presenting at the North America Symposium on Self-Directed Learning shared this assessment of current practice. The two great domains of business and education are still waiting for a better conceptualization of what self-directed learning is or is not (Knowles, 1992, p. 135). Knowles quotes Long who says,

…despite the favorable conditions suggested by the popularity of the topic, adult self-directed learning remains weakly conceptualized, ill defined, inadequately studies, and tentatively comprehended. (p. 135)

The importance of conceptualizing self-directed learning is the need for developing and improving training and learning practices that are practical for the 21st Century multi-national global organization. Knowles (1992) lamented, "I can't help but wish that the North America Symposium on Self-Directed Learning had included a larger representation of practitioners" (p. 141). The fact the symposium was considered a North America symposium might suggest a North American focus on practice. The question is whether self-directed learning requires the personality common to the rugged individual and explorer mentality that created the western culture? Are there cultural and personality differences that impact whether self-directed learning adapts a process that is suitable for a multi-cultural organization?

Tremblay (1989) notes that the adult education movement at the beginning of the 20th century had a focus aligned with Western culture. Tremblay states the founders of the Adult Education Movement "believed that adults are able to learn and that the humanization of knowledge and the democracy of culture would ensure social and individual autonomy and growth" (p. 145). However, adult education and self-directed learning is globally challenged. When looking at the components of process or personality, the cultural dynamics must be considered for practice. Frambach, Driessen, Chan, and van der Vleuten (2012) write, "It is general acknowledged that education methods reflect cultural and ideological values. Addressing the cross-cultural implications of this notion is increasingly urgent in view of the continuing dissemination of education methods around the globe" (p. 739).

Because educational methods are culturally and ideologically bound, processes such as self-directed learning or problem based learning have a cultural dynamic. The United States, for example, values independence, and along with independence, status symbols. The inference of status symbols is much different between individualistic and collectivist societies. Degrees, professional certifications, and licenses are more than about competence; they are about status and recognition. In the United States or Canada, professional trainers would be hard pressed to provide a training program without some form of recognition or increase in status attached. In many cases it would mean no participants. The most prolific argument for having a degree is

materialistic and tied to jobs and status. MBA programs are heavily marketed as roads to success. During the colonial period Harvard, Yale, and Ivy League colleges promoted education with a sense of turning out a cultured individual who would contribute social benefits. The days of getting a degree for the sake of learning, contributing to society, or becoming a cultured individual are long gone.

The individualistic nature of the US culture contributes to the issues of autonomy, control, and reward inherent to both the formal and informal educational processes. Because adult learning with its focus on autonomy and autodidactic roots aligns to the US culture, there is an abundance of individualized educational methods that have a long history in the United States. Correspondence courses, informal training, online courses, and now Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) are indicative of the US individualistic culture with its historical roots.

Frambach, Driessen, Chan, and van der Vleuten (2012) observe, "Rooted in Western culture, student-centred [sic], problem-based methods many not be of a truly international nature and their compatibility with non-Western cultures has been questioned" (p. 739). Asian cultures are collective in nature, as are Middle Eastern, and some Western European cultures. While training and development are as important to job competence, recognition and status does not carry the same value. More important, the educational processes in these countries have more social dynamic as motivators than the individually laden status dynamics common to the United States. The research by Framback, Driessen, Chan and van der Vlueten notes non-Western cultures struggle with self-directed learning. The authors write, "Middle Eastern students expressed more feelings of uncertainty as a cultural factor compared with Dutch and Hong King students. Their uncertainty and difficulties in adapting to SDL were related to sharp contrasts between PBL and their prior educational experiences" (p. 742).

The differences between and individualistic culture and collectivist cultures contribute to the history of educational processes. It was the distinctiveness of individual freedom that brought explorers to the West and led like-minded pilgrims to risk the journey and establish a nation built on individualism as a cultural dynamic. The current trend of adult learning, self-directed learning, distance education or online learning, is simply an extension of our historical education process where many autodidactic learners chose correspondence learning. Caruth and Caruth (2013) write, "Online education is a descendent of and has a shared history with

correspondence learning. In 1873, Anna Eliot Ticknor . . . founded the Society to Encourage Studies at Home" (p. 142). However, before and after Ticknor there was Lincoln, Hemingway, Edison, Abigail Adams, Louisa MayAlcott, Frederick Douglas, Alexander Graham Bell, and many others who shared in the individualistic culture of the West. The question is whether culture and the personality of a rugged individualism must be combined to produce a self-directed learner. Can the "explorer" personality exist in other cultures? Is culture determined by the accumulated impact of personality?

What should be noted is every culture has its explorers and rugged individuals. The western culture is more conducive to what we believe to be a self-directed process which includes our history of distance education from correspondence schools to online learning. Could this imply the western processes that we identify as self-directed learning is simply an outgrowth of the individualistic explorer mentality that created our culture? The historical context of western culture may account a great deal for understanding the personality dynamics that allowed self-directed learning to come into its own existence.

In order to create a culture of self-directed learning adaptable to a multi-cultural organization, it is important to find the *explorers* that will lead the way. Every culture has explorers.   China, a collectivist culture produced Wang Dayuan. "He wrote a travel book called *Records of Overseas Countries and Peoples* (Daoyi Zhilue) in 1349 CE" (Early Chinese Exploration, n.d. para. 3). Whether it is Albanel of France (17th Century) who explored Canada, Italy's Christopher Columbus (15th Century), or Spain's de Soto (16th Century), all cultures have a common denominator of those with explorer personalities. The significance is explorers are known to be followed by others who in groups change or create cultures.

Creating a learning culture that would adapt self-directed learning processes must begin with inserting explorer personalities as *leaders in learning* among those who would be learning.

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