Learning to be a Learner: Self-Directed Learning

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Abstract

Is there a correlation between motivation and self-directed learning? The issue of self-directed learning (SDL) has resulted in a debate between the need for more freedom and for more guidance for the learner. While self–directed learning is often associated with adult education programs, a study by the Northwest Regional Education Laboratory indicates that SDL is becoming more of a priority for secondary school teachers and principals in the Northwest Region served by the study. NWREL asked the following questions. Is self-directed learning appropriate for all students? Does it lead to enhanced student achievement? This journal asks the following additional questions. Is it a strategy that should be used more frequently and be implemented as a broad based alternative to traditional education models? Does it only work for highly motivated learners or does it offer its own motivational component that makes SDL a good option for younger students? A review of the research suggests that motivation is an inherent part of any self-directed learning strategy and as such SDL should be considered as a primary learning model for both adults and younger students.

Learning to be a Learner: Self-Directed Learning

The issue of self-directed learning has often resulted in a debate between the need for more freedom and the need for more guidance for the learner. One argument is that non-adult students lack sufficient self-discipline required to regulate their own educational processes. Another concern is that many students lack basic reading and comprehension skills that are essential for functioning in the self-directed learning environment. Then of course is the fundamental question of choice. Should students choose what they want to study or should this be the exclusive domain of educators and policy makers?

In the world of adult education, self-directed learning has been a norm for years. The University of London claims itself to be the world's first global university which originated distance learning in the year of 1858 following a charter granted by Queen Victoria (University of London, 2008). Distance learning, correspondence schools, and online learning are all examples of education that support adult learners. But these are not unique to adults. Programs like ICS, American School, and Calvert School have each been around for more than 100 years with both high school and adult education; all founded before 1900. We should also not forget that many of the most influential people of history were self educated. A list includes notables such as Abraham Lincoln, Alexander Graham Bell, and Robert Burns. One rare individual was Thomas Alva Edison. According to one biographer, Edison did so poorly in school that he only went for a short time and was pulled out of school by his mother. His education included tutoring by his mother and of being self-taught (Edison Biography, Class Brain, 2006).

As technology has developed self-directed learning has become mainstreamed in all areas of education with the abundance of online learning. The venue of online learning is becoming a norm for business educational development, college education, adult education, and at the levels

of younger students, particularly in home-schooling. An important observation in research by Shinkareva and Benson is that online learning, like other forms of self-directed learning, influences the motivation of students (2007, p. 421). The combination of IT and SDL is already impacting all primary segments of education. IT simply makes self-directed learning more accessible at home, at work, or on campus. The secondary importance is that advances in technology will create a paradigm shift toward self-directed learning becoming a more accepted model of learning and more commonplace in the field of education.

The primary features of self-directed learning typically include the following traits according to a topical summary conducted by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (Dec 2004):

- Student motivation

- Goal orientation

- Locus of control

- Self efficacy

- Self regulation

- Metacognition

The NWREL was not focused on a population of adult learners, but instead was exploring SDL as a way of improving achievement among all students in answer to the "No Child Left Behind Act" (NWREL, 2004, p. 1). The report states that in a needs assessment, teachers, principals, and administrators concluded that the most pressing need was "helping students become self-directed learners who take responsibility for their academic performance" (p.1). The NWREL sought to answer two basic questions: Is self-directed learning appropriate for all students? Does it lead to enhanced student achievement?

However, because all educators concern themselves with the same "pressing need" that prompted the NWREL study, additional questions needed to be asked. Is it a strategy that should be used more frequently and be implemented as a broad based alternative to traditional education models? Does it only work for highly motivated learners or does it offer its own motivational component that makes SDL a good option for younger students? A review of the research suggests that motivation is an inherent part of any self-directed learning strategy and as such SDL should be considered as a primary learning model for both adults and younger students.

Theoretical Framework

Self-directed learning (SDL) "views learners as responsible owners and managers of their own learning process" (Abdullah, 2001, p.2). As such self-directed learning would depend on motivation, volition, and self-discipline being a part of the learner. These are often the attributes of motivated adult learners who depend on flexibility to achieve academic goals. It has been questionable that these same attributes exist in younger students that are still going through certain developmental stages. However, since education is all about teaching, why not teach students to be self-directed learners? There is an old adage that says, "Give a man a fish and you feed him for one meal; teach him to fish and you feed him for life".

One question is similar to "which comes first, the chicken or the egg?" Is motivation first required before SDL can be used as a teaching strategy, or does motivation come as a result of using SDL? The answer may be that both are true. Since educators are always trying to find ways of motivating students, SDL should be considered because the associative traits are the kinds of things that should be priorities in educational development. Teachers should not have a priority of simply transferring information, but the greatest of all priorities should be teaching a

learner to "learn". Why should a student wait until they get to college before they develop the motivation or the skills needed to achieve real academic success? Is academic success to be measured in content that becomes part of memory, or in the ability to quote facts or figures? Certainly teachers desire that students develop higher order learning skills and more than just surface learning. The skills to attain to academic achievement are to be found in the process of "learning to learn". These skills are part and parcel of the process of self-directed learning.

Research Studies and Scholarly Works

What is self-directed learning?

Abdullah quotes studies from Bolhuis (1996) and Garrison (1997) and says, "SDL integrates self-management (management of the context, including the social setting, resources, and actions) with self-monitoring (the process whereby the learners monitor, evaluate, and regulate their cognitive strategies)" (2001, p. 1). In order to accomplish SDL, teachers then must recognize that both motivation and volition is required on the part of the learner. Both of these appear to be problematic for many students, some of whom feel that they are captive audiences to government and educational mandates. It is important to restate the volitional aspect; students must feel that they have a choice. In practical terms educators acknowledge that while most adults have the right of choice, teachers mentally acquiesce to the reality that until a certain age, children do not really have a choice about whether they go to school.

One of the benefits of using a self-directed learning strategy for students is that even if government mandates *no choice* about going to school, the teacher and the student can develop a perception that a student's choice is a part of the educational process. There are certainly many areas where choice and freedoms can be highlighted and presented that will contribute to greater

motivation on the part of the student. These include the ability to set study goals, to participate in lesson plans, or to select from a variety of curriculums.

Lunenberg and Korthagen explain that self-directed learning is a constructivist based learning model that focuses on the activities of the student (2005, p. 2). They write,

> In most constructivist approaches to learning and teaching, learning is considered an active process in which learners build up personal knowledge representations that are the products of their own learning experiences.

In SDL goal-setting, time management, self-evaluation, and students choosing learning strategies are ideal skills to be learned and become a part of the activities of the learning process. Lunenberg and Korthagan postulated the following two indicators for promoting self-directed learning (2005, p. 5):

1. Student-directed learning is promoted when the learning orientations of students and teachers match and/or teachers stimulate students to broaden their learning orientations, especially in the direction of personal interest-oriented learning.

2. Student-directed learning is promoted when the mental models of learning and teaching of students and teachers match and/or when teachers stimulate students to broaden their use of mental models, especially in the direction of construction of knowledge.

"In SDL, control gradually shifts from teachers to learners. Learners exercise a great deal of independence in setting learning goals and deciding what is worthwhile learning as well as how to approach the learning task within a given framework" (Abdullah, 2001, p. 2). It is true that there are great teachers with great skills. The focus of SDL, however, is not on the ability of the teacher to teach, but upon the ability of the learner to learn. The No Child Left Behind Act did have as one purpose the intent of making educators accountable for their teaching. The

assumption was that improvement in teaching should result in improvement in learning, and this could be measured by the standardized tests. It seems logical that there should be a correlation between teaching and learning; but is there a correlation between the ability to teach and the ability to learn? The answer to that question is not always.

SDL means breaking the didactic circle of tradition

The problem for teachers of younger students is that they cannot wait for SDL skills to be developed in the student because the teacher is highly content oriented toward making sure students can meet expectations on the standardized test. Teachers assume that adults come ready equipped with these skills, but only a rare few children can be taught them. Research by Mieke Lunenberg and Fred Korthagen concluded that experienced teachers do not always work well with self-directed learning models.

Lunenberg and Korthagen report on case studies of secondary school teachers that suggest that more widespread use of self-directed learning may be due to the resistance of teachers (2005, p. 1). When we ask if there is a correlation between good teaching and good learning, consideration must be given to the assumption that many under achieving students have never-the-less at times had excellent teachers. One criticism of standardized testing is that it only proves that teachers were able to teach to the test. The fact is that many teachers do not teach students to develop learning skills. Learning skills are those skills that self-directed learners use to educate themselves. Teachers often focus on content instead. Lunenberg and Korthagen report on research in Holland of difficulties teachers have with SDL. The authors write,

Between 1995 and 1997 we carried out several research studies to determine how teachers in Dutch secondary education were coping with the shift to student-directed learning. (For an extensive report on these studies, see, for example, Lunenberg & Volman, 1999). The findings were not encouraging. One reason for these disappointing research findings may be that the teachers involved in the studies were experienced teachers who acquired their teaching certificates years ago. Quite probably, their teacher educators taught them using traditional methods. After all, changing educational practices involves 'breaking the circle' (Stofflett & Stoddart, 1994) of teachers who go on to teach others using the same traditional approach with which they were trained (2005, p. 3).

Self-directed learning focuses on the learner, not the teacher. Williamson observes that "all individuals are capable of self-directed learning but the degree of development varies due to their individual differences" (2007, p. 68). Perhaps the reason why SDL is not implemented more broadly is that mandated requirements have forced teachers to "teach to the test". The focus on the student has been shifted to "the test" and "the teacher". David Posner notes,

> We now see this happening in education in the form of "scripted programs." In these programs, teaching behavior is regimented down to the exact material, timing, and wording of the instruction. Could our obsession with standardized tests reduce teaching itself to a simplistic and ultimately ineffective activity that would be amenable to automation? (2004, p. 751).

Self-directed learning as a strategy would put the focus back where it belongs; on the student. As I often stated, motivation only takes place when needs are being met and I posit that the first concern of educator should be to know the answer to the question, "Whose needs are being met?"

Self-directed learning is a process of thinking independently

The primary emphasis for self directed learning is developing learning skills by the personal pursuit of meaning through exploration, inquiry, problem solving and creative activities. The teacher is to be a facilitator and guide, but the student must work as independently as possible in order to learn how to be a lifelong learner. Learning must include elements of self-direction, self- planning, and self-management. As learning skills develop, learners are equipped to handle increasingly more difficult and complex material.

The independent aspects of self-directed learning suggest that students must come to their own conclusions and understanding for many areas of study. This may present a challenge to the educator intent on indoctrination, social-activism, or controlling the direction of thinking. For this reason there may be bias for acceptance of SDL within public schools. In *Learner Managed Learning: Theory Practice & Policy*, Graves notes,

> Self-directed learning has in its very name an implication that students have control over their own courses. This can contribute to confusion and misunderstanding in educational institutions where the assumption is that teachers are in control of the educational process. It can also lead to fears on the part of teachers that they may introduce a process which is going to undermine their professional standing and make life very difficult for them (1993, p. 164).

Another frame for Grave's comment is that teachers may simply fear that students will not learn what the teachers want them to learn.

Ellen O'Shea notes that the teachers are not always ready to shift from the role of teacher to the role of facilitator. O'Shea writes the change requires a teacher to "to divest themselves of the protective shield of being an authority figure" (2003, p. 66). O'Shea however reiterates that

it is the "responsibility of educators to ensure that students acquire self-directed learning skills that can be transferred from their education to their work requirement" (p. 67).

This highlights a very important part of the debate over the whole principle of self-directed learning. There two items of focus; one is the "how" of learning, and one is the "what" of learning. While much of the "what" of learning can be a matter of debate, it really should be recognized that teachers can maintain more directional control on the content. Where self-directed learning should not create fear for the teacher is in the "how" of learning. SDL should primarily be seen as a method for teaching learning skills: teaching learners to learn.

Discussion

Is self-directed learning appropriate for younger students?

The primary opposition to self-directed learning centers around the discussion of motivation and whether younger students can develop the skills to self manage time, have self-control, set goals, or make appropriate choices about content. The process that most frequently allows for goal setting, time management, and content depends on using learning modules designed for independent learners.

Ausburn's research reviewed the use of learning modules called *Learning Activity Packages* (or LAP) by Tulsa Technology Center. LAPs (learning modules) are also known as Flex Curriculum in TTC. In the Accelerated Christian Education program they are called PACES. Other forms of a modular format are found in online web based curriculum. Learning modules often come as "thematic designed curriculum" such as that being used in nursing and engineering schools.

A major component of any self-directed learning strategy is the curriculum design which must match up with the other components of the strategy. Ausburn states that "learner choice, self-direction, and individualization of learning time and strategy are hallmarks of the modular system" (2002, p. 226). Because autonomy and personalization is the emphasis of SDL, Ausburn observes that there is a logical connection to issues of self-discipline, motivation, and the ability to think critically (p. 227). Ausburn hypothesizes that performance and perception will differ between adult learners and younger students (p.227).

In the study by Ausburn on effectiveness and perception of using learning modules, adult learners and younger students were studied with the use of questionnaires and interview protocols by the research team. Of the 63 students participating in the study, 78% were younger students in a high school level and 22% were adult learners. One of the most important findings for both adult and younger learners is that learners must be oriented to using modules and self-directed learning strategies. Reading levels are a singular primary concern whether the students are adults or younger students (Ausburn, 2002, p. 228). The findings for Ausburn's research indicated that there were both positives and negatives in both age groups, but the main difference between adult and younger learners arises around the "freedom versus focus dilemma" that is inherent in any self-directed learning strategy.

The *freedom versus focus dilemma* simply means that while both adults and younger students have positive perceptions with the freedoms involved in SDL, younger students have more of a challenge with being able to focus on the work and staying continually motivated to achieve results. Concerning freedom, Ausburn reported that both groups,

cited the positive aspects of a sense of personal control and freedom, creation of a relaxed

learning environment, elimination of pressure and fear, a feeling of not being rushed

through the learning process, opportunity to choose and adjust the time spent on specific

learning topics, and ability to speed up or skip topics one already knew. An additional

five younger students also mentioned appreciation of ''being treated like an adult,''

which they reported gave them a feeling of independence and responsibility for their own

learning (Ausburn, 2002, pp. 231-232).

This would seem to indicate that positive feelings would heighten motivation for the process of

learning, but the negatives in the "focus" dilemma affect the younger students more than the

adults. Ausburn reports,

Despite their enthusiasm for the self-directed aspects of LAPs, the younger students also

found this to be their greatest problem. The most frequently cited negative aspect or

disadvantage of LAPs (f = 17) was the difficulty of maintaining self-motivation. The

qualitative comments of many of these younger students revealed the frustration and

confusion they experienced with a self-directed learning environment. They mentioned

feeling confused, isolated, overwhelmed, and ''left behind.'' They reported frequent loss

of interest, fear of falling behind, boredom in working alone, loss of direction and

understanding, and a sense of it being too easy to ''slack off and not work.'' In addition

to these comments, ten students mentioned frustration in trying to get personal assistance

from a busy instructor; four indicated feelings of confusion and frustration with everyone

working at different speeds and on different topics; and two cited frustration and

annoyance from the poor behavior of fellow students. Seven of the younger students

stated that they would have liked to have had more lectures and class discussions to help

keep them on-track, organized, and motivated; one even requested more tests to help

gauge the learning progress (p. 232).

The overall conclusion of Ausburn's research is that while a customized, self-directed learning environment has positives for all age groups, particularly in capitalizing on the freedom aspects of SDL, educators need to recognize the need for appropriate reading skills and also recognize the problems that younger students will have in maintaining focus and motivation. Both groups need thorough introductions to techniques that must be used to achieve success in a self-directed learning environment.

Self-directed learning increases motivation

If one of the "cons" of self-directed learning is that younger students have trouble maintaining focus and motivation, should SDL be considered for use with younger students? It is interesting that in the Ausburn study that while younger students (i.e. high schoolers) struggled with maintaining focus, they felt that using the Learning Activity Packages in a self-directed learning process was a much better form of instruction relative to traditional education. Ausburn reports this as an "interesting contradiction" and states, "All the adults rated LAPs at least as effective as traditional instruction, but larger percentages of high-school age students rated LAPs as better or much better than traditional classroom instruction" (p. 231).

This brings us back to the freedom versus focus dilemma. Both age groups shared in the positive freedom aspects of SDL and while adults had less trouble maintaining motivation, the high school group became frustrated. The report of being "off track", "left behind" or having a sense of "loss of direction" is reported as a loss of focus. Ausburn then concludes that this is a "loss of motivation" and states "The most frequently cited negative aspect or disadvantage of LAPs (f = 17) was the difficulty of maintaining self-motivation" (p. 232). I posit that loss of

focus is not a loss of motivation, but rather an indication that students were simply exhibiting the need for additional preparedness to work within a self-directed learning program.

Maehr and Meyer state that motivation is a "personal investment" that a person makes in one's time, resources, talent, and energy into a particular activity (1997, p. 373). "Such investment not only initiates but shapes the acquisition of skills and the construction of knowledge" (p. 378). The underlying factor in motivation is choice. The article notes that researchers of motivation study "the choices that people make among things to do, the persistence in those choices, the quality of behavior exhibited as they engage, and so forth" (p. 378). When learners are able to exercise the freedom of choice, motivation is the result. Student-directed learning has freedom of choice as a basic part of the process. Motivation is initiated in a process where learners perceive that their needs and desires will be met. It is up to the educational process to build in strategies to keep motivation alive. Self-directed learning builds upon the positive benefits of freedom to ultimately develop the "focus" that is needed in the learning process.

Self-directed learning meets the "needs" of most students

Self-directed learning fulfills the "need" requirements that are most closely associated with motivation. According to Pintrich there are seven basic questions to be considered in motivational research. The seven questions are (1) What do students want? (2) What motivates students in classrooms? (3) How do students get what they want? (4) Do students know what they want or what motivates them? (5) How does motivation lead to cognition and cognition to motivation? (6) How does motivation change and develop? and (7) What is the role of context and culture? (Pintrick, 2003, Abstract).

The question *What do students want* is answered by Paul Pintrich who suggest that self-determination theory has an answer. Pintrich writes,

> In current research on student motivation, self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985;
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> R. M. Ryan & Deci, 2000) is one model that has integrated both needs and social–
>
> cognitive constructs. In this model, there are three basic needs: competence, autonomy,
>
> and relatedness (2003, p. 670).

These needs according to Pintrich are high on the list for all cultures and Pintrich concludes "if individuals can't satisfy these needs, then their motivation as well as a host of other cognitive, affective, and behavioral indicators of adaptive functioning will suffer" (2003, p. 670).

Competency can only be achieved when knowledge and skill becomes a part of the learner, rather than a part of the teacher. It is for the most part experiential and is made up of knowledge, skills, and behaviors. It is something that must be "owned" by the learner. Motivation increases as students become more competent. At some point educators must step back from hand-holding and allow a student to "walk the walk" and "talk the talk" of their learning process.

Autonomy is the ability to control one's own activities. Motivation is reduced for an individual when goals and objectives are controlled by others, but it is increased as "motive" is allowed to operate. A great part of the research in motivation is goal theory. One of the seven questions asked in motivational research is *how do students get what they want.* Pintrich observes that the answer to the question involves the central approach of self-regulation, a part of self-directed learning. Pintrich writes,

> In the academic domain, models of self-regulated learning have been the focus of recent
>
> research that reflects this self-regulatory approach. This research has shown that students

who are self regulating, in other words those who set goals or plans, and try to monitor

and control their own cognition, motivation, and behavior in line with these goals are

more likely to do well in school (2003, p. 677).

<div align="center">Conclusion</div>

It is not lack of motivation that defeats the benefit of self-directed learning. Most often it

is the lack of student preparation, teacher support, and teacher intervention in making self-

directed learning a strong educational tool. Swapna Williamson reports on the development and

use of a self-rating scale of self-directed learning; an instrument used in research of self-directed

learning. While the research was conducted with nursing students at an adult level, consideration

should be given to statements that speak to further research for younger students.

The data from the research indicated that first year SDL students always have limited

skills. It makes sense that skills improve with experience. Williamson states

> Self directed learning skills could be developed through careful planning and integration
>
> into curriculum (Grow 1991). According to Candy (1991), self-directed learning,
>
> especially of discipline based knowledge, calls on attitudes, skills and knowledge that can
>
> be intentionally developed through planned educational interventions (Williamson, 2007,
>
> p. 75).

David Strahan addresses the question of motivation in research of how successful

teachers develop academic momentum with reluctant students. Reluctant students, according to

Strahan "may appear unmotivated, turned off, or disconnected" (2008, p. 97). He investigates

the practices of teachers that worked with reluctant students and discovered that self-directed

learning, self-efficacy, and self-regulation were essential parts of developing academic

momentum.

Strahan concludes that "academic momentum also requires the internalization of the skills of self-regulation" (2008, p. 98). Self-regulation skills according to Strahan include self-observation, self-evaluation, goal setting, strategic planning, and monitoring. These skills don't come by osmosis but can be taught and acquired. Teachers should not see self-directed learning as a challenge to teacher's authority but as a means of "developing academic momentum" (Strahan, p. 99). Strahan sees the SDL process as a partnership between teachers and students. He writes concerning successful teachers and notes,

> Teachers (a) created a climate of shared responsibility through team building and positive discipline (b) taught explicit strategies for performing academic tasks, and (c) developed instructional activities that linked inquiry, collaboration, and real world experience (p. 99).

The instructional activities which included hands-on, minds-on activities, setting goals, planning, and making choices that meant students assumed more responsibility for their learning is the essence of self-directed learning.

David Strahan notes that in recent years "researchers have identified two connected ways of thinking that create skill and will in academic settings" (2008, p. 98). Successful students develop self-efficacy and self-regulation, two important elements of academic achievement. Consideration for future research should be to continue looking at how traditional models of education differ from newer constructivist models and to what degree does any learning strategy support self-efficacy and self-regulation. Herein lie the keys to creating motivation for achievement.

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