

## *Self-Organized Learning in School Practice*

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### **Abstract**

Self-organized learning as a didactic teaching and learning concept is based on the theoretical models of self-control and self-organization within the framework of systemic and constructivist learning theories. In the present concept, this means the participation or transfer of responsibility to learners who, from an organizational point of view, co-determine the subject matter, learning time, methods, place of learning and social form within certain time or content specifications and external structures. The objectives of self-organized learning are to increase the learners' self-competence and knowledge of their own learning and to enable learners to act responsibly and competently. They take responsibility for their learning process and their learning success, whereas teachers in self-organized learning processes take on a supporting, individually advisory or accompanying role. The results of an empirical study (complete survey of teachers by group discussion method according to Bohnsack, 2003) at a New Middle School show that the teaching-learning concept SoL is oriented towards the two action-guiding principles of competence orientation and the teaching and learning setting: self-organization in learning. It takes into account different quality characteristics (e.g. reflection of the learning process, learning success control, ...) and, with regard to the question of the encounter of heterogeneity in the classrooms, it enables different aspects of self-control and, out of itself, ways to a teaching and learning culture in which the learners take responsibility for their learning. In this setting, learners can to a certain extent plan and decide what, when, how, where and with whom they learn.

Keywords: Self-organized learning, Pedagogy, Learning Environment

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## **Introduction**

Promoting self-efficacy, self-determined and self-organized learning, and independent action (Federal Ministry of Education [German acronym: BMB], 2016, p. 2) and thus enabling students to actively acquire knowledge on their own in terms of lifelong learning are formulated in curricula as essential task areas of schools. So there is a central mission related to education and upbringing that is fed by competence-oriented opinions on the one hand and by a strong focus on developing basic democratic values on the other. To do justice to the educational mission, the focus is moving to teaching-learning concepts that promote the acquisition of *specialist* and *interdisciplinary competencies*, think of the development of *personality* and *social behavior* from the learner's point of view, and also stimulate *independence*. Such concepts for promoting independence are considered to be highly conducive (BMB, 2016, p. 6; Pätzold & Lang, 2005, pp. 3-6) to learning.

## **Methodical Approach**

The present teaching-learning concept of SoL<sup>1</sup> (Self-organized Learning) is based on assessments from teachers that were conducted in the course of a full survey using a group discussion process (9 group discussions/4-5 persons) according to Bohnsack (2003). Through the documentary method of interpretation, similarities, and differences within groups are made explicit. The inductive approach involves the explicit structures of meaning for finding or differentiating consistent considerations of the SoL concept (Bohnsack, 2000, 2007). They are the starting point for the theoretical location of the teaching-learning concept used in practice and support a minimum of uniformity in conceptual orientation.

### **Interest in knowledge**

- (1) Creating a category-based concept based on empirical data.
- (2) Working out didactic-methodical principles.
- (3) Specifying pedagogical principles for a common understanding of SoL (Self-organized Learning)

## **Managing and Organizing Learning on Your Own – Theoretical Basis**

The theoretical basis for the teaching-learning concept of SoL is the *concept of self-control* within the framework of systemic and constructivist learning theories (Friedrich & Mandl, 1995; Siebert, 2005). This self-directed form of learning is characterized by (1) learning objectives/standards, (2) operations and strategies of information processing, (3) goal-oriented control processes, and (4) the degree of openness of the learning environment, which learners can determine themselves (Neber, 1978, p. 40). Various *aspects of the self-control process* may be considered. The focus is always on the self-competence of learners with the goal of guiding the learners away from content reception to the construction of knowledge and offering them opportunities to actively shape their learning. This is learning that can be seen as an active, constructive process in which knowledge is constructed, restructured, and expanded (Seifried & Sembill, 2007) and that is managed by learners themselves. Self-control is understood as a dimension of learning (self-control as opposed to

external control) (Sembill & Seifried, 2006). This refers to those phases of the learning process that are related to learning, such as learning organization (e.g., time, location, and speed of learning), setting of learning objectives (e.g., learning content), learning coordination (e.g., adjustment of the learning process to other, individual factors), or monitoring of learning success (Kraft, 2002).

In the present teaching-learning concept of SoL, several aspects of self-control, which are determined by students within certain temporal, content-related, and external structures, are center stage for learners. These include the formulation of self-selected work objectives at the beginning of the week as well as the selection and coordination of learning content and requirements of the subject and decisions on learning organization, such as learning time, learning material, learning speed, learning location, or learning partner.

In this approach, *self-organization* represents the framework concept and refers to planning or the sequence of the self-directed learning processes mentioned here. It is regarded as a central *principle of action orientation* that also underpins the learning process with a clear objective, namely, to enable learners to make their own judgements in practical contexts of action (Schüßler, 2004) and problems and to act competently but responsibly.

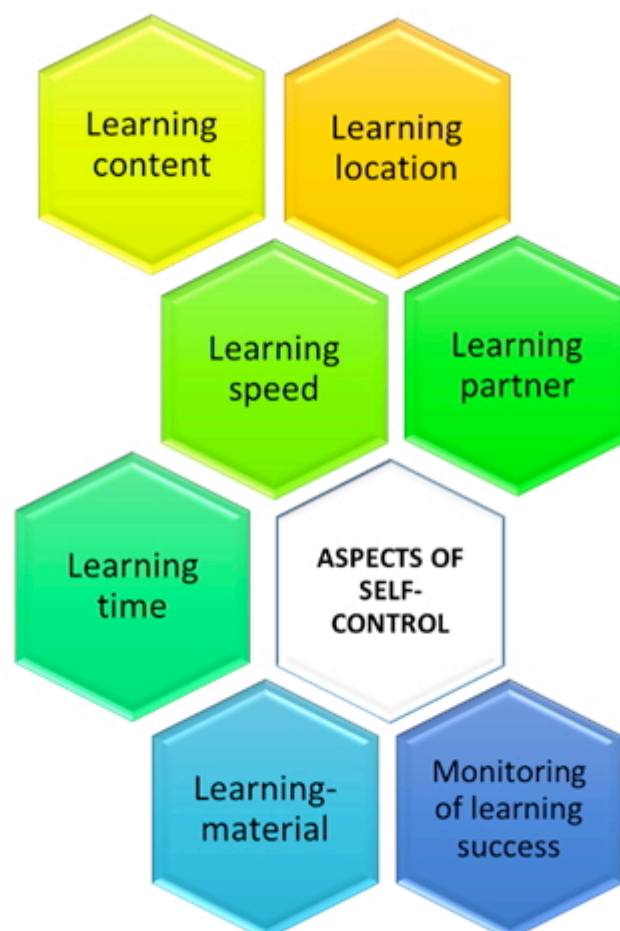


Figure 1: Aspects of self-control in the SoL concept.

## Didactic Teaching and Learning Concepts

Supported by an understanding of education based on application and self-activity, the concept of competence is becoming the basis for reorienting school education in the course of introducing educational standards (Drieschner, 2010). According to Weinert (2001), competencies are cognitive abilities and skills on the one hand that can be learned to solve certain problems and the associated motivational, volitional<sup>2</sup>, and social willingness and abilities on the other hand to make use of situations successfully (Weinert, 2001, p. 27) and responsibly.

The prerequisite for the acquisition of professional competence is self- and social competence (BMB, 2016, p. 3), for which many opportunities are opened up in self-organized learning processes. Thus, the acquisition of subject-specific and interdisciplinary competencies is also formulated as a central concern in the SoL teaching-learning concept.

The motivational basis for competence-oriented teaching can be seen in the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 1993), according to which self-determination and self-competence (ego-strength) are basic needs. Accordingly, learners define themselves through their own competencies. It is essential that they are able to correct negative self-images with regard to their learning competencies. A look at competencies can especially help those with learning disabilities break down their own attribution of deficiencies (Reutter, Ambos & Klein, 2007), highlight individual strengths, and see themselves as self-effective and valuable.

The particular strength of the teaching-learning concept of SoL lies in the procedural *application and practical knowledge* as well as in the acquisition of *social and personal skills*. Examples of this are perseverance, personal responsibility, self-activity, or the ability to work in a team. In particular, they are seen as an added value.

## Objectives and Roles in Self-Organized Learning Processes

Self-organization in learning is a learning process and requires time, the social context of a learning group, but also advisory support (Drieschner, 2010; Reutter et al., 2007). This appears to be central in that the teaching profession is guided by uncertainty and paradoxes that often also manifest themselves in the implementation of self-organized learning. Not all learners can cope with the learning process in the same way. Learners who have great difficulty in organizing themselves and have to learn how to deal with themselves first (Bönsch, 2006) often experience a lack of space for testing themselves and therefore need more support than others. Pedagogical action in such situations is determined by irreversible paradoxes when learners are asked to act on their own. Here, it is important to recognize that "the person to be educated cannot be self-active yet without a corresponding request, that he/she will not get that way based on such a request but can only get that way through his/her own participation" (Benner, 1991, p. 71). Contradictions that are experienced upon the external request for self-activity and independence as a result can consequently not be resolved. They can be overcome in the long run if children are successively enabled to become independent and allowed to be independent. This is done by conveying competencies and values (Drieschner, 2010) and when *clear rules* and *structures* (e.g., schedules) give this self-organization a certain framework (Seifried & Sembill, 2007). Thus, self-

organized learning with advisory and supportive guidance in the learning process is not a contradiction but should be considered as a whole (Reutter et al., 2007). In this support process, in which learners take responsibility for their learning, the following applies to assistance: "as much help as necessary and as little help as possible" (Möller, 2012, p. 44).

### **Developing Knowledge on One's Own Learning**

In self-organized learning processes, your own learning is consciously given more attention to further develop your own *self-concept*. Opportunities to perceive the learning process on your own and to reflect on your own learning development are triggered in the SoL concept, e.g., by keeping a logbook. The *development of reflective and self-regulatory competence* (Gläser-Zikuda & Hascher, 2007) is facilitated by students defining personal work goals and continuously reflecting on and recording their learning process. The above aspects of self-control (e.g., learning organization, determination of learning objectives, learning coordination, monitoring of learning success) are thus supplemented by a continuous reflection on the learning process in the course of a self- and external assessment in the learning logbook. These assessments are then presented to the teacher together with the elaborations related to the learning opportunities at a time defined by the learner him or herself and form the basis for *monitoring learning objectives or learning success* (Kraft, 2002), which is agreed upon individually with the teacher. In the course of feedback, it is possible to discuss solutions individually and to perceive mistakes as a natural part of learning processes (BMB, 2016; Seifried & Sembill, 2007).

### **Learning Culture – Assuming Responsibility for Your Own Learning Process**

Establishing a relationship between learning and yourself makes it possible to identify with the learning process. From the recipient of instructions to the designer of their own learning processes, learners assume more responsibility (Reutter et al., 2007). Large differences in learning conditions and learning strategies require learners to manage their own learning. Decision-related situations such as "*When do I learn what, where and how or with whom?*" *significantly support this process of assuming responsibility.*

Self-organized learning entails competence-oriented, methodic-didactic access to learning content in the teaching-learning concept of SoL. It is embedded in an *overall pedagogical concept* that is supported by various process-accompanying measures (e.g., learning offices, learning logbook, individual performance assessments, ...). It requires a *professional pedagogical approach* that enables learners to assume shared responsibility for their learning process and success (Reutter et al., 2007) but does not make teachers shirk responsibility.

### **The Role of Teachers**

In a constructivist understanding of self-organized learning, it is assumed that teachers have an *advisory and support-related function* in the learning process (Möller, 2012).

The role of the teacher is differentiated to the extent that he or she can take on various tasks through a possible interplay of linked teaching and self-organized learning units. From guiding, instructing, and leading learning processes to supporting, advising, and helping in self-control processes, learners are individually advised and supported to achieve self-competence and through shared responsibility for the learning process.

Self-organized learning processes require not only the willingness of teachers to delegate responsibility but also the corresponding *learning opportunities*. In the teaching and learning concept of SoL, teachers therefore provide competence-oriented task sets that account for different learning conditions. The curriculum describes these as differentiated, goal-oriented learning opportunities that account for different prior experiences, interests, and learning preferences, enable individual learning approaches, and offer new introductions and incentives time and again (BMB, 2016, p. 10). With regard to the *suitability* of tasks and *learning-related taxonomic principles* (Bloom, Englehart, Furst, Hill & Krathwohl, 1956; Astleitner, 2006; Webb, 2002), it seems equally important to provide diverse and differently complex learning opportunities that not only enable different learning approaches but also include challenging and meaningful but not overwhelming tasks. Tasks that provide emotional and motivational stimulation (Seifried & Sembill, 2007) so that learners can construct knowledge themselves.

### **The Role of Learners**

From a constructivist point of view (Friedrich & Mandl, 1995; Siebert, 2005), the role of learners in the teaching-learning concept of SoL is an extremely *active one* since self-organized teaching-learning concepts focus *on the learner rather than on the material* (Reutter et al., 2007). They organise their learning processes independently insofar as within *stipulated, external structures* and *content and time-related specifications*, they manage their learning, for example, in terms of time and content, formulate work objectives, organize and carry out their own learning actions, and conduct monitoring and reflection. They also decide to what extent they need assistance in this respect or when they want to obtain feedback on their learning success (monitoring of learning success). Reflection on learning processes occurs in a designated *learning logbook* that also provides insight into self- and external assessments for organizing learning processes.

By providing diverse and differentiated learning opportunities, teachers make it possible for learners to recognize their own individual strengths and to develop them further in a targeted manner. Assistance is particularly successful in *learning offices*, where learners receive individual support in small groups or through *peer learning* (learning buddies) by first questioning fellow students before receiving support from the teacher. Learners take part in the learning process of others. *Participation* is therefore an important key word to evolve from the consumer role into the responsibility role and to learn together or from each other (Reutter et al., 2007; Geier, Schober & Niederreiter, 2018).

## Organization in Academic Practice

For the organizational realization and successful implementation of the teaching-learning concept of SoL in everyday teaching, time lines are used that are fed by a division of lesson quotas of individual subjects and are reflected in student schedules in interaction (e.g., 50:50 model - i.e., 50% linked lessons, 50% self-organized learning time, organized in double units) with traditional lessons. Direct instruction and self-organized learning are thus implemented as complementary, mutually supplementary forms of teaching and learning (Mattes, 2011) in subjects.

## Conclusions

The acquisition of coping skills (social and personal skills) requires *social learning environments* in which learners can "mirror" each other (Reutter et al., 2007, p. 43). This supports resilience when learners take a stand, formulate opinions, or reflect on their learning more often (Reutter et al., 2007). In this understanding, the focus of self-organized learning is more on the *professional pedagogical approach*, how teachers approach learners, advise learners, and support the learning process than on designing or structuring the learning form itself. Successful self-organized learning requires not only shared responsibility between teachers and learners but also allowing, letting go, and trusting learners without constant monitoring. Thus, it is not primarily a question of the degree of self-control or of defined degrees of freedom in learning but of the added value that learners actively shape their learning process and learning success themselves. So, this added value does not result from the learning setting as an organizational form but from the underlying pedagogical understanding (Reutter et al., 2007). It means giving learners that *confidence* to acquire professional, personal, and social skills in a self-organized way. Confidence that is also fundamental to the willingness to engage in lifelong learning.

To successfully anchor self-organized learning in academic practice as a teaching-learning concept in the long run, it is essential for it to be integrated into an overall strategy in collaboration with a school's *quality assurance*. Important for organizational development processes here in particular are openness to results and very fundamental phases of pausing and balancing (Reutter et al., 2007) so as not to lose sight of the goal of "self-organized learners." After all, even if impact analyses and evaluations are not always clearly verifiable (Schüßler, 2004), they can be used for continuous development and to safeguard action.

## Foodnotes

<sup>1</sup> The teaching-learning concept of SoL (Self-organized Learning) is described here in its pure form, knowing fully well that self-organized teaching-learning concepts are not or cannot be found in their perfection in practice since forms of organization generally cannot dispense with every specification for structuring learning and can occur independently of external conditions (Reutter, Ambos & Klein, 2007, p. 25).

<sup>2</sup> determined by the will

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