

An Analysis of the Characteristics of Self-Directed Learners and Strategies to Enhance Self-Directed Learning in Education Systems: Transcending Boundaries

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Abstract

Education can allow individuals to transcend boundaries of space, identity, and culture by empowering learners with the ability to pursue self-directed, lifelong learning. Valuable new meanings and understandings can be created by the interaction between self-motivated, self-directed learners, communities, and a wide range of organizations (Rogers, 2004). A shift away from traditional, teacher-centered power relations towards learner-centered approaches can significantly enhance learning and create the intrinsic motivation necessary to enable effective, dynamic, lifelong learning processes. Intrinsic motivation is an essential element of self-directed learning (Cross, 1992). Self-directed learners are skilled at teaching others and at overcoming barriers to communication and mutual understanding. Self-motivated learners understand the viewpoints of other learners and are skillful at sharing experiences and knowledge (Kalantzis, 2003). Mentors play a useful role as guides and advisors in self-directed learning. One of the most important, fundamental goals of education may be to create the conditions that lead to intrinsic motivation and a lifetime of self-directed learning (Lewis, 1995). Self-directed learning is becoming increasingly important in the global economy and international society and is associated with adult learners that exhibit common characteristics. Self-reflection is a key aspect of lifelong learning and leads to a better understanding of one's own strengths and weaknesses. Self-directed learners are engaged emotionally in the learning process and are able to monitor and adjust their own learning. Learner-centered learning strategies can be employed to enhance and promote the traits of self-directed learners and lifelong learning for the benefit of individuals and society.

Keywords: lifelong learning, adult learning, self-directed learning, intrinsic motivation, empowerment

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Introduction

A shift away from traditional, teacher-centered power relations towards learner-centered approaches can significantly enhance learning and create the intrinsic motivation necessary to enable effective, dynamic, lifelong learning processes. Intrinsic motivation is an essential element of self-directed learning (Cross, 1992). Self-directed learners are skilled at teaching others and at overcoming barriers to communication and mutual understanding. One of the most important, fundamental goals of education may be to create the conditions that lead to intrinsic motivation and a lifetime of self-directed learning (Lewis, 1995). Self-directed learning is becoming increasingly important in the global economy and international society and is associated with adult learners that exhibit common characteristics. Self-reflection is a key aspect of lifelong learning and leads to a better understanding of one's own strengths and weaknesses. Self-directed learners are engaged emotionally in the learning process and are able to monitor and adjust their own learning. Learner-centered learning strategies can be employed to enhance and promote the traits of self-directed learners and lifelong learning for the benefit of individuals and society.

Self-directed learning and lifelong learning are closely related concepts. Self-reflection is an intrinsic element of lifelong learning and leads to a better understanding of one's own strengths and weaknesses, abilities and limits. People learn more about themselves as they learn more about the world and other people during a lifetime of formal and informal study and daily learning. Self-directed learning is becoming increasingly important in the workplace and is associated with adult learners that exhibit common characteristics. Learner-centered learning strategies can be employed to enhance the traits of self-directed learners (Butcher & Sumner, 2011). The educational philosophies of humanism and connectivism may serve as useful theoretical frameworks for examining and developing self-directed learning. Numerous barriers as well as opportunities exist in lifelong learning.

Learner Autonomy: Essential Characteristics of Self-Directed Learners

Self-directed learners exhibit many common and measurable characteristics. Intrinsic motivation, the ability to select personal goals, self-discipline, the ability to self-assess, and metacognitive skills are key characteristics of self-directed learners (King, 2011). Self-directed learners are engaged emotionally in the learning process, maintain high levels of self-generated motivation to pursue their self-determined goals and

objectives, and are able to monitor and adjust their own learning. Independent learners possess high levels of determination, perseverance, and self-motivation (Cross, 1992). Motivation is a common characteristic of self-directed learners. Proactive, extroverted personality types may naturally tend to engage in independent, self-directed learning, and ambitious entrepreneurs and high-level managers and leaders of organizations are often highly self-motivated and self-directed in their personal learning objectives and goals (Raemdonck, Rien van, Valcke, Segers, & Thijssen, 2012). Although some learners may naturally tend enthusiastically towards self-directed learning as a result of their personality type, all learners may be guided towards effective independent learning strategies.

Intrinsic motivation is the force which allows students to pursue independent, self-directed learning. One of the most important, fundamental goals of education may be to create conditions that lead to intrinsic motivation and a life-time of self-directed learning. Rogers (2004) believes that self-directed learners initiate their own learning by finding out what they need to learn and how, by planning and monitoring their learning using various resources, and maintain their learning by recording it and working with peers and mentors. Mentors may play an important role as guides and advisors in self-directed learning. Effective self-directed learning requires some degree of expert guidance (Hatcher, 1997). Self-directed learning does not occur spontaneously in a vacuum. The surrounding environment, society, culture and educational institutions may serve to promote or inhibit the key characteristics of autonomous learning processes.

Strategies to Promote and Enhance Self-Directed Learning

A wide range of practical strategies and policies may be employed to facilitate the development of intrinsically motivated, self-directed learning. Self-directed learners should be given opportunities to teach others, thereby reinforcing their own knowledge and understanding. Group work assignments provide students with opportunities to share and to explain what they have learned to others, thereby reinforcing their own understanding of subject matter and confidence in their own abilities (Douglas & Morris, 2014). Collaborative learning tasks enhance self-directed learning. Interactive online environments provide valuable opportunities for a variety of collaborative learning projects (Bryan, 2015). Collaboration with peers can foster self-directed learning and increase the intrinsic motivation to learn.

Blogs are one form of effective, interactive, technology-based communication that can be used to create a collaborative community of learning and to promote highly reflective learning and self-assessment (Robertson, 2011). The sharing of personal experience provides numerous opportunities for self-reflection. Personalizing learning tasks may assist learners in encoding new knowledge within existing cognitive frameworks (Butcher & Sumner, 2011). Social interaction can provide a catalyst for intrinsic motivation and deep, reflective learning. Self-directed research involving the use of social media can promote the development and improvement of complex knowledge management skills and of self-monitoring, self-assessment, and goal selection (Rampai, 2015). Effective self-directed learning requires some degree of control of the selection of learning goals. Flexible, modular software programs in foreign language study and other subjects allow individual learners to learn at their own pace and to transfer independent learning and knowledge management skills to other areas (Morrison, 2011). The manner in which students learn and the acquisition of independent study skills are as important as the subject matter and facts being learned.

Self-directed learners are competent at teaching others what they know (Kalantzis, 2003). Self-directed learners understand the viewpoints of other learners and are skillful at sharing experience and knowledge. Curricula need to address a wide range of different learner backgrounds and life experiences. The life experiences of learners can be used as a useful and motivating learning resource in independent learning (La Porte, 2015). Online newsgroups provide an ideal platform for self-directed learners to share their experiences and knowledge with a large audience for the benefit of all participants.

Learner-centered environments require respect for the needs of learners. Negative educational experiences may prevent the development of self-directed learning (Cross, 1992). Emotions play a significant role in successful independent learning. Learners have an emotional and psychological need to study in a supportive learning environment (Gordon, 2004). A supportive learning community of peers and mentors, whether local or online, can help to facilitate self-directed learning. E-learning can be applied to meet the educational and life needs of lifelong learners in many areas. Learner portfolios allow students to reflect deeply on the learning process (King, 2011). E-learning can be used to provide additional resources for professional development in many fields and to assist employees in building a network of valuable contacts. Strategies to enhance self-directed learning should be learner-centered, community-based, and relevant to the personal and professional needs of lifelong learners.

Humanism and Connectivism: Theoretical Insights into Self-Directed Learning Processes

Responsibility for learning outcomes should be given to self-directed learners (Cross, 1992). Just as learners are ultimately responsible for their own decisions in life, they must also learn to be responsible for directing and adjusting their own learning processes and goals. Learners need to approach self-directed learning in a professional, systematic fashion and to assume responsibility for their own learning outcomes (Hatcher, 1997). Educators should respect the uniqueness of each individual learner and enhance their teaching practices with theories of human development that promote the growth of individual learners. Self-directed learners require a high degree of control of their own learning and selection of materials and assignments. Adult learners have a unique and extensive life experience and tend to be focused on solving practical problems (Cross, 1992). Effective theories of self-directed learning focus on the needs and experiences of learners and the development of learner autonomy and problem-solving skills. Connectivism and humanism, which emphasize the importance of intrinsic motivation and self-actualization, are examples of educational philosophies that may provide a useful theoretical framework for self-directed learning (Conradie, 2014). Technology is causing learners to become both more independent and more interconnected with other learners in a wide range of online learning communities. Connectivism provides a theoretical framework for an understanding of the manner in which technology is transforming traditional modes of learning and creating meaning in powerful new forms of interactive, collaborative communication.

Theories of self-directed adult learning should also address the biological, social, and psychological developmental factors of adults. Older learners can integrate new information more deeply into existing knowledge and provide more accurate and detailed responses than younger learners (Cross, 1992). The wisdom from life experience can be incorporated into independent learning processes. Increased levels of discipline, persistence, confidence, and motivation to continue learning and to acquire new skills may result from successful self-directed learning (Davis, 2015). The promotion of self-directed learning in formal education is an essential component of successful lifelong learning programs. Learning may be more effective when learners possess some degree of autonomy and control over the selection, focus, and processing of information (Todd & Douglas, 2012). Theories of self-directed learning should also include the central importance of the individual learner and of freedom of choice, self-expression, and creativity which drives innovation.

Transcending Boundaries: Opportunities and Barriers to Self-Directed Lifelong Learning

The number of self-directed adult learners is increasing each year in many countries and some companies are paying part or all of the tuition expenses of flexible distance learning programs. Opportunities for self-directed, lifelong learning are steadily increasing in educational institutions and in online learning environments (Davis, 2015). Distance learning programs and online courses are providing more learning opportunities for self-directed adult learners. People who cannot leave their home due to health problems or disabilities are able to stay in contact with a large online community of friends, peers, colleagues, and educational support services. Technology and free or relatively low-cost, collaborative online learning environments are revolutionizing traditional learning processes and creating unprecedented opportunities for access to higher education. Students who learn how to engage effectively in self-directed, lifelong learning are able to transcend multiple psychological, cultural, societal, educational, and professional barriers and to achieve numerous challenging goals.

Barriers to self-directed learning include factors such as different forms of discrimination, financial barriers, and time constraints due to work and family duties. The shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered modes of instruction and learning may be challenging for both teachers and students and may require a transitional phase (Hatcher, 1997). Some of the greatest barriers to continuous self-directed adult learning may be psychological; some adults may lack motivation, self-esteem or confidence in their own learning abilities, and they may succumb to negative peer pressure. Administrative barriers may exist in some learning environments. Self-assessment and course assessment processes can provide valuable feedback to enhance self-directed learning environments and to remove administrative barriers to independent learning and creativity (Douglas & Morris, 2014). Self-directed learners need to acquire critical thinking skills and a minimum level of computer and social media literacy. Lack of technical skills and lack of access to online collaboration tools may impede the development of optimal levels of self-directed learning (Bryan, 2015). High, sustained levels of motivation are important in the creation and maintenance of self-directed learning and can help to overcome financial, social, cultural, and psychological barriers. The intrinsic motivation to learn may become a self-generating force once students become skilled at self-directed learning.

Conclusion

Self-directed learners exhibit many common characteristics including high levels of self-generated motivation, confidence, and a focus on goals. Learner-centered strategies and learning communities may promote and enhance the common traits of self-directed learners. Learning theories should address the specific social, psychological, and emotional needs of adult learners and the influence of technology on learning processes. Online learning is increasing opportunities and resources for self-directed learning, allowing learners to overcome many traditional barriers (Bryan, 2015). Intrinsic motivation can be a powerful force in overcoming the many barriers to self-directed, self-generated, autonomous lifelong learning, and methods to promote the intrinsic motivation to learn should be incorporated into formal education. Students who discover the joy of learning are able to make significant contributions to their communities and to the body of human knowledge over a productive and rewarding lifetime of research.

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