

5

Successful Learning and Teaching Approaches: Self Reflection as a Bridge to Self-Directed and Lifelong Learning

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Abstract

With the advent of the global economy and global education and with the need to adapt to changing lifestyles and value systems, lifelong learning, including the skills of self-direction and self-reflection, have gained new importance with educators and

employers. One of the major forces generating the need for life-long learning is the rapid change in all spheres of life. Self-directed learning is becoming a necessary skill to adapt to these changes. Educators and educational establishments are looking into innovative approaches to educating adults, paying close attention to non-traditional forms for learning and methods of delivery. In this way self-inquiry and self-evaluation are needed at the beginning, during, and after instruction. Educators can enhance lifelong learning among their students by facilitating the development of characteristics and skills, such as goal setting, taking responsibility for learning, understanding selves as learners, reflection, and self-assessment. This chapter investigates successful approaches to self-direction in teaching and learning in English-language courses.

Introduction

As previous studies show, the ability to learn and adapt are related (Chuprina, 2001; 2003). Both learning and adaptation skills have become survival skills in the age of continuing change. Furthermore, the research in the area of Self-Directed Learning (SDL) suggests that self-awareness is a cornerstone of lifelong learning that should be encouraged and modeled in academia/training (Chuprina, 2004; 2007). Another important advantage of SDL is its capacity to promote ongoing reflective thought and responsibility for learning (Caffarella, 1993).

Knowles (1975) provides a comprehensive definition of SDL: "Individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes" (p. 18). Garrison (1997) adds that SDL focuses on the external management of the learning process where the learner decides what to learn and how to approach the learning task. He offers a further clarification of SDL as "an approach where learners are motivated to assume personal responsibility and collaborative control of the cognitive (self-monitoring) and contex-

tual (self-management) processes in constructing and confirming meaningful and worthwhile learning outcomes" (p. 18).

It is also necessary to note that while self-teaching and self-direction imply a degree of independence or autonomy, the learning that occurs through self-teaching does not generally take place in isolation (Tough, 1966). In fact, SDL implies good communication and collaboration skills, and according to Brockett & Hiemstra (1991), "Those individuals who engage in self-teaching are highly likely to seek the assistance of others, such as close friends and relatives, subject-matter experts and fellow learners" (p. 41).

Behaviors and characteristics which support lifelong learning include taking risks, trying new things, self-reflection, listening, gathering information, and being open to new ideas and information (Kotter, 1996). These characteristics and learning skills do not come on their own and should be explicitly taught. Faculty should build into the curriculum encouragement for students to engage in the SDL process, self assessment, and self reflection opportunities.

Background

Guglielmino, Gray, Le Arvary, Asen, Goldstein, Fran Kamin, Nicoll, Patrick, Shellabarger, & Snowberger (2009) stated,

Learners benefit greatly from a content base on which to build, but if we allow the learning of content to crowd out time for reflection on learning and exploration of individually-selected topics that create excitement about learning and build skills and attitudes that will support lifelong learning, we will do a disservice to our learners and our cultures. Our times require continuous lifelong learning (p. 26).

One of the compelling attributes of the SDL approach in formal, content-based, and structured academic environments is the opportunity for students to become conscientious learners through reflection on their process of learning. Bringing SDL into

the curriculum of those institutions that are dedicated to developing lifelong learners has a potential for creating the balance between learning by the individual, the pressures of testing, and the penalties for not reaching the standards. Encouraging self-direction does not mean ignoring accountability; self-direction in learning exists along a continuum in each individual. More than that, each learning experience offers different levels of opportunity for self-direction (Guglielmino, et al., 2009) with personal and collective growth.

As practice shows, in traditional educational settings such skills as learning how to learn, how to solve problems, and how to use reflection and self-assessment through self-inquiry activities have not been part of the curricula; they are expected to be part of a student's existing tools. Reflection and assessment of one's own learning process are two of the most important skills for lifelong learning. Reflection Practice (RP) includes a proactive examination of one's goals and practices. It helps students construct their knowledge based on their previous experience and incorporate new ideas and concepts to reach the goals they set for themselves. Self-reflection also prompts the learner to think about the mode of learning that fits best in the given situation.

Through reflection on their learning process, students provide valuable information on their learning preferences, their strengths and weakness, and the goals they want to achieve. This informs the teacher as to what materials and methods of knowledge delivery to choose to address the variety in interests of the participants. Teachers become facilitators and advisors in the learning process and also provide resources to meet the students' learning needs.

It is self-reflection that integrates intellectual and emotional human development and provides meaning and purpose in learning and academic and professional pursuit. This connection allows people to maintain vigor in learning and keeps students motivated and responsible for their own learning.

Another way to approach the development of the characteristics and skills that contribute to lifelong learning is to include reflection in the learning process in SDL contracts to help students set their learning goals for the quarter, academic year, or career and life paths.

A misconception about SDL and self-reflection is that teachers and classmates should be excluded. In fact, Cunningham (2001) noted that reflective practice draws upon the input of other learners and is collective by nature, which creates a basis for partnerships in learning in the classroom. By creating an atmosphere of collaboration in class, teachers model how to relate to others in the class and in real-life situations. Language learning, for example, creates an atmosphere for social interaction within and beyond the classroom; therefore, it is an imperative for ELP instructors to use real-life situations and authentic materials for classroom reading and discussion. The process of working together and being involved in conversations and discussions in the class enhances students' social, reflective, and lifelong learning skills.

Practices, Examples, Issues

Self-assessment and self-directedness are embedded in the City University of Seattle (CityU) Academic Model. This Academic Model focuses on student learning, which is "carefully designed by faculty to encourage self-directed learning within an appropriately defined structure of expectations. Students are actively encouraged to define and take responsibility for their own contributions to the learning process with the understanding that their engagement is critical for substantive learning to take place" (City University of Seattle, Academic Model).

Selected ELP courses include graded and non-graded reflective assignments. At the beginning of the term of study, students are asked to reflect on their current knowledge and skills, set goals, and then assess their learning progress in the middle and at the end of the term as well as discuss what areas they would like to explore and improve further on their own after the end of the course. The self-assessment assignments are graded on completeness and depth of reflection to promote candid and non-defensive student reflection. Some of the reflective assignments include:

- Online discussion forums in which students are asked to reflect on their own skills at the beginning of the term of

study and identify areas of strength and improvement. The students are asked to think about their initial knowledge and skills. At the end of the course, students participate in an end-of-course forum to reflect on their learning and to discuss it with their peers and the instructor. Online asynchronous forums are particularly beneficial in that they allow each student to get peer and instructor reinforcement, encouragement, and suggestions. Each student is required to post a reflection and respond to at least one of his or her peers. To keep the reflections and responses focused on course objectives, guidelines for reflections and peer responses are provided. Once the responses are posted, the instructor has the opportunity to provide feedback to each student.

- Worksheets with questions to promote depth of self-reflection.
- Initial assessments and diagnostics administered by the instructor. After completing these assessments, students are asked to reflect on how they did in addition to receiving feedback from the faculty.

The reflection assignments are designed according to the learning outcomes of the course. For example, in an academic and professional writing course, students are asked to think about the papers and the academic and professional writing tasks they completed in the past, the challenges they encountered, how they dealt with the challenges, and what they learned from the process. The students are also asked to discuss their strengths and the areas where they need improvement as writers. At the end of the quarter, students are asked to review their beginning-of-term reflections and goals and to assess their learning in the course. In reading classes the students are asked to think about their reading skills and challenges and set goals to improve their reading speed and comprehension. At the end of the term, students reflect on their growth and set future goals. In grammar, listening, and speaking classes, students complete similar reflective activities as relevant to the course content.

Having students complete reflection assignments at the beginning of the term allows faculty to tailor instruction. Most CityU courses include required assessments developed by the department but allow for some instructor-determined assignments. Faculty can use this opportunity to create assignments that address student learning needs and interests. Furthermore, faculty can adjust the required assessments and select topics for them based on students' initial self-assessments. For example, if one of the course curriculum requirements is to complete a case study, the instructor may select a topic relevant to student needs or interests.

The materials, textbooks, and additional resources are also selected to respond to student interests and learning needs. The texts and exercises in the textbooks selected for all the levels of English learners help students acquire skills they identified as lacking in addition to the skills required to complete the course. Integration of the required and desired knowledge and skills plays an effective role in maintaining interest and motivation among students.

ELP instructors also attempt to facilitate the development of learning skills and reflective practice on one's learning process in students along with language learning and focus on the content. Additional techniques available for teachers to invite students to participate in self-reflection and self-evaluation are as follows:

- In-class and on-line journaling with questions that help students reflect on their learning goals, learning needs, and the learning process; self-reflective writing brings in connectivity between the mind and emotions.
- Course learning outcomes included in syllabi underlining the importance of learning and study skills, which provide meaning and purpose in learning the course content.
- Rubrics for written assignments, oral presentations, and constructive participation, providing students with information on the requirements in each category, such as content knowledge, organization, quality of writing, research, ethical citations, presentation, and other components. This provides specific expectations for presentations, at the

same time allowing for creativity and self-expression in the students' assignments.

- Classroom Assessments Technique (CAT) forms, which are available on the Faculty Portal, contain specific questions leading students through the self-inquiry process in a certain subject (e.g., reading; listening and speaking; and grammar and writing) as well as give students room to respond to open questions and the opportunity to offer suggestions to teachers on the class organization, content delivery, and the teaching-learning process.
- Mid-term and end-of-course student evaluations, which allow instructors to gather information regarding whether each student is learning and allow students to reflect on their instruction based on their feedback. These student reflections help teachers make adjustments to their curriculum, lesson plans, and the choice of classroom materials to meet students' learning needs.

Due to the multi-level character of the majority of language classes, instructors use individualized approaches. The information shared by students through their self-inquiry and reflection helps ELP instructors maintain an environment conducive for learning.

Self-reflective practices can offer important input for teaching, learning, and planning. In their book *Self-Direction in Adult Learning: Perspectives on Theory, Research, and Practice*, Brocket & Hiemstra (1991) suggested the following steps to enhance self-direction in learning and learner responsibility through the self-reflection and planning process to achieve desirable learning outcomes:

1. identifying needs, objectives, and benefits from the learning activity;
2. identifying resources, specifying learning activities, and establishing criteria for successful accomplishments;
3. carrying out the learning activities, analyzing obtained information, and recording progress towards some personal changes;

4. evaluating the learning outcomes and how they can be used in a real-life situation/self-planning (1991, p. 106-107).

Instructors provide structure and find time throughout the course for reflective practice as they discuss the importance of goal setting, encourage students to set their personal goals, and make plans to achieve them. By doing this every week of the quarter, instructors ensure that self-evaluation skills and reflective practice become part of the learning process.

Students are also directed to think about their study habits and learning preferences by answering questions such as:

What time of the day do you learn the best?

Do you learn better by yourself or together with other students/friends?

How do you learn better? When you just listen or write it down?

Which specific language skills would you like to improve: listening, reading, speaking, or writing?

Hiemstra (2000) offered the following list of the educational changes that are taking place in the American society:

- **Continuing Education Unit (CEU)**—A unit for measuring participation in a variety of formal and informal learning activities (ten classroom hours of instruction equals one CEU). In some instances this unit replaces the college credit.
- **Learning modules**—Short credit or noncredit blocks of learning in which a person can participate independently at home, at work, or at community learning centers.
- **Credit for experience**—The granting of college credit for community service, life experiences, or occupational experiences.
- **Credit by testing**—The granting of a certain amount of credit, usually college credit, through an examination program. The College Proficiency Examination Program (CPEP) and the College-level Examination Programs (CLEP) are the most widely used systems.

- **Non-traditional college offerings**—The offering of mini-courses, internships, travel courses, intensive summer session courses, and weekend courses for college credit.
- **External degree—or the open-university or campus-without-walls approach**— this usually refers to the granting of a college degree based on a variety of learning experiences, formal courses, and/or assisted activities.
- **Online learning**—The use of computers, the Internet, and computer-mediated conversations permits study in the home, at work, or in neighborhood resource centers, sometimes combined with some type of tutorial service, to present learning opportunities on a variety of topics.
- **Learning contracts**—The mutual negotiation between an educational facilitator-expert and a learner on some specified learning activity or even a full course for credit.
- **The adult learning project**—A deliberate effort to learn something new, primarily through self-initiated effort and typically outside of any institutionalized cassette or CD-Rom instruction.
- **Voucher system for learning**—Each person is entitled to a certain number of years of education, but the education can be obtained any time that help is needed. Although not yet a reality in the United States, this form of learning takes place in various parts of the world.
- **Open entrance/open exit**—A person will be able to enter the school setting for a self-determined period of time and then exit, often with a plan for later reentry and study.
- **Facilitative self-training workshops**—Retreat-like settings in which individuals are helped by resource specialists to experience self-growth.

Such nontraditional activities, alternative learning modes, or innovative educational changes are based primarily on the assumption that lifelong learning is a natural circumstance within which autonomous, self-directed learners participate according to their needs and interests. More change can be expected and must happen if education is to meet a goal of truly helping people with a lifetime of challenge (Hiemstra, 2000).

The library is another resource which facilitates students in lifelong learning. Librarians at City University of Seattle actively help new students in their use of the library's resources and teach students how to conduct research. Instructors make a point of organizing tours to the library and help students find books for reading based on their level of English and their interests. This collaboration with the library plays a significant role in the development of the students' lifelong learning skills and lays a foundation for further success.

Implications for Training Faculty

Hiemstra (2000) suggests that those who work with students must learn to think of themselves more as educators instead of fairly narrow subject matter specialists. By facilitating student learning and helping them learn to use the many resources now available electronically, instructors promote attitudes of and commitment to lifelong learning in their students.

Faculty too might benefit from these approaches to learning and teaching. Faculty self-reflection on their teaching beliefs and practices can make more transparent the potential gaps in their approaches to teaching. Both students and faculty might benefit from such self-reflection.

As pointed out by Manz & Manz (1991), "Self-directed learning is in the heart of human resource effectiveness, yet it is perhaps the most overlooked form of learning" (p. 3). It is also truly related to higher education and professional training. The many applications and opportunities for future research and practice include:

- SDL skills for the new faculty orientation
- SDL approaches among faculty and staff
- SDL skills training for business managers
- SDL approaches and skills for teachers in training and in their first years of practice

To disseminate the practice, the following steps can be offered:

1. Organizing Train-the-trainer seminars and providing practical application handbooks.

2. Offering professional development workshops to interested faculty.
3. Starting study group(s) where experienced and novice teachers can exchange their perspectives on teaching and also share self-directed learning plans for professional growth.
4. Encouraging peer evaluations and mentor programs which include reflection on the teaching-learning process so that instructors can internalize the steps and skills for self-directed learning and teach these skills explicitly to their students.

One of the recent innovations is the use of e-portfolios for educators and students. E-portfolios allow one to maintain a portfolio as a lifelong project, collecting samples of work and assignments which demonstrate their level of expertise.

Future Research and Directions

The topics of self-reflection and lifelong learning in academia are very important and timely for both researchers and practitioners. Though the topics have been well researched within the last twenty-five years (IJSDL publications, n.d.), it would be interesting to research how faculty are engaged in reflective practices and in self-directed learning, whether for professional or personal development.

Since it has become clear that perspective on the meaning of self-direction in learning differs among cultures, it is essential for researchers and practitioners to understand the degree to which language reflects culture and vice versa and the degree to which language affects one's thinking (Boucoulas, 2009; Ho & Crookall, 1995). For example, collaboration and interdependence are part of the self-directed approach in Asian cultures (Nah, 2000; Sinclair, 1997). Therefore, another interesting area of research is to study the phenomena of self-directed learning and self-reflection from a sociolinguistic approach. The knowledge of how students from different cultures and language backgrounds construct the mean-

ing of self-directed learning in academia would help educators who work in the global environment understand the SDL application across cultures.

Another area of research interest includes self-reflection and self-assessment as part of SDL approaches and in computer-aided second-language learning, especially writing, where students have an opportunity to save their writing assignments together with teacher and peer feedback. It would be of value to explore the incorporation of self-assessment and reflection in ESL computer-assisted classes. A similar study on self-assessment and reflection in computer-aided ESL classes conducted in Sweden (Sullivan & Lindgren, 2002) showed that this method is not restricted to an L2 environment but can be equally effective in other learning situations.

Conclusion

Self-assessment and self-reflection practices conducted by students can provide a bridge between accountability-based assessment and formative assessments conducted by the faculty. Both student and teacher assessments are needed to give a clearer and bigger picture of the learning processes and the learning environment.

The practice of using learning reflections and self-evaluation techniques within the curriculum of language teaching is highly valuable for the academic setting and supports a shift from teacher-centered learning towards learner-centered approaches. Students who reflect on their learning and participate in self-evaluation to identify their areas of strength as well as their areas which need improvement tend to be more successful not only in academic programs but also in professional and personal life. This phenomenon can be explained by the fact that self-directed learning brings about intrinsic motivation for learning and feelings of competence. More than that, self-reflection connects the mind to what matters and integrates intellectual and emotional domains in human development.

Where teachers and advisors become facilitators and participants in the knowledge transfer and learning process, students take charge of their learning. To facilitate self-directed learning skills and allow students to take responsibility for their learning, faculty have to know the principles of adult learning theories, including self-reflection and self-evaluation skills, and model these skills in their classes.

Guglielmino et al. (2009) state that in order to prepare leaders, workers, citizens, and specialists capable of working within the context of the globalization of the economy and education, it is imperative that individuals responsible for education and human resource development incorporate the development of self-directed lifelong learners as a primary aim of their programs.

Faculty need to become facilitators in the learning process, with attention given both to the content and the process of learning within the curriculum and instruction. Since the development of self-directed learning skills is a lifelong pursuit for teachers and students, the best teachers are, first of all, self-directed learners. It is essential in an age of rapid change and global education to help learners engage in reflection on their learning and make feedback a part of the learning process.

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