

6

Self-Direction in Adult Learning: Best Practices

Gina Smith, EdD

Pete Anthony, EdD

City University of Seattle

School of Management

Abstract

An adaptive and flexible methodology that encompasses a blend of effective practices is necessary in self-directed learning. The characteristics of self-directed learners are identified, and innovative methods to promote learning for this category of highly-motivated adult learners are presented, even for those with barriers to overcome. Both theoretical views and practical applications are discussed.

Introduction

Adults become self-directed learners to fulfill a personal and intrinsic desire to gain knowledge. The reasons behind self-directed learning are varied and dimensional, but the key element is an individually-motivated desire to learn. However, no two learners approach self-directed learning in the same way (Brockert & Hiemstra, 1991), and this requires numerous methods and mechanisms to support individual lifelong learning. Alternative learning delivery, such as online or hybrid learning environments, can promote self-directed learning and offer innovative structures for those individuals driven to seek new knowledge. A number of varying theoretical insights help to explain the advantages and barriers associated with self-direction in adult learning.

Curriculum designers and university faculty can best take advantage of motivated adult learners by understanding the different issues related to their learning. Despite the wide range of differences among adult students, self-directed learners exhibit common characteristics. Penland (1979) described self-directed learners as ones who set their own pace by using their own style of learning within their own structures. Knowles (2002) points out that adult learners need to know what they are learning, why it is important, and how it will be useful. A number of opinions offer the best ways to administer and deliver education programs for self-directed adults, but they seem to share the same need to provide motivated learners with the knowledge and skills that they can apply directly and quickly in the pursuit of personal goals.

Employing the proper curriculum design and delivery methods is a key to meeting the needs of self-directed learners. Much focus has been paid to the way that instruction is delivered, as student-focused, activity-driven, authentic instruction has emerged to take the place of the traditional lecture-centric model (King, 1993). This shift has been driven by an emergent belief that real learning only happens when students have the ability to engage with material directly. "When students are engaged in actively processing information by reconstructing that information in such

new and personally meaningful ways, they are far more likely to remember it and apply it in new situations" (King, 1993, p. 30).

Curricular Design in Support of Self-Directed Learning

The needs of the self-directed adult student are evolving. These learners prefer a flexible learning strategy that includes the ability to begin the educational process immediately versus waiting for a structured class to begin. Self-directed students enjoy learning and have a positive attitude toward the learning process; however, those who are self-directed need innovative educational structures. If accommodations related to their learning styles are provided, these learners may go further in their education and have fewer negative feelings about required traditional classes (Cross, 1981).

At the university level, an important aspect of authentic instruction is in the design of the curriculum. Opportunities for self-direction need to be built into course activities. Assessments should be structured in a consistent and cohesive manner that focuses on the needs of the learner. One method for ensuring that learner-centered content is part of both the program and its courses is to include it by incorporating all four stages of the Suskie (2004) Model. Learning goals, or program and course outcomes, can be established that allow students to take an active role in their own learning. Assessments that are authentic and learner-centered should be a central part of this process. Rubrics that are aligned with authentic instruction should seek evidence of learning relative to the outcomes. Lastly, results from program assessments can be applied to the continuous improvement of both the program and its courses to ensure that instructors are properly providing authentic, student-centered opportunities for self-directed learning, with the purpose of helping students achieve their learning goals. Inclusion of opportunities for self-direction in all parts of the design, delivery, and even the review process can be a valuable method of ensuring that self-direction

opportunities remain at the forefront during the program and course development process.

Characteristics of the Self-Directed Learner

The actual mechanics of learner-centered curriculum design that accommodate self-direction can be difficult given the variability in learning styles. Having a better understanding of the specific characteristics of the self-directed learner is useful in the curriculum design process.

The relationship between teacher and learner should reflect mutual respect and both should view it as a facilitative partnership rather than a teacher-student relationship (Maehl, 2000). The experience of adult learners needs to be recognized by the teacher since self-concept has been formed by previous experiences (Maehl, 2000). Additionally the dimension of self-direction is perpetuated by societal conditions. Maehl (2000) states that rapid population growth is propelling adults to independently seek out new knowledge due to “the increasingly competitive and globally oriented economy, the increasing availability of learning resources due to technology, and the now permanent need to engage in learning” (p. 16).

Rubenson’s Expectancy-Valence Model is applied to adult learning since it represents the way in which adults weigh their likely success in organized education in terms of expectations and preparedness (Cross, 1981). Adults considering an educational program must consider all factors related to going back to school, such as cost in time and money as opposed to income that may be earned upon the completion of the degree. The adult student must also consider time away from family. Each of these factors will impact the level of self-direction and motivation that an adult brings to the learning process.

Boshier’s Congruency Model is similar to Rubenson’s model since the motivation behind learning is based on the interaction between internal and external factors (Cross, 1981). Each of these is directly related to environmental factors. Boshier expands this theory by relating the variables not only to success but also to fail-

ure. If an individual has a negative self-image, he/she is more likely to drop out of an adult learning situation (Cross, 1981).

Self-direction holds many advantages in adult learning. Adults face opportunities to learn every day that represent self-direction due to contradictions and paradoxes. Merriam & Caffarella (1999) stated that dialectical thinking allows one to accept alternative truths or ways of thinking about instances that occur in everyday life (as cited by Kelsey, 2006). Alternative truths lead to wisdom. Merriam (2001) stated that wisdom is seen as the hallmark or seal of adult thinking. Kelsey (2006) stated that wisdom is the ability to problem-solve, listen, weigh advice, deal with different kinds of people, make sensible judgments, and learn from mistakes. Each of these characteristics is a potential advantage in self-direction. “Wisdom teaches us to respect all people, to celebrate their differences, to be guided by a single ethic-service about self. Moral authority is primary greatness” (Covey, 2004, p. 299).

Strategies to Enhance Self-Direction

Several strategies are available to enhance self-direction in organized education. Four such strategies are signals, reward systems, transformational leadership, and symbols. To engage learners and capitalize on their sense of self-direction, instructors need to build learning environments that can utilize or reinforce these strategies.

To better illustrate how each of these strategies can be used in organized education, it is best to view them in a relevant context; to this end each strategy will be considered in the context of learning about leadership with university-level graduate students.

- **Signals.** “Leaders build culture with the signals that their actions convey” (Marion, 2002, p. 240). Positive signals from leaders within an environment promote an effective culture. They can also send a signal of motivation to others instead of a signal of discouragement (Zaretsky, 2000). Signaling positive communication is also a strategy used to enhance adult interactions since “people work out their

common understandings, the norms of behaviors, and their expectations by interacting and communicating with one another” (Marion, 2002, p. 240). Instructors can take advantage of the motivation and drive exhibited by self-directed learners by showing them how they can take their energy and turn it into positive leadership using communication signals that influence those around them in both their personal and professional lives.

- **Reward systems.** Organizations also shape culture through “...recognition, prestige and advancement. Such rewards reinforce appropriate cultural behavior” (Marion, 2002, p. 241). When faced with an opportunity to learn, it is human nature to want to know the payoff. The payoff with adult learning is gained knowledge and often an increase in pay or position. Harvey (1995) stated that leaders should personalize change through the rewards they give and the reassurance will have a positive affect on the recipient. This can be a strong advantage when educating self-directed leadership students who are likely to be strongly motivated by intrinsic rewards.
- **Transformation.** Another strategy to enhance self-direction is the ability to transform. Transformation can raise the culture of an organization to a more effective level of motivation and morality (Sergiovanni, 2004). Transformation is defined as the operation of change, whether the change is looked at through the need to learn in math, grammar, genetics, business applications, or any other subject. Transformation, then, converts one situation into another by insertion, deletion, or permutation (Merriam-Webster, 2005). A self-directed learner transforms his/her educational setting by redefining the structures that house learning. Then he or she has the ability to design new ways to think and react as a transformational leader. The final purpose comes in validating real-life situations by using transformational leadership skills. Vaill (1996) determined that the ways to learn are self-directed, creative, expressive, feeling, on-line, continual, and reflexive.

- **Symbols.** Symbolic leadership transforms a culture into an environment of enhanced self-direction since symbols may prompt the vision and communication of a goal (Dollahide, 2003). Clear vision is crucial to an effective adult learning outcome since facilitators must consider and plan individualized outcomes for their learners (Maehl, 2000). Adult learners need symbols that reflect the flexible, yet clear vision of the learning process.

Innovative Structure

An adult learning program should facilitate access by providing an easy approach, a welcoming environment, supportive services, and adaptability to individual circumstances. The program should establish a friendly climate of learning for adults, both in a physical facility that is suitable and in a psychological environment that is warm, mutually respectful, trusting, supportive, and collaborative (Maehl, 2000, p. 78).

An innovative and effective structure incorporates these provisions to promote self-directed adult learning. “The program should involve learners in diagnosing their learning needs, setting learning goals, designing a plan of learning, managing the learning experience, and evaluating learning outcome” (Maehl, 2000, p. 78).

When self-directed learning is planned in a university program such as graduate-level leadership, a number of steps can be taken to ensure that motivated learners are able to take full advantage of the program’s flexible structure. The following are innovative steps that can be taken to support self-directed learners:

- Program modularization—Design the program in a way that provides students with milestones that they can reach, as doing so will serve as a strong motivator to reach the next milestone. An example of such a modular design is to have a program core, followed by groups of courses that the students can take to earn certificates, all of which combine together to make up a degree. Self-directed

students will be motivated by their completion of the core, which will propel them to move onto the first certificate and then each subsequent one until they have completed the program.

- Course modularization—Design the courses in modular sections to give motivated students accomplishments that they can point to as motivators for their next challenge. Few things are more motivating than progress (Amabile & Kramer, 2010) and both the programs and the courses can be set up to provide many progress checkpoints throughout.
- Online and hybrid delivery models—Self-directed learners appreciate flexibility (Brockert & Hiemstra, 1991) and courses that offer flexible schedules will allow them more control over their learning. Fully online models are often popular with such students while others appreciate a flexible mix of online and face-to-face instruction.
- Flexible scheduling—Completion time to degree can be an important factor for a self-directed learner. Thus, designing programs that allow learners more control over the program's pace can appeal to these learners' sense of motivation and personal achievement.
- Simulations—Using simulations to empower self-directed learning is an effective adult learning strategy. The students are placed in scenarios where they can make their own decisions and be evaluated on the results of their actions, often directly in the simulation. Simulations create a learning environment for students that allows them to utilize self-directed learning as they make their own decisions based on their actions and analyses of competition and resources.
- Team building—Adults work in teams in today's world, so effective team building is an essential adult learning strategy. Self-directed learners may have well-established patterns of self-reliance and may be less comfortable working with others as it requires them to relinquish control. Team assignments are an important way to help create an envi-

ronment that respects the needs of self-directed learners while it provides opportunities for collaborative leadership.

- Challenging, flexible, and independent capstones—Self-directed learners want choices (Brockert and Hiemstra, 1991) and one area where choice can help motivate learners is in a program's capstone. Having multiple options available to students as they get ready to complete their program allows the self-directed learner to select the option that best suits his/her choices and goals.

Opportunities to Overcome Common Barriers

Common barriers associated with adult learning include pre-sumptions, scheduling issues, and resistance related to change (Carp, Peterson, & Roelfs, 1974, as cited by Cross, 1981).

To overcome common barriers, the self-directed learning structure needs to recognize and respect individual experiences of the past, while incorporating a flexible and warm environment that moves toward the future (Maehl, 2000). "We must begin with the faith that all people have the capacity to develop and exercise their own intelligence in shaping their own future" (Dewey, as cited in Pai & Adler, 2001, p. 103).

"You can learn to walk only by taking baby steps" (Harvey, 1995, p. 23). Small, precise, and clearly defined steps that lead to a defined outcome also create a positive learning environment that reduces resistance. To motivate those with reluctance, the environment needs to provide a "clear payoff...provide them with a good enough reason to do so" (p. 11). After providing a clear reason for direction for learning, it is imperative that questions are asked to facilitate rather than teach. "Change is best facilitated with questions, not statements" (p. 14).

Andragogy is the way in which educators help adults learn (Conlan, Grabowski, & Smith, 2003). Andragogy is applied to develop positive attitudes toward learning. Knowles (2002) used several principles, or recognized abilities, to implement an effective adult learning design:

1. The ability to develop and be in touch with curiosities. Perhaps another way to describe this skill would be the ability to engage in divergent thinking.
2. The ability to perceive one's self-objectively and accept feedback about one's performance non-defensively.
3. The ability to diagnose one's learning needs in the light of models of competencies required for performing life roles.
4. The ability to formulate learning objectives in terms that describe performance outcomes. The ability to identify human, material, and experiential resources for accomplishing various kinds of learning objectives.
5. The ability to design strategies for making use of appropriate learning resources effectively.
6. The ability to carry out a learning plan systematically and sequentially. This skill is the beginning of the ability to engage in convergent thinking.
7. The ability to collect evidence of the accomplishment of learning objectives and have it validated through performance (Knowles, 2002, para. 5).

Knowles (2002) recognized the abilities needed to promote learning and assist reluctant learners to overcome common barriers. When applied learning plans are carried out effectively.

Adults have a desire to gain knowledge and are capable of doing so successfully through self-directed learning. Self-direction incorporates strategies that make adult learning more applicable and systematic. An adaptive and flexible methodology that encompasses a blend of effective practices is necessary in self-directed learning. The future of adult education will continue to change through these practices. "In building democracy we must begin with the faith that all people have the capacity to develop and exercise their own intelligence in shaping their own future" (Dewey, as cited in Pai & Adler, 2001, p. 103).

Future Research Directions

When considering the nature of self-directed learners, instructional designers need to broaden their sense of educational

strategies, particularly in regard to online education. Variations to online discussion questions could be explored in an effort to enhance their effectiveness and the level of challenge they provide to self-directed learners. Other possible research could center on the effectiveness of student-designed course activities. One example might be to test if online students will be more challenged, motivated, and self-directed in their courses if they are allowed to develop their own case studies that are based either on the content knowledge learned in the class or real world scenarios pulled from their own experience. The need to determine the level of effectiveness of student-designed education, as indicated by performance on key metrics and outcomes, remains an area of research that would help inform instructors and curriculum designers about the best ways to engage self-directed learners.

Additional research into self-directed learning based on a qualitative phenomenological study might add insight into lived experiences from alumni. Efforts to gather graduates' perceptions about best practices regarding instructional design and delivery would be valuable in determining what they found motivating or constraining. This information might provide data for analysis of additional best practices for future facilitators to use in their respective classes.

Conclusion

The concept of adult learning theory must be addressed in the effort to design a rigorous program based on best practices for working with self-directed learners. Best practices for program design can employ lessons from the Expectancy-Valence Model, b) Boshier's Congruency Model, c) signals, d) reward systems, e) transformation, and f) symbols. These components drive the transformation of self-directed learning into a rigorous forum by which adult learners are supported as well as held to a standard of excellence.

The facilitation of a program for self-directed learners must also apply theoretical concepts to practical application leading to a collection of innovative practices that includes a) program modularization; b) course modularization; c) online and hybrid delivery models; d) flexible scheduling; e) simulations;

f) team-building exercises; and g) challenging, flexible, and independent capstones. By empowering students through the use of these tools, programs can promote personal development as well as collaboration among students and instructors that enhances a self-directed learning environment.

References

- Amabile, T. M., & Kramer, S. J. (2010, January - February). What really motivates workers? *Harvard Business Review*. Retrieved from <http://hbr.org/2010/01/the-hbr-list-breakthrough-ideas-for-2010/ar/1>
- Brockett, R. G., & Hiemstra, R. (1991). *Self-direction in adult learning: Perspectives on theory, research and practice*. New York: Routledge.
- Conlan, J., Grabowski, S., & Smith, K. (2003). *Current trends in adult education: Emerging perspectives on learning, teaching, and technology*. Retrieved from <http://www.coe.uga.edu/epltt/AdultEducation.htm>
- Covey, S. (2004). *The 8th habit*. NY: Free Press.
- Cross, P. (1981). *Adults as learners increasing participation and facilitating learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.
- Dollarhide, C. (2003, June). School counselors as program leaders: Applying leadership contexts to school counseling. *Professional School Counseling, 6*(5), 304-308.
- Harvey, T. (1995). *Checklist for change: A pragmatic approach to creating and controlling change*. Lancaster, PA: Technomic.
- Kelsey, K. (2006). *Cognitive development in adulthood*. Retrieved from <file:///C:/Documents%20and%20Settings/Gina%20Smith/Local%20Settings/Temporary%20Internet%20Files/Content.IE5/09EV45E7/5123-7%5B1%5D.ppt#292,32,DialecticalThinking>
- King, A. (1993). From sage on the stage to guide on the side. *College Teaching, 41*(1), 30-35.
- Knowles, M. (2002). *Lifelong learning: A dream*. Retrieved from http://www.newhorizons.org/future/Creating_the_Future/crfut_knowles.html
- Maehl, W. (2000). *Lifelong learning at its best*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Marion, R. (2002). *Leadership in education: Organizational theory for the practitioner*. Columbus: Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Merriam, S. B. (2001). *Andragogy and self-directed learning: Pillars of adult learning theory*. Retrieved from <http://www.fsu.edu/~elps/ae/download/ade5385/Merriam.pdf>
- Merriam, S.B. & Caffarella, R.S. (1999). *Learning in adulthood: a comprehensive guide*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (2005). Retrieved from <http://www.m-w.com>
- Pai, Y., & Adler, S. (2001). *Cultural foundations of education* (3rd ed.). Upper Saddle River: Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Penland, P. (1979). Self-initiated learning. *Adult Education, 29*, 170-179.
- Sergiovanni, T. (2004, May). Building a community of hope. *Educational leadership, 61*(8), 33-37.
- Suskie, L. (2004). *Assessing student learning: A common sense guide*. San Francisco: Anker Publishing Company.