

Self-Directed Learning in Adults: An Interview

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ALD 605

November 5, 2012

Self-Directed Learning: What is it and why is it important to adults?

Self-Directed Learning has been part of my adult life for many years. Over the past 20 years, it has helped me in new jobs and has helped in promotions for these jobs. What exactly is Self-Directed Learning? “In its broadest meaning, ‘self-directed learning’ describes a process by which individuals take the initiative, with or without the assistance of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identify human and material resources for learning, choosing and implement appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes. (M. Knowles, *Principles of Androgogy*, 1972)” (Corporate Training Partners, 2009). Most businesses use the learning theory in training and educating their employees. This practice is used by companies, mostly due to the fact that most companies just do not have the budgets to allow their employees to take time away from their jobs to attend institutions of higher learning. For a company, the bottom line is the budget. If a company can educate their employees cheaper and with less time constraints, the situation is a win-win for both the employee and the company. Not all Self-Directed Learning is initiated from the employer’s requirements. Many times, adults take the initiative in learning new skills for various reasons.

“As a person matures, his or her self-concept moves from that of a dependent personality toward one of a self-directing human being. (Merriam, Caffarella, Baumgartner, 2007, p. 84).” There are many factors in adults learning. Many deal with professions they have at the time of the learning. Others are required due to home situations or just from a passion for learning. From child to adult, individuals are directed by others at what they should learn and when they should learn it. Once that individual becomes an adult, learning becomes their own responsibility. Adults learn every day. One individual, Paul, was required to return to school, earning his nursing license. Partially out of his desire to learn about the health care field and partially out of duty to provide for his family, Paul took the initiative to return to college, seeking his degree. At the same time, I have taken the same initiatives, being involved with adult learning for my various different jobs, allowing me to learn snippets of information and immediately use that information in my job roles. I enrolled in various educational opportunities, from specialized training lasting a couple days to returning to college, earning my Bachelor’s Degree and now working toward my Master’s Degree. All of these educational opportunities for both of us work toward keeping our families strong.

What kinds of learning activities have you engaged in? What motivates you to learn?

Paul enrolled in Cuyahoga Community College (Tri-C) to earn his nursing license. At the time, he was working full-time and knew that he had to become trained in a field other than technology as the technology industry took a hit in early 2000 where many workers were laid off. He had a family and

needed to get into another field. While in college, he had the opportunity to work at a local hospital, allowing him to start working in the health care field while being trained. College allowed him an opportunity to not only take in-class instruction, but also Web based classes, labs, and clinical training. During clinical training, he practiced the topics learned during the instructor-led classes to further his knowledge of health care. Once he completed my education, he was required to study and pass the State of Ohio's licensure exam for nurses, allowing him to be employed in the field.

While I understand where Paul is coming from, my husband also attended Tri-C to become a nurse. At the time, both he and I were unemployed. Education was his way of helping our family because he had to attend school. On the other hand, many years ago, I attended college and earned my Associate of Arts (AA) degree. At the time, there was no such thing as Web based learning or Desktop Learning. All classes held were taught by an instructor and at the college or one of its satellite locations. I had to schedule my classes around my working schedule as I worked full-time hours. After my AA degree, I relocated to Ohio. Through my employment at Ernst & Young, I volunteered to be trained to learn new technologies, and classes outside of the company were required. Unlike traditional college classes, these classes were just a few days in length, teaching me exactly what I needed to learn for the job I was required to complete. By taking these classes, I was able to further my employment and received promotions based on these classes. I took the initiative to learn. After the training, I spent the next three years self-teaching myself on the updated technology for the software I used in my programming tasks. The company benefited from my self-direction through Web based learning, books, and research. I benefited through my ability to quickly learn the new technologies, allowing me to become more knowledgeable in my employment.

A number of years later, after employment changes, marriage, and the start of a family, it was required that I return to college to earn my Bachelor's Degree. The job market at that time required higher levels of education for the positions that I historically obtained through experience and my AA degree. Those levels were not enough. Back to school I went, taking in-class instructor-led classes. Even five years ago, distance learning was still in its infancy for higher education. Now, more and more training programs are being offered through distance learning. Distance learning helps enhance the ability for individuals to take even more initiative and promotes Self-Directed Learning. Companies and education institutions see the need for these types of opportunities, allowing all adults to learn at their own pace and in their own time.

Do you have a specific learning style (learning preferences or patterns)?

Paul said that he doesn't have a specific learning preference. By federal law, all individuals who wish to work as a nurse must participate in training that will prepare them to become a nurse. They also have to pass a licensure exam that will allow them work in a specific state based on that exam and

state's requirements. "Nurses must graduate from a nursing program. It takes about 2 years of college to attain an associate degree in nursing. It takes about 4 years to finish a bachelor's degree in nursing. And a nursing diploma program usually takes about 3 years. (US Department of Labor, 2010)." Most programs are completely in-class required. Even those programs that contain distance learning portions also contain in-class requirements for clinical exams. Because you are learning to care of people, the laws required him to show and be tested on the skills he would be using for his career. Beyond the training program and exam to become licensed, every year, he is required to renew his license, just like any adult is required to renew their driver's license as required by each state. The difference in nursing is that he is required to also complete continuing education to learn about changes in laws for the state where he is employed as a nurse. Paul stated that even though he liked to learn when the learning was required, because of his desire to become a nurse, he was required to follow certain procedures and educational regiments to become licensed.

What do you think about Self-Directed Learning?

We both agreed that Self-Directed Learning is the way to go, especially to improve employment opportunities. We are both motivated by family needs and our own yearning for learning more. Paul stated because of his background in technology that he continues to learn about technology. During his free time from home and work, he builds Web sites and enjoys building computers. Many of the topics he has learned to be able to build the Web site he has learned by researching how others have completed the same tasks. He has been able to find short learning topics on online forums and YouTube videos. Because he also likes to hunt, he has viewed videos on hunting tips. Being the ever busy man, he also likes to work with carpentry, using videos and examples to build cabinets and other wood projects through DVDs and YouTube videos. The videos are step-by-step on how to pick the wood, size requirements, then cutting and piecing together for a finished look.

In my spare time, I like to bake and cook by gathering recipes, cook books, and other items related to cooking. Some of my favorite shows are from the Food Network on cable television. Chefs like Guy Fieri, Pat and Gina Neely, and Emeril Lagasse show in a televised format how to prepare their favorite foods. Web sites like FoodNetwork.com have their shows and Top Food Videos (Food Network, 2012) ready for you to view when trying to prepare items that they have featured on their shows. I am able to prepare better foods at home based on what I am watching on television. I have taken the initiative to prepare the foods so that they are healthier for my family. To me, this is my personal version of Self-Directed Learning by not only taking the initiative to learn something new, but reflect on how it will help my family, but also realize that the more I learn new ways to cook, the healthier my family will be.

Conclusion

In the end, it all boils down to the goals of Self-Directed Learning. According to Knowles, there are three main goals in Self-Directed Learning. The first is that “part of the job of educators of adults is to help learners, whether they are learning on their own or in formal learning programs, to be able to plan, carry out, and evaluate their own learning. (Merriam, Caffarella, Baumgartner, 2007, p. 107)” The second is that adults need to reflect why they need to initiate this learning. Lastly, the learning has to enhance the ability for the learner to become even more self-directed. I know that with my own educational and learning opportunities, I have taken the initiative to learn more for myself and for my family. One of my mantras is that we should at least one thing new every day. At work, especially in my position requiring me to understand more about the manufacturing process and how things should work for my company, not only am I learning new things for work, I also learn new things personally. So, I learn at least two things every day.

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