

Self-Directed Learning in Adult Learning and Development

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Introduction

When an adult takes the initiative to learn something new, whether they are required to learn this topic for work or personal knowledge gain, this initiative is called Self-Directed Learning. All adults learn new things every day, whether they believe they are learning new topics or not. Unlike with a child whose mind isn't ready to be independent in their learning tasks, adults often have to use independence and initiative in learning. For most adults, they do not believe they are learning if they are not in a formal setting. Perception is the key to understanding learning.

“Andragogy focuses on the adult learner and his or her life situation” (Merriam, Caffarella, Baumgartner, 2007, p. 83) whereas “Pedagogy refers to the teaching of children where the teacher is the focal point” (Peterson, 2012). Without Self-Directed Learning in an adult, most adults would not be able to function. Adults need to become independent to compete and sustain their life in the adult world. What exactly is Self-Directed Learning?

Defining Self-Directed Learning

Being in the working world many years now, many of the topics that I have needed to learn for my job have come through taking initiative. Whether that training came from reading a book, watching a video on the Internet, or taking classes formally and informally, I have always been the one who promoted my professional development and requested my learning opportunities. For many, including me, learning, often called professional development, is a means to gain more knowledge in employment-related topics that will help in promotions. At the same time, as an adult, I am not instructed by anyone that I need to learn a specific topic by a specific date. If I did, this type of learning would be considered Pedagogy, where a teacher tells me what I need to learn and when. On the opposite end of the spectrum to Pedagogy lies Andragogy and Self-Directed Learning. Both of these go hand-in-hand. Andragogy is the theory of how adults learn. Self-Direct Learning is “a process in which students take the initiative to

diagnose their learning needs, formulate learning goals, identify resources for learning, select and implement learning strategies, and evaluate learning outcomes. The role of the instructor shifts from being the 'sage on the stage' to the 'guide on the side' in a self-directed learning environment" (The Northeast Texas Network Consortium Coordinating Office, 2002).

There are three goals of Self-Directed Learning. They are: 1. Educators help adults to carry out education plans, whether the individual is in a formal learning program or learning on their own, to plan, carry out, and evaluate that learning; 2. Adults need to critically reflect and understand the reasons for their learning needs, wants, and interests; and 3. Enhance an individual's ability to become more self-directed in learning more (Merriam, Caffarella, Baumgartner, 2007, p. 107-108). With these goals, individuals who take the initiative to become more knowledgeable in any topic tend to follow these goals.

Personally, I have used the goals first in returning to college to earn my Bachelor's Degree and now to complete my Master's Degree. By working with my employer through my supervisor, we discussed the need the company had of having someone trained with this level of knowledge to train others. Our company has a tuition reimbursement program. With the documentation submitted, I was asked by my supervisor to give a descriptive narrative why I felt my proposed education would benefit the company. In the position that I obtained at the beginning of 2012, not only am I completing the daily tasks of my required job, but I am also taking 50% of my time to develop and train others on our technology systems. The documentation was written in such a way that my supervisor and Vice President realized the need and how I was filling that need. By taking the initiative, I was able to prove to my superiors the importance of this education.

Working with the advisor at the university, I have been able to be guided in carrying out the plan to earn my degree. What classes do I attend? What are the best classes for my ultimate goals for my employment? I am also able to evaluate that the learning I have been completing immediately impacts my ability to perform my job better. I have been able to bring examples of my classroom learning to work, using the ideas and theories immediately. At the

same time, as I am currently training adults, I am able to use the training that has already been developed as live case studies in my classes.

As I was promoted at work, I always knew the education path I wished to complete. I have been able to reflect, while researching the correct education path to reach the goal. By reflecting the goals, I was able to determine that there are many other learning opportunities once I complete my degree. Where do I want to go next? What other learning will I be required to complete for my next goal? Is there any other learning required at this time? All of these questions allow me to further become a Self-Directed Learner.

Critiquing Self-Directed Learning

All of my life I have considered myself a self-directed learner. I know when I NEED to learn something, whether that learning is for my career or for my home/personal endeavors. I know when I WANT to learn something. I know the entire W's of learning (Who? What? Where? Why? How?). The ultimate question and critique comes in assessing Self-Directed Learning. As a developer of adult learning programs, am I developing the right training for those who learn from me? Am I able to guide those individuals in learning? How can I build my training better?

The biggest critique of Self-Directed Learning is the ability to measure self-directed competencies. Mackeracher states there have been attempts to develop means of assessing Self-Directed Learning competencies. "The two most frequently used are the Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale (SDLRS) (Guglielmino, 1977) and Oddi's Continuing Learning Inventory (OCLI) (Oddi, 1986)" (Mackeracher, 2004, p. 47). In formal education settings, these assessments have been used in studies related to self-directed learning. However, with that being said, there's no clear indication that self-directed learning is developed as unbiased and context free. Even with my own training and education programs I am building within my own company, I know who my audience is. The bulk of my adult learners are engineers. These individuals are white males. Even though many of my learners are not white engineers, I tend

to write my training geared toward this audience. At this time, I have not been able to determine the consequences in developing my training this way. For those individuals who are not white males, those individuals I train in other countries, does my training work for them? Understanding that this company is a United States based company, with offices globally; there are standards that need to be met.

At this time, there has been no tools developed, allowing me to understand even more how my employees need to learn their tasks. One of the ways I develop my training is by how I have learned. By taking the education I have experienced, asking myself if this is how I want my training to resemble when I develop for my employees. For all of the training that I develop, the documentation solves two issues, documentation of the in-class topics being discussed and reference material for job tasks. By developing my training in this way, not only can the individual be trained how to do the work they are required to complete, they also have the steps to recreate the training in a self-directed environment back at in their offices.

As education continues, and more training is developed into a full and formal program, research will need to continue that will allow me to understand how to evaluate the training that I am developing and delivering. If Self-Directed Learning as a theory gives issues to educators in a formal setting, how I can solve the answers to my problems so quickly when I am in the beginning of building this program for my employees?

Conclusion

Self-Directed Learning is ingrained in the majority of adults. As we grow, we learn how to become independent, not only in our thinking but in our learning. We realize that without questioning and taking the initiative to learn new things, we cannot grow as adults. In my professional and personal lives, I live with the thinking that I should learn something new every day. I am the responsible person who lives my life. If I didn't continue to learn for my profession, how would I prosper and earn promotions? At the same time, as the educator, I am learning the best ways to evaluate the training I am building for my employees. Am I building

the best training for those who will learn from me? Are there other methodologies needed to build the best training opportunities for my constituents. By sharing what I know with others, I am building and training the best way I know how, allowing my company to profit from my knowledge sharing.

Works Cited

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