SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING: A STRATEGY FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

Dolene Rossi
Central Queensland University

ABSTRACT

Governmental inquiries into higher education have raised societal and institutional awareness of the expectations of higher education and focused attention on the need to develop strategies that promote the pursuit of lifelong learning. While self-directed learning is not considered a panacea for adult learning it does appear to provide an appropriate response to changing societal and educational demands.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of student-centred learning is by no means new. In fact, educational philosophers since the time of Socrates have recognised that, as the process of learning is individual to each student, the student should be at the centre of the learning process. While the concept has changed little with the passage of time, the strategies which may be utilised by educators in order to achieve educational goals have become more diverse and include problem solving, experiential learning, and self-directed learning. Differentiation between pedagogical and andragogical models of learning, and identification of the assumption that adults prefer to be self-directing rather than totally dependent on a teacher, has important implications in further and higher education. In addition, the preoccupation of employers and educational institutions with continuous professional development, the pursuit of individual lifelong learning, and the necessity for learners to be able to think and adapt to change have been influential in changing educational philosophies. The increasing use of student-centred learning approaches that incorporate self-directed learning is well documented within the literature. However, despite both political and educational emphasis on such strategies, evidence suggests that both students and teachers are ill-equipped to fulfil their individual roles in this enlightening process and therefore fail to gain full benefit from such teaching and learning methods.

This paper provides an historical perspective of the concept of self-directed learning and highlights increasing political and educational interest in the strategy. The relationship between adult learning, self-directed learning and lifelong learning is identified and discussed. The difficulties associated with conceptual understanding of both self-directed learning and lifelong learning – and their effective implementation within educational institutions – are explored, analysed, and discussed based on the literature reviewed.

AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF THE CONCEPT OF SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

The notion of self-direction in learners has existed under numerous different guises from classical antiquity to the present day. Educational literature provides evidence that philosophers and theorists have utilised associated teaching and learning strategies since Socrates in the 5th century B.C.

"I shall only ask him, and not teach him, and he shall share the enquiry with me: and do you watch and see if you find me telling or explaining anything to him, instead of eliciting his opinion" (Socrates as cited in McQueeney, 1999, p.1).

While self-directed learning has its roots in humanistic philosophy, other views, such as those covered by the behaviourist, neo-behaviourist, and transformation perspectives help to provide a greater understanding of some of the characteristics of self-directed learning (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991). Essentially, humanism recognises man as a being with feelings, attitudes, and values, and is concerned with individual growth, fulfilment, and self-actualisation (Curzon, 1997; Quinn, 1995; Recce & Walker, 1997). The association between self-directed learning and the humanist approach is demonstrated by a number of learning principles reported by Rodgers (1969, as cited in Quinn, 1995) which state the following:

- Learning is facilitated when the student participates responsibly in the learning process.
- Self-initiated learning, which involves the whole person of the learner, feelings as well as intellect, is the most lasting and pervasive.
• Independence, creativity and self-reliance are all facilitated when self-criticism and self-evaluation are basic and evaluation by others is of secondary importance.

One of the most serious criticisms of the humanist approach is the lack of empirical evidence to support its claims, as the theory relies mainly on observations and assumptions about human behaviour (Quinn, 1995). However, despite this analysis, Curzon (1997) suggests that it is important for educationalists to take account of the research undertaken in this area because those who are assisting in the educational growth of students should understand the basis of student motivation if instructional practice is to be successful.

Strong links were forged between self-directed learning and adult education following the differentiation between andragogical and pedagogical theories of learning. These theories, based on the assumptions of Knowles (1990), argue that andragogy encourages a proactive approach to learning in which inquiry and autonomy are predominant features. The assumptions consider six dimensions of learning and describe a number of characteristics attributed to adult learners: within them elements of humanistic philosophy and the perceived self-directing nature of adults is illustrated (see Table 1).

The influence of andragogical perceptions on the developing concept of self-directed learning is illustrated by Mezirow (1981 as cited in Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991), who outlines a 'charter for andragogy', which identifies a number of activities considered essential in the enhancement of self-direction in learners. These activities relate specifically to the learner's ability to assess personal needs, plan learning activities, secure or create learning resources, and assess personal progress in achieving learning goals. Smith (1990, as cited in Garrison, 1992), an advocate of the charter, emphasises the importance of learners becoming more active and self-aware, reiterates the importance of self-monitoring, and promotes the assumption of 'an appropriate amount of control' over learning activities by learners.

The ongoing debate surrounding the concept of andragogy is highlighted by Brookfield (1995) who challenges the assumptions of Knowles, suggesting that developments in adult learning are weak and hindered by persistent myths which suggest that their learning is inherently joyful and that adult learners are innately self-directing. Despite such criticism there is continuing support for the assertion that adults learn in a different way from children and that self-direction is a feature of adult learning (Long, 1990; Hammond & Collins, 1991).

| The learner's need to know: |
| Adults need to know why they must learn something. |
| The learner's self-concept: |
| Adults have a self-concept of being responsible for their own decisions and their own lives, thus adults take responsibility for their own learning and are self-directing. |
| The role of the learner's experience: |
| Adults have greater and more varied experience which serves as a rich resource for learning. In adult education emphasis should be placed on individualisation of teaching and learning strategies, experiential learning, and peer-helping activities. |
| The learner's readiness to learn: |
| Adult readiness relates to the things that he or she needs to know and do in real life. |
| The learner's orientation to learning: |
| Adults have a life-centred orientation to learning involving problem-solving and task-centred approaches. |
| The learner's motivation: |
| Adult motivation is largely internal, such as self-esteem, quality of life, and job satisfaction. |

Table 1. Andragogical assumptions and the six dimensions of learning (Adapted from Knowles, 1990, & Quinn, 1995).
INCREASING INTEREST IN SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

The plethora of literature available on the subject of self-directed learning indicates the level of educational interest in the concept. Indeed it is reported that no area of adult education has received more attention, in terms of investigative research, in recent years (Boekaerts, 1997). In the past, inquiry focused upon the relationship between self-directed readiness and personality variables (Martin, 1996). However, more recent emphasis has been on the development of theory, which has led to the generation of models to explain the meanings and contexts of self-directed learning. Research suggests that self-directed learning can play an important role in learning within educational institutions and highlights the variance in levels of readiness for self-directed learning in individual students (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991; Grow, 1991).

Kelly (1999) suggests that educationalists have long been aware of the importance of education in the achievement of political goals. Today the relationship between education and governmental goals has been made transparent through national and international inquiries in respect of higher education. Nationally, the Australian federal government considers that,

"The key to economic and social improvement lies in having a population that is adaptable, flexible, well educated and attuned to the need for lifelong learning" (National Board of Employment Education & Training, 1996, p.2).

This view is supported by similar inquiries conducted in the United Kingdom (Dearing, 1997; Garrick as cited in Dearing, 1997). Both, the Dearing Report (pertaining to the whole U.K.) and the Garrick Report (focusing on Scotland in particular) document that the aim of higher education should be to sustain a learning society and offer four main principles to underpin this aim:

- To inspire and enable individuals to develop their capabilities to the highest potential throughout life.
- To increase knowledge and understanding to benefit self, the economy and society.
- To serve the needs of a knowledge-based economy at local regional and national levels.
- To play a major role in shaping a democratic, civilised, inclusive society.

These principles clearly reflect humanistic beliefs and are closely related to the concept of self-directed learning. In its published response, the government of the United Kingdom states that it anticipates higher education playing a key role in lifelong learning through strategies that promote effective learning and that enhance professional skills (Department for Education & Employment (DFEE), 1998).

Such investigations have raised societal and institutional awareness of the expectations of higher education. They have also focused attention on the need of educational institutions to develop strategies that will enhance the individual's capacity and ability to adapt to change and to promote the pursuit of lifelong learning (DFEE, 1998; National Board of Employment Education & Training, 1994).

However, despite recognition of the effectiveness of self-directed learning as an approach which enhances lifelong learning, and explicit governmental support for the development of collaborative policies and strategies, there is a continuing lack of coordination, cohesion, and application in educational programs (Business Higher Education Round Table, 2001; Kreber, 1998).

RELATIONSHIP ISSUES & CONCEPTUAL DIFFICULTIES

Discussion of the relationship between humanistic philosophy, adult learning, and self-directed learning has been based on educational literature. The relationship between self-directed learning and lifelong learning can be identified from the same source. The learning principles of Rodgers (1969 as cited in Quinn, 1995) identified self-initiated learning as the most lasting and pervasive form of learning. This particular principle confirms early acknowledgement of the value of self-directed learning and provides an indication of the significance of the strategy in relation to the pursuit of lifelong learning. Brockett & Hiemstra (1991), who advocate self-directed learning as an effective approach in the pursuit of lifelong learning, and Kreber (1998), who considers self-directed learning to be a prerequisite for lifelong learning, clearly concur. Recent commentators consider lifelong learning to be more overarching and view it as a unifying principle for educational approaches, which include self-directed learning (Knapper & Cropley, 2000).
The complexity of the concept of self-directed learning is illustrated by the failure of educational theorists to reach a consensus upon a terminological definition, and within the literature a number of explanations are offered as to why this is the case. Several authors report that the problem can be isolated to variations in perceptions of the concept (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991; Garrison, 1992; National Board of Employment & Training, 1994). Brockett & Hiemstra (1991) identify a number of myths about self-directed learning, which include both organizational and personal bias. Garrison (1992) extends this theme beyond individual impressions. Reflecting upon application of the approach, Garrison (1992) acknowledges difficulties as the concept of self-direction may be applied as both a noun and a verb in different contexts i.e., as an independent pursuit of learning, a way of organizing instruction, or a personal attribute.

D’A Llevy & Lavery (1991) consider that the absence of concept clarity raises issues about how the approach should or could be managed within the curriculum. A number of educational institutions currently incorporate self-directed learning within their curriculum by quantifying notional student effort or identifying the number of hours a student is anticipated to spend in self-directed learning (Bell College, 1997; Queen Margaret College, 1996). However, Long (1990) argues that by adopting this approach educationalists are debasing the concept, as self-directed learning does not always occur just because the learner has some input into the learning process.

Martin (1996) reports that institutional concern, about the detrimental effect of self-directed learning on the quality of educational programs, is having a limiting effect on the implementation of self-directed learning. This concern is explained by Grow (1991) who discusses the perceived association between self-directed learning and unstructured learning environments. Grow suggests that such environments provide little information or feedback in respect of learning activities and that, as a result, positive appraisal of conceptual development or validation of student knowledge proves difficult.

Similar difficulties have been experienced with the concept of lifelong learning. A report compiled by the National Board of Employment Education & Training (1994) highlights that within educational institutions the concept of lifelong learning is poorly understood and is most often considered to relate to continuing education programs. By identifying lifelong learning as a concept, a policy, a practice, a process, a goal, and an ideal, Gopee (2001) lends support to the notion of conceptual difficulty and to a certain extent provides the reason for it.

It is evident from the literature that one of the main problems surrounding the concept of self-directed learning is the lack of clarity about the term. The way the concept is perceived and interpreted within each educational institution has important implications for its implementation. If there was a better understanding of the concept and greater appreciation of why it is necessary to incorporate self-directed learning approaches, educators would be more able to identify effective ways to integrate it into existing curricula and incorporate it within the curricula development process. Similarly, an internal orientation to the approach, offered by the institution for both staff and students, may assist in the identification of strategies to assess individual learning needs and methods by which to evaluate the outcomes of a self-directed learning process.

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

Constraints

There is no doubt that educational institutions are influenced by a number of internal and external factors that affect the learning experiences and opportunities they can provide. Externally, governments, statutory regulating bodies, and professional developments are highly influential in the design of vocational curricula; while internally, the organizational culture, teachers, learners, and resources available further constrain the learning environment (Kelly, 1999; Taylor, 1997).

While Brockett & Hiemstra (1991) maintain that the lack of support for self-directed learning is the result of a lack of appreciation for the potential of the approach, others argue the case both for and against based on the effective utilisation of institutional resources. For instance, both Garrigan (1997) and Hughes (1999) relate increasing interest in self-directed learning to the financial concerns of educational institutions. These authors support the long-held view that self-directed learning has been introduced as a means of saving educational costs and that one of the main considerations,
when deciding whether or not to implement self-directed learning strategies, is the effective utilisation of the instructor’s time. However, Taylor (1997) suggests that curricular time constraints and the need to satisfy statutory learning outcomes are responsible for the persistent implementation of traditional teaching and learning approaches (Taylor, 1997). Taylor’s assertion, in respect of the teaching and learning approaches adopted, is supported by Camiah (1998) who found tutors perpetuating didactic approaches rather than encouraging student participation. Camiah maintained that such practices promoted student dependency and failed to encourage self-direction.

**Facilitation of self-directed learning**

A wide variety of factors are identified as being influential on both learner willingness and ability to engage in self-directed learning. These factors are characterised as being either internal or external to the actual process of self-directed learning. The influence of educational institutions is perceived as external to the self-directedness of learners, but fundamental in the process of self-directed learning, through the provision of appropriately-structured learning environments, the implementation of relevant teaching and learning strategies, and access to suitable resources (Boekaerts, 1997). Despite acknowledgement of the effectiveness of certain strategies in the facilitation of self-directed learning, educational institutions often fail to identify the structure of the learning environment, strategies that will be used, or the resources available to support the process (Bell College, 1997; Queen Margaret College, 1996).

The approaches recommended to facilitate self-directed learning generally reflect the student-centred nature of the process, e.g., self-paced modules, independent study, and distance learning (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991). Martin (1996) maintains that specific media and the learning variables and strategies used within the instruction can be manipulated to facilitate and encourage the learner toward greater independence. Indeed, in the research conducted by Camiah (1998) the term ‘facilitating learning’ was implicitly viewed as the ability of tutors to use open, flexible, and computer-assisted learning. Given the increasing range and access to educational resources as a result of technological developments, there are great many avenues available for self-directed learning (JISC, 1995). However, despite these positive advances, educational institutions have not adapted nor implemented the new technology effectively (Business Higher Education Round Table, 2001).

**Readiness & control**

The internal factors in self-directed learning are reported to relate specifically to the learner in terms of their preferred learning style, personality traits, motivation, and readiness to accept responsibility for their own learning (Garrison, 1992). Generally speaking, these variables emphasise the individuality of students in any learning environment, and acknowledgement of that feature within self-directed learning is equally important. If learning is perceived as a continuum, and self-directed learning considered part of that continuum; as a result of the variables identified, students will find themselves at different points – each with a different degree of readiness for self-direction, and requiring modified levels of facilitation (Reece & Walker, 1997). However, through research, a number of models have been developed that not only reflect the individuality of the learner but also seek to accommodate it within the learning process. Three specific examples of these are: the Personal Responsibility Orientation (PRO) offered by Brockett & Hiemstra (1991) which differentiates between the instructional processes and methods of self-direction, and the personality characteristics of the individual; the Staged Self-directed Learning Model (SSDL) developed by Grow (1991) which proposes that learners advance through stages of increasing self-direction; and the Partnership Model proposed by D’A Slevin & Lavery (1991), which identifies and focuses upon various levels of control over the learning process.

It is generally accepted that self-directing students must assume a ‘degree’ of control over the learning process. Taylor (1997) states that if self-directed learning is the goal then an entire set of assumptions about the ways teachers and learners relate to each other have to be reoriented to affect a change in how self, others, authority, and knowledge are understood (Taylor, 1997). Negotiated learning contracts are considered one of the most effective methods of achieving this balance as it is the product of collaboration between the teacher and learner and is thought to negate many of the difficulties associated with the process of self-directed learning e.g., wide-ranging abilities, experience, education, and motivation (Knowles, 1990). The document can also be developed to address the individual needs of the student and the educational requirements of further and higher
institutions, primarily, through the identification of learning needs, learning objectives and outcomes, learning strategies and resources, and methods of assessment and evaluation of the learning experience (McAllister, 1995). Within the Partnership Model, learning contracts are a predominant feature (D’A Slevin & Lavery, 1991).

The external regulation currently imposed by educational institutions is considered to leave the learner little autonomy, hardly any responsibility for the learning process and, in addition, hinders the development of self-directing skills (Boekaerts, 1997). Collaboration requires sharing power and negotiating issues. On a practical level, a balance needs to be established between maximising the student's control of their own learning and the constraints imposed by statutory educational requirements. Curzon (1997) reports that such ideas are a challenge to the practice of formal education. Martin (1996) concurs suggesting that orientation to such an approach would undoubtedly raise new educational dilemmas and fuel debates on many educational issues — particularly since to relinquish power is to move from the realms of the known to the unknown and from the secure to insecure. However, the time has surely come for educational institutions to apply their research-based knowledge to educational practice.

CONCLUSION

Within contemporary society educational institutions are expected to play a key role in the development of lifelong learners. Educational literature identifies self-directed learning as an effective means to that end. Despite research that provides data on the numerous variables that influence the process of self-directed learning, the documented range of successful models and teaching and learning strategies, and the current availability of educational resources, educational institutions remain reluctant to fully embrace the approach within their curricula. Part of the reason for this hesitancy may be related to the lack of clarity and the ambiguity that surrounds the concepts of self-directed and lifelong learning. If educators are to integrate self-directed learning effectively and consolidate it within the curricula-development process then they must understand the process, and the product of the strategy and appreciate why it is necessary to incorporate the approach. Successful implementation is dependent not only upon the readiness and willingness of students to participate in self-directed learning, but also upon the institution's ability to facilitate self-directed learning and its' commitment to involve the learner in the management of the process. While self-directed learning is not considered a panacea for adult learning it does appear to provide an appropriate response to changing societal and educational expectations.

REFERENCES


