

10 Ways to Do Self-Directed Learning

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Self-directed learning is as natural as breathing. Yet it's easy to forget how to discover stuff for oneself after years of schooling.

Try this thought experiment: Imagine that your close friend is diagnosed with a new and rare disease, and she is put on a waiting list to see a specialist. As a concerned friend, you decide to research the disease yourself.

How would you go about this? Would you start with a Google search, talk to your friend the nurse, e-mail the author of an article on the disease, or take a community college class to understand basic disease-fighting processes? If those attempts didn't produce results, what would you do next?

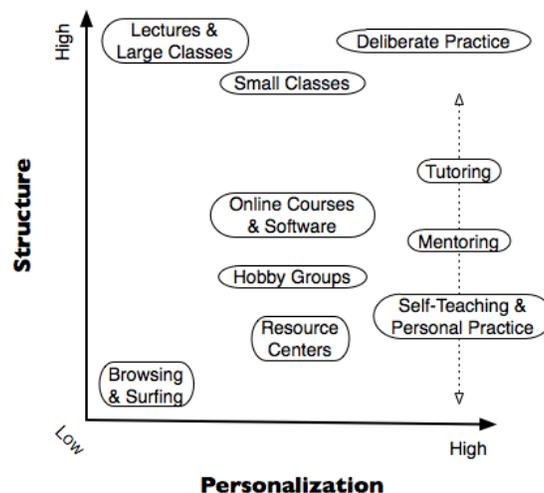


However you answered: that's self-directed learning (SDL). To generalize, SDL is a two-step process:

1. **Start with a question, curiosity, or concern that is directly relevant to *your* life and goals.** ("Goals" include both immediate goals, like learning more about a friend's disease, and long-term goals, like becoming highly competent in graphic design).
2. **Pursue that question, curiosity, or concern with the best resources you can find.**

I write often about the *creme de la creme* of self-directed learning: [deliberate practice](#).

Deliberate practice is a form of high-intensity practice involving a mentor or coach who gives you constant feedback. But is deliberate practice *essential* for self-directed learning?



No, it's not. Deliberate practice is just one way to do SDL, and if it was the only one you used, you'd probably die of high-blood pressure by age 30. I got good at backpacking (the above photo was taken on a trip I led; credit: Jed G.) with just a little bit of deliberate practice (guided hiking) early in my life, followed by lots of learning through other means: reading books, doing trips with my friends, browsing websites, talking to more experienced backpackers, and leading trips.

Here are ten ways to do self-directed learning, organized on a scale of structure (i.e. pre-determined curriculum) versus personalization.

1. **Deliberate practice**: high-intensity, high-feedback, repetitious practice with a coach
2. **Tutoring**: one-on-one formal instruction
3. **Mentoring**: one-on-one guidance
4. **Self-teaching & personal practice**: independent study, personal research, practice with friends (as structured as you make it)
5. **Resource centers**: free-choice centers with optional instruction (like free school [SVS](#) and higher-structure [North Star](#))
6. **Browsing & surfing**: exploring the internet, TV, movies, or books
7. **Hobby groups**: study or practice groups with shared interests/goals
8. **Online courses & software**: like Rosetta Stone, flight simulators, and [online classes](#)
9. **Small classes**: offering personalized flexibility, inside or outside of college
10. **Lectures & large classes**: as in most colleges & high schools

(Regarding #9 & #10: Yes, formal classes are part of “self-directed” learning—when it’s a free and informed choice!)

Which of these approaches is best? Obviously, the answer depends on person, place, and opportunity. The same person who hungers for deliberate practice and small classes one year might need the slow pace of personal practice the next year. Someone who lives in rural isolation may need to rely on Rosetta Stone when a language tutor is locally unavailable.

The art of SDL is choosing the approach that puts the best resources at your disposal.

Savvy self-directed learners will use every one of these ten approaches at some point. [Extensive research](#) shows deliberate practice to be the path to world-class performance, but if your goal is regular competency, then deliberate practice isn't a must. Choose the method of self-directed learning that matches your needs and goals, and remember that there's always a second way to learn something.