

Self-Directed Learning

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The concept of Self-Directed Learning (SDL) is one which educators have investigated and discussed for many years. This Digest will examine the basic tenets of SDL, and it will discuss recently conducted research findings germane to its application in K-12 classrooms.

What is Self-Directed Learning?

Self-directed learning, which has its roots in adult education, is an approach that has also been tried with learners in elementary and secondary schools. There may be slight variations in how different educators define SDL, but a survey of the literature on the subject identifies several tenets that are central to the concept.

- As the term suggests, SDL views learners as responsible owners and managers of their own learning process. SDL integrates self-management (management of the context, including the social setting, resources, and actions) with self-monitoring (the process whereby the learners monitor, evaluate and regulate their cognitive learning strategies) (Bolhuis, 1996; Garrison, 1997).
- SDL recognizes the significant role of motivation and volition in initiating and maintaining learners' efforts. Motivation drives the decision to participate, and volition sustains the will to see a task through to the end so that goals are achieved (Corno, 1992; Garrison, 1997).
- In SDL, control gradually shifts from teachers to learners. Learners exercise a great deal of independence in setting learning goals and deciding what is worthwhile learning as well as how to approach the learning task within a given framework (Lyman, 1997; Morrow, Sharkey, & Firestone, 1993).
- Teachers scaffold learning by making learning 'visible.' They model learning strategies and work with students so that they develop the ability to use them on their own (Bolhuis, 1996; Corno, 1992; Leal, 1993).
- SDL is, ironically, highly collaborative. Learners collaborate with teachers and peers in (Guthrie, Alao & Rinehart; 1997; Temple & Rodero, 1995).
- SDL develops domain-specific knowledge as well as the ability to transfer conceptual knowledge to new situations. It seeks to bridge the gap between school knowledge and real-world problems by considering how people learn in real life (Bolhuis, 1996; Temple & Rodero, 1995).

What are the Benefits of Self-Directed Learning?

The benefits of SDL are best described in terms of the type of learners it develops. The literature on SDL asserts that self-directed learners demonstrate a greater awareness of their responsibility in making learning meaningful and monitoring themselves (Garrison, 1997). They are curious and willing to try new things (Lyman, 1997), view problems as challenges, desire change, and enjoy learning (Taylor, 1995). Taylor also found them to be motivated and persistent, independent, self-disciplined, self-confident and goal-oriented.

Self-directed learning allows learners to be more effective learners and social beings. Guthrie, et al. (1996) noted that the self-directed learners in a Concept-Oriented Reading Instruction (CORI) program demonstrated the ability to search for information in multiple texts, employ different strategies to achieve goals, and to represent ideas in different forms (drawing and writing). Morrow, et al. (1993) observe that with proper planning and implementation, self-directed learning can encourage students to develop their own rules and leadership patterns.

What Can Teachers do to Support Self-Directed Learning?

One of the most important tasks of the teacher is to raise student awareness of their roles in learning. Taylor (1995) suggests engaging students in discussion on topics from the Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale. Examples of topics are: I know that I want to learn and that I am a learner, so if I want to learn something, I can, and I like to learn and to solve problems because I know that thinking 'hard' can be fun. The exercise of evaluating oneself on such topics was found to have positively influenced learner awareness. Lyman (1997), who works with readers, suggests generating similar discussion through the use of questions designed to help learners become aware of what good readers do and how to become one. Among the examples he provides are: Did you read better today than yesterday? Could you keep the ideas in your book straight in your mind? Were there words you did not know? How did you figure them out?

Learner participation in decision-making is another fundamental aspect of the SDL approach. Taylor advocates involving students in decisions concerning what is to be learned, when and how it should be learned, and how it should be evaluated. In addition, every proponent of SDL emphasizes the importance of allowing learners to pursue their own interests so that learning becomes more meaningful. Morrow, et al. (1993) report that when writers are allowed to choose their own topics, they write more often and they write longer pieces. Students do not have to be given total freedom, however. Teachers could, for instance, establish a thematic framework within which students are given choices (Guthrie, et al., 1997; Temple & Rodero, 1995).

Lyman (1997) and Bolhuis (1996) stress that teachers who want to encourage SDL must free themselves from a preoccupation with tracking and correcting errors, a practice that is ego-threatening (Guthrie, et al. 1996). Lyman and Bolhuis advocate greater tolerance of uncertainty and encourage risk-taking, and capitalizing on learners' strong points instead of focusing on weaknesses, as it is more beneficial for learners to achieve a few objectives of importance to them than it is to fulfill all the objectives that are important to the teacher. Leal (1993) advocates allowing learners to explore ideas through peer discussions - even without fully intact answers - a process that can yield new and valuable insights. Corno (1992) suggests allowing learners to pursue personal interests without the threat of formal evaluation. Even if they make mistakes

while doing so, the activities will sustain their interest, transcend frustration, and eventually break barriers to achievement. According to Lyman, Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading may be one way of accomplishing this objective in the reading classroom.

To establish the habit of self-monitoring, teachers need to encourage learners to reflect on what they did and to revise attempted work (Corno, 1992). Keeping journals is one way of maintaining a record of the learning process.

Since SDL stresses meaningful learning, Temple and Rodero (1995) advocate a situated learning approach, in which teachers bring real-life problems into the classroom for learners to work on. They advise against 'sugar-coating' work with fun, the rationale being that if the tasks are meaningful, learners will work on them willingly. Learners should also be allowed to collaborate with the teacher in determining deadlines and other regulations.

Finally, teachers need to model learning strategies such as predicting, questioning, clarifying, and summarizing, so that students will develop the ability to use these strategies on their own. Teachers also need to allow individual learners to approach a task in different ways using different strategies (Many, Fyfe, Lewis, & Mitchell, 1996).

Researchers have found that as children grow, they have an increasing desire for autonomy. SDL may be one way of harnessing that natural desire to help achieve a meaningful learning experience that will last through adulthood.

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