

Self directed learning: Why it didn't make it into the Australian Federal Curriculum but it is still a cornerstone of the BIS education

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Self directed learning, that is the process “... *in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes*” [1] , has an interesting history.

From the early progressive school movement in the 19th century through to radical thinkers like Dewey to Carl Rogers and William Glasser, the idea of self education directed by an engaged learner who feels passion and enthusiasm for learning has consistently been hailed as the ultimate goal in education. So why then isn't every school preaching self directed learning? When I started teaching in the 1990's it was the latest buzzword however now most schools do not even discuss it anymore. The great idea was abandoned.

So what happened?

Rodney Skager, a UNESCO researcher, wrote a range of seminal research papers in the 1980s about the importance of SDL. In his book “Organising Schools to Encourage Self Direction in Learners” he stated that whole school change was an imperative to creating SDL. His research showed that only a very rare type of learner, the introspective extravert, was capable of demonstrating the necessary skill set to actively engage in Self Direction: every other type of learner needed to be explicitly taught. Furthermore, schools needed to

change in order to increase the opportunities for students to control their own learning through new experiences, a chance to question, to be autonomous, to reflect on their own learning and to search for answers. Later research by authors such as Westwood (1997) and Van Deur and Murray-Harvey (2005) have continued in the same vein as Skager. Decades of research have confirmed that self directed learning must be explicitly taught and requires time for depth of learning and reflection.

This process of school change has proved almost impossible for most schools to even consider as the mainstream system relies on a level of homogeneity that has just been increased with the implementation of the Federal Curriculum across many State Schools. Teachers face a generic work program that demands the same texts being studied, the same history topic and the same timing. In such a design, there are no opportunities for the needs of an individual to be catered, and no time for the depth of learning and reflection SDL requires, and it is no surprise that it was abandoned despite its immense benefits.

Fortunately for BIS, although we are required to follow the Federal Curriculum, we are not restricted to it in the same way State Schools are. As such we have been able to embrace self-directed learning as a major focus of our program. Our teaching and learning engages students with increasing their skills in expressing 7 clear characteristics of Self Directed Learning:

Planfulness, Autonomy, Internalized Evaluations, Openness to Experience, Intrinsic Motivation, Self Acceptance and Flexibility.

These characteristics are planned into our curriculum and each student is tracked on a continuum of development. It is wonderful to see how a student can go from needing a teacher to help them even come up with an idea for a project and then observe them in their final years developing planning and implementing a project like the end of year concert or fundraising for the RSPCA. They learn how great it feels to develop their own idea and most importantly how to complete the task without anyone standing over them to get it done.

BIS kids are taught to be Self Directed Learners, embarking on a lifelong journey full of passion and joy for learning.

That is what school should always be about.

References

[1] M. Knowles, Principles of Androgogy, 1972

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Westwood, Peter (1997) Commonsense Methods for Children with Special Needs. Third Edition. Routledge London and New York.

Website:

<http://www.bis.org.au/2012/self-directed-learning-why-it-didnt-make-it-into-the-australian-federal-curriculum-but-it-is-still-a-cornerstone-of-the-bis-education/>