

## **Self-Directed Learning: A Key Component of Adult Learning Theory**

Geri Manning

### **Definitions and Parameters**

The relationship between adult learning and self-directed learning is a topic worth exploring on both theoretical and practical grounds. Mezirow points out that, "no concept is more central to what adult education is all about than self-directed learning".<sup>1</sup>

Knowles describes self-directed learning as "a process in which individuals take the initiative without the help of others in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating goals, identifying human and material resources, and evaluating learning outcomes".<sup>2</sup>

What and who is an adult learner? A person is an adult to the extent that he or she is performing social roles typically assigned by our culture to those it considers adults, and to the extent that the individual perceives him or herself to be essentially responsible for his or her life. A child is not responsible for his or her life even from a legal point of view. According to Neimi, the adult learner is one who returns to study, on a full-time or part-time basis, after a period of time spent in other pursuits.<sup>3</sup> Freedman states that the adult learner is someone who is motivated enough to want to pin further education at the end of a working day or is required to come to a program for certification.<sup>4</sup>

### **Conceptual Framework of Adult Learning Theory-Literature Review and Critique**

Modern adult learning theory has its foundations in the following assumptions of Lindeman:

---

**Geraldine A. Manning** received a PhD in education from the George Washington University in January 2004 as part of GWU Executive Leadership Program. She recently retired from government after 31 years of service. Mrs. Manning works as a consultant at the Customs and Border Protection, Office of Finance.

<sup>1</sup> J. Mezirow, "A Critical Theory of Self-Directed Learning", *New Directions for Continuing Education*, N25 17-30 (1985) p.17

<sup>2</sup> M.S. Knowles, "Self-Directed Learning", *A Guide for Learners and Teachers*. (N.Y. Cambridge Books 1975) p.18

<sup>3</sup> J. Neimi, "Fostering Participaton in Learning", *New Directions for Continuing Education*, 26 (1985)

<sup>4</sup> J. Freedman "Reflections of a Teacher of Adults", *New Directions in Continuing Education*, 26 (1985) pp. 97-102

1. Adults are motivated to learn as they experience needs and interests that learning will satisfy.
2. Adults' orientation to learning is life-centered.
3. Experience is the richest source for adults' learning.
4. Adults have a deep need to be self-directing.
5. Individual differences among people increase with age.<sup>5</sup>

The first three assumptions clearly demonstrate a very pragmatic orientation towards learning. The fourth assumption is clearly the most important for this paper because of its obvious relation to self-directed learning. The last assumption is interesting and demonstrates the value of self-directed learning, where there is variation in both the form and the speed of learning.

The implications of these assumptions are clearly that learning should be largely based on individuals' experiences and focused on life situations and life goals. Instruction should emphasize the analysis of experiences and the role of the instructor should be that of a facilitator or engager rather than a transmitter of knowledge. The last assumption would indicate that teaching strategies should take into account differences in style, time, place, and pace.

The roots of adult learning theories can be traced to research in group dynamics approaches in the late 1940s and 1950s. According to this early theory, the adult learner mobilized a set of motivational, perceptual, emotional, and attitudinal -systems to resist learning and changing unless the climate was safe to do so. Thus, learning and changing could be viewed as either safe or unsafe strategies. Knowles's theory of adult education suggested that adults succeed in situations where they are highly motivated, where they can participate in the learning process, and where learning content had practical applications. This modern approach to adult learning theory had a very pragmatic orientation. In addition, Knowles also found that adults find an informal setting conducive to learning, and they want exact details of what is expected of them, opportunities to practice their new skills and immediate feedback on their learning process<sup>6</sup>. Are adults sometimes slightly demanding?

---

<sup>5</sup> E.C. Lindeman, "The Meaning of Adult Education", (N.Y. The New Republic, 1926)

<sup>6</sup> Knowles, Op cit

## **Self-Directed Learning: A Key Component of Adult Learning Theory**

Knowles also asserted that learners themselves are important resources for teaching; activating and incorporating rich experiences into the teaching material making it more relevant.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the education of adult learners has to go beyond the transmission of knowledge to helping persons in directing and managing their own learning. Again, a possible reference to self-directed learning. Adult learning according to Knowles should also include a psychological climate favorable to learning.

After Knowles' theory of andragogy appeared, Tough reported the results of seven years work on efforts of adults to learn, change and grow. Tough's research was not only concerned with why adults learn, but also with how they learn. He found that adults organized their learning efforts around "projects ... defined as a series of related episodes, adding up to at least seven hours. In each episode, more than half of the person's total motivation is to gain and retain certain fairly clear knowledge and skill, or to produce some other lasting change in himself."<sup>8</sup> Tough concluded that adult learners proceed through several phases in the process of engaging in a learning project. He speculated that helping them gain increased competence in dealing with each phase with decreasing amounts of assistance might be one effective way of improving their learning.<sup>9</sup>

Mezirow's perspective transformation centered upon his work with community college re-entry programs for women. He described what the women experienced as a unique kind of learning: Learning the psychological and cultural assumptions that influenced how they saw themselves and their relationships. Later, Mezirow grounded his observations in the critical theory of Jurgen Habermas, who described three areas in which people sought knowledge: work, relationships, and emancipatory action. Mezirow translated these areas into domains of adult learning, each with its own distinctive model and needs. Habermas' domain of emancipatory action, the uniquely adult domain of learning, is what Mezirow means by perspective transformation. According of this theory, the most important task for adult educators is assisting people become aware of the psychocultural assumptions that have shaped how they see themselves and others.

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> A.M.Tough, The Adult's Learning Projects: A Fresh Approach to Theory and practice in Adult Learning, (Austin, Texas: Learning Concepts, 1971)

More recently, in developing college courses based on adult learning theory, Brookfield suggested six principles of effective practice in facilitating learning: (1) voluntary participation in learning; (2) mutual respect; (3) collaborative spirit; (4) action and reflection; (5) critical reflection; and (6) self-direction<sup>10</sup>. The latter principle is most closely associated with self-directed learning.

### **Conceptual Framework of Self-Directed Learning - Literature Review and Critique**

What is this notion of self-directed learning that keeps being mentioned as a part of adult education? When an individual or group decides that they want to learn certain information, knowledge or skill, they often seek the help of a teacher or professional instructor to tell them how to proceed and to supervise the learning process. However, another alternative for an individual is to assume the primary responsibility for planning, initiating, and conducting the learning project. Such behavior can be called either self-instruction, self-education, independent study, individual study self-teaching, or self-directed learning.

Knowles identifies three reasons for self-directed learning as follows:

1. Individuals who take the initiative in learning, learn more things and learn better, than do people who sit at the feet of teachers possibly waiting to be taught.
2. Self-directed learning is more in tune with our natural processes of psychological development.
3. Many of the new developments in education ... put a heavy responsibility on the learners to take a good deal of initiative in their own learning.<sup>11</sup>

He continues with three implications as follows:

1. It is no longer realistic to define the purpose of education as transmitting what is known.

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> S. Brookfield, Independent Adult Learning, Unpublished doctoral dissertation University of Leicester (1980)

<sup>11</sup> Knowles Op Cit., pp.14-15

## Self-Directed Learning: A Key Component of Adult Learning Theory

2. There must be somewhat different ways of thinking about learning.
3. It is no longer appropriate to equate education with youth.<sup>12</sup>

Knowles also states five key assumptions which underlie self-directed learning:

1. Self-directed learning assumes that the human being grows in capacity and needs to be self-directing as an essential component in maturing.
2. Self-directed learning assumes that the learners' experiences become an increasingly rich resource for learning that should be exploited along with the resources of experts.
3. Self-directed learning assumes that individuals become ready to learn what is required to perform their evolving life task or to cope more adequately with their life problems.
4. Self-directed learning assumes that the natural orientation of individuals is task or problem-centered.
5. Self-directed learning assumes that learners are motivated by internal incentives such as the need for self-esteem.<sup>13</sup>

However, it is interesting that Knowles does acknowledge that there are situations where the learners' experience is of little value including: when they have no previous experience in the subject matter, where readiness to learn is governed by one's level of maturity, and when the learner is motivated by external pressures<sup>14</sup>. Confessore and Confessore explain, "The point is made that there may be situations where teacher-directed learning is to be preferred over self-directed learning<sup>15</sup>. But even here Knowles continues to emphasize learner responsibility and critical thought"<sup>16</sup>.

Throughout history, some adults have planned and conducted their own learning. For example, Socrates, Benjamin Franklin, Abraham Lincoln, and John Stuart Mill were considered self-educated men. The earliest tradition in American schools was that of each student learning his lessons by himself; during the nineteenth century graded classrooms and group instruction became common in North American schools. During the 1950's and 1960's, self-teaching became

---

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21

<sup>15</sup> G.J. Congessore and S.J. Confessore, Editors, Guide points to Self-Directed Learning (King of Prussia, Pa: Organization Design and Development Inc. 1992)

<sup>16</sup> Knowles Op Cit, p.41

an important component of a variety of experimental programs in both elementary and secondary schools. Tough points to three specific attempts to promote self-teaching in schools.

First is self-selection where children or adults will actually select books that meet their level of maturity and their learning needs<sup>17</sup>. My problem with this approach is that many individuals do not know what they need to learn in subjects for which they have little knowledge.

A second example of self-teaching is the use of programmed instruction and teaching machines. Tough points to three major principles of programmed instruction: (1) The student should learn from printed materials rather than from the teacher or the group; (2) He should learn at his own pace; and (3) He should test his own progress<sup>18</sup>. It is interesting to note that when Tough wrote these principles he had no idea the potential of personal computers and their effect on methods of education.

Finally, is the attempt in colleges and universities to promote independent study. One of the early attempts to promote independent study was conducted at Stanford University in the 1930's. During later years, many other universities have encouraged independent study where students make decisions about learning with little assistance from faculty members. Bonthuis pointed out that independent study is called by various names such as honors courses, senior thesis, individual study, and independent reading; and that it can be defined as "the pursuit of special topics or projects by individual students under the guidance of faculty advisers apart from organized courses"<sup>19</sup>.

Forster proposes a more comprehensive definition of independent study in terms of four variables: (1) Where students acquire knowledge by his or her own efforts and develop the ability for inquiry and critical evaluation; (2) it includes freedom of choice in determining those objectives; (3) it requires freedom of process to carry out the objectives; and (4) it places increased educational responsibility on the student for achieving course objectives. Clearly, there is a trade-off here where more control also means accepting more responsibility.

---

<sup>17</sup> Tough, Op Cit

<sup>18</sup> Tough, *Learning Without A Teacher* (Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1967)

### **Applications to Lifelong Learning Situations**

An interesting question is whether self-directed learning implies a life-long education. The obvious answer is "no" because it is clear that an individual can elect to complete only one self-directed learning course and not choose to continue with any form of education. However, Candy has a more enlightened view of this issue: "The relationship between self-directed learning and life-long education is a reciprocal one. On the one hand, self-directed learning is one of the most common ways in which adults pursue learning throughout their life span, as well as being a way in which people supplement learning received in formal settings. On the other hand, lifelong learning takes, as one of its principle aims, equipping people with skills and competencies required to continue their own self-education beyond the end of formal schooling. In this sense, self-directed learning is viewed simultaneously as a means and an end of lifelong education"<sup>20</sup>.

According to the definition of lifelong education adopted by the Unesco Institute of Education, it should have the following characteristics:

1. Last the whole life of each individual;
2. Lead to the systematic acquisition, renewal, upgrading and completion of knowledge, skills, and attitudes made necessary by the constantly changing conditions in which people now live;
3. Have, as its ultimate goal, promotion of the self-fulfillment of each individual;
4. Acknowledge, the contribution of all available educational influences, including formal, nonformal, and informal; and most importantly,
5. Be dependent for its successful implementation on people's increasing ability and motivation to engage in self-directed learning activities.

An important distinction regarding self-directed learning is whether it is a goal or a process. For some authors and researchers, self-directed learning is simply a method of

---

<sup>19</sup> R.H. Bonthuis, The Independent Study Program in the United States, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957) p.61

<sup>20</sup> P.C. Candy, Self-Direction for Lifelong Learning, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass 1991) p.15

organizing instruction. The best example of this approach is found in Tough's list of 13 steps in beginning a self-directed learning project:

1. Deciding what detailed knowledge and skill to learn;
2. Deciding the specific activities, methods, resources, or equipment for learning;
3. Deciding where to learn;
4. Setting specific deadlines or intermediate targets;
5. Deciding when to begin a learning episode;
6. Deciding the pace at which to proceed during a learning episode;
7. Estimating the current level of knowledge and skill and progress in gaining the desired knowledge and skill;
8. Detecting any factor that has been backing or hindering learning;
9. Obtaining the desired resources or equipment;
10. Preparing or adapting a room;
11. Saving or obtain the money necessary for the use of certain human or nonhuman resources;
12. Finding time for the learning; and
13. Taking certain steps to increase the motivation for learning<sup>21</sup>.

It is interesting to note that although this list includes many practical issues regarding self-directed learning, Tough did not ignore motivation, which is especially important for self-directed learning. Another observation about this list is that Tough does not ignore the important issue of necessary resources and time which are often difficult to obtain.

### **Potential Characteristics of Self-Directed Learners**

For other authors and researchers, self-directed learning is not so much a method of organizing instruction as it is a characteristic of learners. This leads logically to the following question or issue: what do we want self-learners to become--perhaps, some form of self-directed



## Self-Directed Learning: A Key Component of Adult Learning Theory

individuals? Candy explains: "Most government policies on education, and many institutional policies and mission statements as well, stress the development of independence, autonomy, and the ability to control their own affairs as major objectives for learners of all ages. Indeed, the rapid rate of political social, and technological change with which we are currently confronted has increased, rather than diminished, the need for self-directed citizens"<sup>22</sup>.

One potential characteristic of self-directed learners is the striving for the democratic ideal. As Naisbitt points out, there is a trend in America from representative to participatory democracy brought about by the increasingly widespread belief that "people whose lives are affected by a decision must be a part of the process of arriving at that decision"<sup>23</sup>. As Candy explains, "As people become more accustomed to, and skilled at, informed participation and choosing in these aspects of their lives, they have made increasing demands for similar power sharing in relation to their education. These demands go far beyond so-called participatory learning methods, and extend into all aspects of the educative process, from the assessment of needs through the design of programs to the evaluation of learning outcomes"<sup>24</sup>.

Another potential characteristic of self-directed learners is an increased emphasis on the ideology of individualism. Keddie points out that "the notion of individuality as a desirable personality goal is not universal, but is cultural specific and tends to be found in those cultures (such as ours) where high status is obtained by competitive individual achievement"<sup>25</sup>. Also, there is a class dimension to individualism. Also, Keddie explains, "Nor is it valued equally by all groups within our society. The force of the research which has attempted to distinguish between middle and working class cultures has stressed that while the middle class are oriented towards the value of individual achievement, working class culture places emphasis on collective values"<sup>26</sup>. This point is confirmed by Brookfield who, in his review of self-directed learning research, laments the failure to deal with working class learners<sup>27</sup>.

---

<sup>21</sup> Tough, *The Adults Learning Projects*, *Op Cit*, pp.95-96

<sup>22</sup> Candy, *Op Cit*, p.20

<sup>23</sup> N. Naisbitt, *Megatrends: Ten New Directions Transforming our Lives* (London: Macdonald 1984) p.159

<sup>24</sup> Candy, *Op Cit*, p.33

<sup>25</sup> N. Keddie, "Adult Education: An Ideology of Individualism" *Adult Education for a Change*. (London: Hutchinson 1980) p.54

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, pp.34-55

<sup>27</sup> S. Brookfield "Self-Directed Adult Learning: A Critical Paradigm", *Adult Education Quarterly*, (1984) 35(2), pp.59-71

A final potential characteristic of self-directed learners involves the concept of egalitarianism. As Candy explains, "The broad area of egalitarianism in adult education is a conceptual and terminological minefield, concerned as it is with issues of equity as well as equality--of opportunity, of participation, and of outcomes"<sup>28</sup>. There are two broad categories of reasons why adult learners might choose to treat learners as equals. First, the adult learner may be seen to be as autonomous as the teacher, capable of making enlightened choices both as to the content of the curriculum and the method of instruction. Second, since there is a pragmatic threat that adult students will not submit to learning that is not acceptable and useful to them, there is a belief among teachers that they should not strictly impose their values and beliefs if they can avoid doing this.

### Open Education

Closely related to the idea of egalitarianism is Lawson's notion of "the democratization of knowledge," where the creation, distribution, and interpretation of knowledge are seen as social processes involving everyone<sup>29</sup>. It is interesting to note that this trend according to Crittenden is, in fact "reacting to the excesses of the mechanistic, positivist account of knowledge"<sup>30</sup>.

In opposition to the positivist account of knowledge, where knowledge is objective and external to the learner, are two alternative paradigms. The first, called radical subjectivism, holds that each person is entirely the author of his or her own knowledge, and that there is no independent objective world outside of the individual mind. A second, less radical approach, is the relativistic view of knowledge which is expounded by Rathbone under the rubric of "open education." Their tenets include:

1. Knowledge is idiosyncratically formed, individually conceived, fundamentally individualistic. Theoretically, no two people's knowledge can be the same, unless their experience is identical.

---

<sup>28</sup> Candy, *Op Cit* p.36

<sup>29</sup> K.H. Lawson, *Conceptual Essays on the Education of Adults*, (Nottingham, Dept. of Adult Education U. of Nottingham, 1982) p.36

<sup>30</sup> B. Crittenden "Autonomy as an Aim in Education", *Ethics and Education Policy*, (London: Routledge and Kegan 1978) p.111

## **Self-Directed Learning: A Key Component of Adult Learning Theory**

2. Because knowledge is basically idiosyncratic, it is most difficult to judge whether one person's knowledge is better than another's.

3. Knowledge does not exist outside of individual knowledge; it is not a thing apart.

4. Knowledge is not inherently ordered or structured.

5. People do not make their cognitive way up any universal ladder. On the contrary, the learner envisioned by open education faces a world open to a plurality of interpretations<sup>31</sup>.

Given these beliefs about the nature of knowledge, it is not surprising, that in open education, we move away from the concept of master and apprentice and towards notions such as facilitators, resource persons, and self-directed learning. In fact, under this paradigm, since knowledge is fundamentally individualistic, self-directed learning is perhaps the most valid form of learning.

What factors inhibit or encourage the use of self-directed learning? Kops points to a variety of enhancing factors that include: good availability of resources, supportive and consistent leadership, and learning opportunities available from external colleagues<sup>32</sup>. Some negative factors include: Negative micro-climates, restrictive policies, limited delegation of authority that restricts initiative, and constrained economic condition.

### **Interpretive Summary - A Critical Review of Self-Directed Learning Research**

The efforts of Tough, Knowles, and others to understand and develop self-directed learning as a critical component of adult education have been the subject of this paper. In terms of self-directed learning and social settings, Tough, Brookfield and Moore have argued that the self-directed learner should not be thought of as an intellectual Robinson Crusoe, but, instead, as someone with a strong reliance on external resources, both human and material, in the conduct of learning, projects<sup>33</sup>.

---

<sup>31</sup> C.H. Rathbone, "The Implicit Rationale of the Open Education Classroom", Open Education: The Informal Classroom, (N.Y. Citation Press 1971) pp.102-103

<sup>32</sup> W.J. Kaps, Self-Planned Learning of Managers in an Organizational Context, SDL Symposium, 1994

<sup>33</sup> Tough, Op Cit, Brookfield, Op Cit and M.G. Moore, "Towards a Theory of Independent Learning", Journal of Higher Education (1973) 44(12) pp.661-679

## **Self-Directed Learning: A Key Component of Adult Learning Theory**

In terms of self-directed learning and independence, Tough and Knowles emphasize the fact of the learner's control over the planning and execution of learning.

In terms of self-directed learning and middle-class life styles, many researchers have focused on educationally advantaged populations including Tough and Brookfield . Thus, there is an issue regarding the resultant generalizations about self-directed learning and if they are culture and class specific.

In terms of self-directed learning and its applications in schools, Tough Bonthuis and Forster point to self-selection, programmed instruction, and independent study.

In terms of self-directed learning and lifelong education, Candy and the Unesco Institute of Education point to self-education as both a means and an end in supplementing formal schooling.

In terms of how to organize self-directed learning, Tough outlines 13 steps which represents the best summary available on how to conduct self-directed learning including steps on deciding what to learn and motivation for learning.

In terms of potential characteristics of self-directed learners, Naisbitt points to the democratic ideal; Keddie and Brookfield point to the notion of individualism; and Candy points to egalitarianism.

Finally, in terms of self-directed learning and open education, Rathbone, points to five key tenets including the fact that knowledge is fundamentally individualistic.