

AN INVESTIGATION OF THE CONCEPT OF  
SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING AND  
IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENT  
RETENTION

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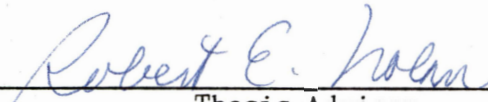
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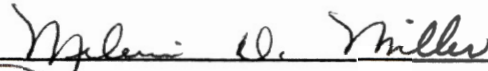
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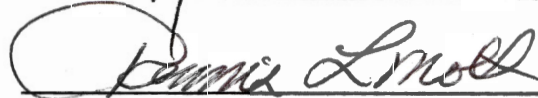
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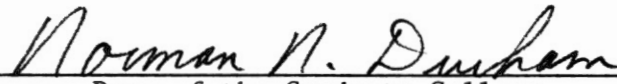
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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The recent emphasis on lifelong learning rather than a specified number of years of education as preparation for life has caused new interest in self-directed learning (Guglielmino, 1977). "The complexity of life and the increasing importance of learning across the life span put an added emphasis on self-direction in learning" (Long and Agyekum, 1984). Brookfield (1984, p. 59) stated "By almost any measure conceivable, research into self-directed adult learning must constitute the chief growth area in the field of adult education research in the last decade." Zemke (1982, p. 10) further asserted, "Only those who can design their own learning can cope with constant change."

Guglielmino (1977) also reported the UNESCO's statement that "Education must cease to be confined within schoolhouse walls and emphasize the importance of an education which develops a taste for self-learning, a desire to know, and a critical spirit" (p. 2). Therefore, learning how to learn, in addition to the mere learning of subject matter, is of the utmost importance.

The concept of self-direction in adult learning was stimulated by Tough's (1967) work over 20 years. Since then research into questions concerning adults' self-directed learning has expanded into enormous research projects and an abundance of literature in self-direction.

However, there are few data dealing directly with the relationship of self-directed learning and academic and personal success. The drop-out rate on the secondary and post-secondary levels is on the rise and the enrollment in the ABE programs is also rising. Fellenz (1982) suggested that self-fulfillment and the development of self-directed learners and self-concept are the most appropriate goals of adult education. When these goals are reached, adults will be better prepared to compete for jobs, read on a higher level, and in general become more prepared for lifelong learning.

#### Problem

The problem is that adult students are dropping out of the Adult Basic Education programs.

#### Need

Because technology and society in general are changing rapidly, continual learning is becoming a necessity rather than an option (Zemke, 1982). Those who do not advance or progress with these changes become obsolete and eventually lose their jobs. Likewise, students who do not progress with these changes become academic casualties (Fellenz, 1982).

#### Purpose

The purpose of this study is to investigate the concept of self-directed learning and its implications for student retention. Current available research is in agreement that adults are self-directed learners; however their direction needs channeling by a

facilitator to keep them on track (Gibbons, Bailey, Comeau, Schmuck, Seymour, and Wallace, 1980) and if properly channeled, adults may become more responsible which is often the key to personal success and success in the workplace (Dejoy and Dejoy, 1987).

### Research Questions

The report sought to answer the following questions:

1. What is self-directed learning?
2. What are the characteristics of self-directed learners?
3. What is the role of the teacher/facilitator in fostering self-directed learning?
4. How do teachers/facilitators increase readiness for self-directed learning?

### Definitions

ABE Students: Adult Basic Education students.

Self-Directed Learning: A change in an individual's disposition or capabilities which could be observed in the form of a permanent behavioral change brought about by that individual's own efforts (Brookfield, 1984).

Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale (SDLRS): The Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale developed by Guglielmino (1977).

### Organization of the Report

Chapter I introduces the study, presents the problem, purpose, need, definitions, and organization of the report. Chapter II includes a review of the related literature focusing on the areas of (1) adult

education, which includes self-directed efforts and research related to self-directed learning of adults, and (2) self-directed learning activities in continuing education for nonself-directed learners. Chapter III reports the findings, conclusions and recommendations of this report.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter presents a review of related literature area of self-directed learning. Organization of the chapter is as follows: (1) self-directed learning of adults, (2) characteristics of adult self-directed learners, (3) teacher/facilitator role in self-direction, and (4) increasing readiness for self-directed learning.

#### Self-Directed Learning of Adults

The topic of self-directed learning as an element of adult education is of increasing importance and has received considerable research attention from adult educators. Self-directed learning is known by a variety of other names--self teaching, independent learning, self-instruction, self-study, self-education, inquiry method--all synonymous with self-directed learning (Knowles, 1975).

According to Knowles (1978), as early as 1926, Lindeman included the concepts of self-directed learning in his assumption of the adult learner in the publication, The Meaning of Adult Education:

1. Adults are motivated to learn as they experience needs and interests that learning will satisfy; therefore, those are the starting points for organizing adult education activities.
2. Adults' orientation is life-centered; therefore, the appropriate units for organizing adult learning are life situations not subjects.



3. Experience is the richest resource for adults' learning; therefore, the core methodology of adult education is the analysis of experience.
4. Adults have a deep need to be self-directing; therefore, the role of the teacher is to engage in a process of mutual inquiry with them and then evaluate their conformity to it.
5. Individual differences among people increase with age; therefore, adult education must make optimal provision for differences in style, time, place, and place of learning (Knowles, 1978, p. 31).

Houle (1961) reported that every individual possesses some wish to learn, but all do not possess the same desire to learn. There are those who seem to be content with a semi-vegetative routine; on the other hand, there are those who have insatiable appetites for learning. Furthermore, Houle (1961) categorized the participants of adult learners as: (1) goal-oriented learners, (2) activity-oriented learners and (3) learning-oriented learners.

Houle (1961) described the goal-oriented learners as ". . . those who use education as a means of accomplishing fairly clear-cut objectives" (p. 15). These are the learners who believe that knowledge is to be put to use, and if it is not, then the pursuit of that knowledge is fruitless. This type of learner would be symbolic of one continuing in education for the sake of getting ahead in his job. These learners have clear-cut aims which they wish to achieve.

The activity-oriented learner ". . . takes part in learning primarily for reasons unrelated to the purposes or content of the activities in which they engage" (Houle, 1961, p. 19). Those learners participate for the joy of participation, not necessarily for the sake of learning. Loneliness, pursuit of a husband or wife, escape from personal problems or unhappy relationships are all reasons for

activity-oriented learners to participate.

The learning-oriented learner is much different from the other two types of learners. The fundamental purpose of the learning-oriented is the desire to know, or as Houle (1961) put it, ". . . the itch to learn" (p. 25). Houle further asserted ". . . each particular educational experience of the learning-oriented is an activity with a goal, but the continuity and range of such experiences make the total pattern of participation far more than the sums of its parts" (p. 24). What they do has a continuity, a flare and a spread which establish the basic nature of their participation in continuing education. Even though the three types of learners have different emphases, they all have goals, they enjoy participation, and most importantly, they like to learn (Houle, 1961).

Houle's studies of 1961 have become standards in the matter of self-direction, but Caffarella (1983) suggested that the self-directed learner has always been and "Self-directed learning as a method of learning has been with us for years disguised as other labels" (p. 7).

Tough (1967), another pioneer of self-directed learning who uses self-teaching interchangeably with self-directed learning, and a student of Houle, pointed out such people as Socrates, Benjamin Franklin and Abraham Lincoln as being recognized as self-directed learners. Tough interviewed 40 college graduates who professed to having taught themselves. Investigating 12 teaching tasks that might be performed during normal self-teaching, Tough (1967) concluded that self-teachers can and do perform the same tasks as a professional teacher.

A national sample was taken by Penland (1979) regarding

self-initiated and self-planned learning. The findings of Penland's research as reported by Guglielmino (1977) indicated:

More than three-fourths of the U. S. population had planned one or more learning projects the year before the information was collected. Seventy-nine percent of the population 18 years and older perceive themselves as continuing learners whether in self-planned or formal courses for credit. Only 2.9 percent were engaged in formal courses or school-like projects (p. 173).

According to Box (1982) data were gathered through research in specific geographical areas of the United States. Box reported data gathered from 466 adults in Knoxville and one rural county of Tennessee. Ninety-one percent of the participants had executed at least one project in the year with most projects related to occupation or recreation. She also reported Hiemstra's 1976 study of 256 Nebraska adults. Over one-half initiated projects related to self-fulfillment in the areas of arts, crafts, recreation, religion, mental health, physical health, finances, and homemaking. Very few of the learning projects were related to occupations, social and civic competence (Box, 1982).

Box (1982) also reported in a study of randomly-selected professional men that of the average of 11 self-directed projects per year that were performed, 55 percent were job related. The most prevalent cited reason for the self-directed projects was the need for individualization of the subject matter.

Individualization of instruction has implications that instructors may not be individual enough or the ability of the instructor to teach may be questionable (Tough, 1978). Box (1982) also reported the preferences of the planners of self-directed studies varied according to subject matter. Group settings were preferred for religious and

academic learning (47 percent); one-to-one instruction was preferred for personal development (29 percent); self-planning for current events (96 percent); and of all these projects, vocational learning was most preferred.

Johnstone and Rivera (1965) described the findings that at least nine million adults in the United States were involved in at least one major self-education project in 1965 as "surprising" (p. 37) and that self-instruction may be the most overlooked avenue of study in the entire field of adult education. Even though Tough (1967, 1971) thought the information reported by Johnstone and Rivera (1965) was a gross underestimate due to the method of questioning, Tough admitted the need for further questioning to determine the nature of self-directed learning and its related topics. Guglielmino (1977) reported that Tough's (1967) findings revealed:

Almost everyone undertakes at least one or two major learning efforts a year, and some individuals undertake as many as 15 or 20. The median is eight learning projects a year, involving eight distinct areas of knowledge or skill (p. 11).

Tough also reported that at least 70 percent of the learning projects are self-planned.

Knowles (1980) stated that in a world of accelerated change, there are "four main ideas that will influence adult education practice in the eighties and nineties" (p. 18). These four ideas were (1) a reconceptualization of the purposes of education, (2) a shift from focusing on teaching to a focus on learning, (3) conceptualization of lifelong learning as the organizing principle for education, and (4) the development of new methods and techniques for presenting educational services.

According to Knowles (1980), until recently the purpose of education was to produce the

. . . educated man . . . but in an era of knowledge explosion, . . . this definition of the purpose of education and faith in the power of transmitted knowledge are no longer appropriate. We now know that in the world of the future we must define the mission of education as to produce competent people--people who are able to apply their knowledge under changing conditions; and we know that the foundational competence all people must have is the competence to engage in lifelong self-directed learning (p. 19).

The "why" then of self-directed learning according to Knowles (1975) is that of self-survival of the human race.

Knowles (1980) advocated turning the focus of education from teaching to learning. This redirection of focus puts a new emphasis on the learner and more specifically the process of facilitation of self-directed learning. This focus redefines the role of a teacher from a transmitter of knowledge to a facilitator and a resource to be used by self-directed learners. Knowles also emphasized that a primary concern of education must be developing inquiry skills and providing resources and support for self-directed inquiries.

The literature contains a variety of definitions for self-directed learning. Murphy (1984, p. 20) cited several definitions:

Self-design and implementation of learning (Magus, 1973), self-diagnosis of learning needs, self-selection of materials and activities to achieve learning and giving the students broad topics, a reading list, and freedom to study areas of personal interest (LaLance, 1976).

Brookfield (1984) argued that the term self-directed learning has confusing connotations. Citing the works of Jensen, Verner Little, and Boshier, he argued that the term learning should be used to describe change in an individual's disposition or capabilities which could be observed in the form of permanent behavioral change, and the

term education should be reserved to the process of management of the external changes to facilitate the internal change; therefore, those adults who assign their own learning goal, locate the appropriate resources and evaluate their progress are engaged in self-education rather than self-directed learning. Brookfield (1984) then distinguished between self-directed learning as the internal change while self-education is the external collection, management and analysis of information.

Although agreement of a definition does not exist nor does research provide conclusive evidence that the self-directed learning method is superior to the lecture method, agreement about the importance of fostering self-directed learning does exist.

#### Characteristics of Self-Directed Learners

"The concept of self-direction in learning is an attractive idea that seems to be of increasing interest in higher education circles" (Long and Agyekum, 1983, p. 77). Since learning skills and attitudes have gained importance with changing philosophies concerning the role of schooling and education, and there will be increasingly more self-directed learning at all educational levels, extreme importance should be placed on the identification of the characteristics of self-directed learners.

Guglielmino (1977) suggested that perhaps dropout rates in independent study programs may be lowered provided students who are self-directed would be admitted to these programs. In her development of the SDLRS, Guglielmino (1977) conducted a study of the

characteristics of self-directed learners. Torrance and Mourad (1978) and Zemke (1982) all cited Guglielmino's study of characteristics as well as her SDLRS as being valid.

The literature suggests that there are some rather clearly identifiable behaviors and abilities associated with self-directed learning. Long and Agyekum (1983) condensed a list from several sources that included: intelligence, independence, confidence, persistence, initiative, creativity, ability to critically evaluate one's self, patience, desire to learn, and task orientation. Other behavioral characteristics identified were: tolerance of ambiguity, ability to discover new approaches, prior success with independent learning, preference for working alone, knowledge of variety of sources, ability to plan, and the ability to carry out a plan.

Guglielmino (1977) reduced the preceding list of characteristics and descriptions through the use of factor analysis as a result of her work on the SDLRS. She stated that the highly self-directed learners were those who exhibit initiative, independence and persistence in learning. Furthermore, self-directed learners are capable of accepting responsibility for their own learning and self-directed learners view problems as challenges rather than obstacles. Self-directed learners possess both curiosity and self-discipline, they combine self-confidence with a strong desire to learn and they organize their time, set an appropriate pace for learning, develop a plan for completing work, and derive pleasure from accomplishing their goals.

Zemke (1982) summarized Guglielmino's (1977) work by stating: "The self-directed learner is one who takes charge, accepts responsibility and is not stopped by problems" (p. 29).

## Teacher/Facilitator Role in Self-Direction

Before describing the facilitator's role, it is useful to recall Tough's description of self-direction. Tough (1978) reported that adults spend a ". . . remarkable amount of time . . ." (p. 250) on their major efforts to learn. He further stated that a typical adult conducts five major projects per year which total 500 hours per year. Tough's (1978) definition of a learning project has been accepted and cited by many who view it to be a classic definition:

A learning project is a highly deliberate effort to gain and retain certain knowledge and skill, or to change in some other way regardless of the method of the learning effort--reading, listening, observing, attending classes, reflecting, practicing, and getting answers to questions (p. 250).

The terms "knowledge" and "skill" also include such matters as changed awareness, competence, habits, attitudes, sensitivity, and confidence. Therefore, self-planned learning includes classroom learning, learning guided by a friend or a group of peers and learning guided by programmed instruction. Noncredit learning as well as learning for credit, a degree or a certificate is all included. Reasons for learning--to make a good decision, to build something, to raise a child, or to perform a task--are included in the range of major learning efforts as are learning motivated by curiosity, interest, puzzlement, and enjoyment.

Whatever the number of learning projects or the reasons for learning projects, there is evidence of a shift in focus from instruction to facilitation, from ". . . adult and continuing education" to learning opportunities for adults" (Tough, 1978, p. 251).



Brookfield (1984) in commenting on Tough's earlier studies, stated:

This research has challenged the assumption that adult learning can only occur in the presence of a fully accredited and certified professional teacher appropriately trained in techniques of instructional design and classroom management. Adult educators can no longer ignore the informal and noninstitutional dimensions of learning (p. 60).

Brockett (1985) reported that he as well as many other individuals, especially those "hard-to-reach" (those who are under-represented in continuing education such as the elderly, the handicapped and the geographically isolated), may believe that formal educational settings can reinforce conformity while stifling creativity.

The statement a student made in a study by Fellenz (1982) that "The teachers were friendly but wanted us to ask before doing anything" (p. 79) seems to corroborate Brockett's (1985) view that conformity stifles creativity. The only positive statement made in the group of ABE students labeled self-directed was made by an 85 year old woman who recalled a teacher who had taught her "how to do a theme paper" (p. 79). Many of the 62 interviewees in Fellenz's (1982) study emphasized the importance and influence of their high school teachers who did not teach much in the traditional sense. Instead, the teachers gave assignments, posed problems and pointed out potential resources. The point is, then, that the teacher who trained the students to take responsibility, who trusted the students to "decide" (p. 79), and who made the students think of new ways were the most effective in fostering self-direction.

It is obvious, then, that the teacher has a role to play in the development of self-directed learning. Zemke (1982) cited

Guglielmino's (1977) discovery through research that self-directed learning is both a necessary and a learnable skill. He further stated that many researchers believe that we all have the innate ability to learn to be self-directed, we just have to channel it. Rogers as cited by Guglielmino (1977), asserts that no man can properly be called educated until he learns how to learn, how to adapt and how to change. She further presented Bruner's view of the purpose of education to be closely related to Rogers' view that instruction is "their provisional state that has as its object to make the learner or problem solver self-sufficient" (Guglielmino, 1977, p. 12.)

Knowles (1975) declared "Self-directed learning is the best way to learn" and "Every act of teaching should have built into it some provision for helping the learner become more self-directing" (p. 10). Guglielmino (1977) agrees with the viewpoint that a major part of the solution to students' feelings of insecurity and dependence can be solved by encouragement of greater independence in learning, and schools as they are, seem to encourage conformity and passivity thus deadening the desire to learn.

Self-directed learning can be as effective as traditional modes of instruction with learners of widely-varied intellectual abilities (Guglielmino, 1977). Fellenz (1982) stated that "Teachers must take most seriously their duty to teach adult learners how to learn" (p. 83).

Dejoy and Dejoy (1987) stated there is a process for developing self-direction in learning. They outlined a simple plan:

The first step in a self directed learning program is developing individual learning goals and specific objectives. The second step is the planning step. With some help from the trainer, students identify resources

for learning, describes tasks for using these resources, and determine how their performance will be evaluated. The third step is establishing the type of feedback about performance will be evaluated. The third step is establishing the type of feedback about performance that will support students during the learning activities (p. 64).

Knowles (1984) reported an experience of becoming a facilitator. He compared the traditional way of teaching to facilitation. His experience in the traditional role of teacher--transmitting prescribed content, controlling the manner in which the students received the content and used it, and testing to evaluate if they had received it was preempted by converting to facilitation rather than teaching. Knowles (1984) began to let students state goals and expectations and identify their special interests and resources and, in short, take responsibility for their own learning. Reforming from content transmitter to process manager, from teacher to facilitator, Knowles (1984) was then performing the function of process designer and manager, which required relationship building with students, needs assessment, involvement of students in planning, linking students to learning resources, and encouraging student initiative. Knowles (1984) never again attempted to revert to the role of teacher.

### Increasing Readiness for Self-Directed Learning

Guglielmino and Rutland (1987) predicted that the problem of functional illiteracy may be solved through promotion of the self-directed learning approach, and ultimately the learning experiences of adult education students will be improved and enhanced. Self-direction is a necessity in the constantly changing technological

society.

Guglielmino and Rutland (1987) quoting Garstha and Knowles, stated that adult education students should be taught what self-directed learning is before they begin self-directed activities.

The use of a self-directed learning group will encourage growth and development of the adult student by promoting independence and self-understanding, and by providing a strong support system from the learning group (Guglielmino and Rutland, 1987, p. 1).

Because many authors believe facilitation rather than teaching is more effective in promoting learning, many adult education educators (teachers) are not prepared to conduct self-directed learning groups. "Facilitating any small group effectively requires certain skills, attitudes and abilities" (Guglielmino and Rutland, 1987, p. 4). A group facilitator is the key to a successful group, he/she must be sensitive to both verbal and nonverbal messages of the group so that he/she can effectively facilitate communication. Caring, concern, sensitivity and acceptance of group members should be demonstrated by what is said by the facilitator in a group. Guglielmino and Rutland (1987) listed personal characteristics of the Self-Directed Learning (SDL) group facilitator as guidelines for effective facilitation:

1. Demonstrate a pleasant and caring attitude
2. Be aware of indicators that tell you that you are becoming tense, and take steps to decrease that tension.
3. Demonstrate to the group that the students are special by remembering their names, projects, and personal information about them.
4. Demonstrate patience, acceptance, and tolerance of group members.
5. Be aware of problems in the group as soon as they occur (p. 13).

A proper climate must be set in preparation for a SDL group session (Guglielmino and Rutland, 1987). Adults must feel physically and psychologically comfortable for effective learning environment. Guglielmino and Rutland (1987) suggested the temperature should be neither warm nor cold, seating should be informal (in a circle or semi-circle), and lighting should be good. They further stated: "Demonstration of respect for the group and its individual members and sensitivity to their needs will lead to a more productive group experience and greater learning on the part of the adult student" (p. 16).

## CHAPTER III

### FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Findings

The following findings were found in this study:

1. Self-directed learning has many labels such as self-teaching, independent learning, self-instruction and self-education. Whatever the label is, research indicates that many adults are devising and conducting much of their own learning without assistance from professional educators and doing so mostly to their own satisfaction.

2. Most researchers agree that self-directed learning is a process whereby the learner is motivated and responsible for an experience which results in a permanent behavioral change.

Guglielmino and Guglielmino discovered that success today and tomorrow requires creativity and innovation, and they credit success in the transition to the skill of learning in a self-directed way (Zemke, 1982). Self-directed learning is the key to personal and academic and personal success (Zemke, 1982).

4. Gibbons, et al. (1980) agree that self-directed learning is a form of schooling that prepares students for a life of self-directed learning, attainment, and academic success.

5. There is a general agreement among researchers that the following characteristics inherent in self-directed learners are: openness to learning opportunities, self-concept as an effective

learner, initiative and independence in learning, informed acceptance of responsibility for one's own learning, love of learning, creativity, future orientation and ability to basic study skills, and problem-solving skills.

6. Personal will (Gibbons, et al., 1980) is an essential ingredient of personal accomplishment.

7. The role of the teacher is to foster self-directed learning in the student.

8. Guglielmino's SDLRS is recognized as a valid method of measuring self-directed learning readiness.

9. When a person becomes self-directed, he/she is then equipped to face changes in his/her workplace or in his/her personal life and thus be successful.

### Conclusions

The following conclusions were drawn from this study:

1. Because researchers agree that self-direction in learning is a learnable skill, teachers must take their duty most seriously to teach adult learners how to learn.

2. Facilitators can increase readiness for self-directed learning by being aware of and recognizing the factors of self-directed learning.

### Recommendations

1. Facilitators should encourage self-direction, offer challenges, be flexible and let the students learn.

2. Facilitators must provide an environment in which self-direction can be practiced such as a SDL group as Guglielmino and Rutland (1987) suggested.

3. Whatever or wherever the setting, the facilitator must be caring, patient, and models of autonomy who can accept the challenge of developing self-direction.



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Candidate for the Degree of

Master of Science

Thesis: AN INVESTIGATION OF THE CONCEPT OF SELF DIRECTED LEARNING AND  
IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENT RETENTION

Major Field: Occupational and Adult Education

Biographical:

Personal Data: Born in Fairfax, Oklahoma, December 7, 1945, the  
daughter of Garland P. and Yvonne Evatt.

Education: Graduated from Ralston High School, Ralston, Oklahoma,  
in 1963; received a Bachelor of Science Degree in Business  
Education from Central State University, Edmond, Oklahoma, in  
1969; completed requirements for the Master of Science Degree  
at Oklahoma State University in December, 1988.

Professional Experience: Business teacher, Ralston, Oklahoma,  
1973-1976; English teacher, Orlando High School, Orlando,  
Oklahoma, 1977-1981; English teacher, Stillwater Junior High  
School, Stillwater, Oklahoma, 1981-present.

Professional Organizations: Oklahoma Education Association,  
National Education Association, National Teachers of English  
Association.