

Empowering Students to be Self-Directed Learners

ALEC 610: Learning in Adulthood

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Abstract

Self-directed learning has been a central topic of discussion in adult education for many years. After analyzing several articles and books regarding autonomous learning, I have taken a stance of my own on the matter. In the sections that follow I have summarized my readings of Gerald Grow and Mark Tennant's articles regarding self-directed learning, to include an explanation of my position on the topic. I argue that the student, not the teacher, is the judge of ability and propose that emotion is a key component of a learner's readiness to advance to higher levels of self-directed learning. In addition, I concur that self-directed learning can be taught and learned, but emphasize the importance of constructive feedback as a tool and means to do so.

Article Summaries

Grow (1991) proposes that learners can advance through stages of increasing self-direction if they are matched with the proper teaching methods at each stage. He supports his theory through his *Staged Self-Directed Learning (SSDL) Model*, which describes each level of student self-direction with its equivalent level of teaching. He also emphasizes that a mismatch between teaching styles and the learner's degree of self-direction can hinder the student from developing into an autonomous learner. For example, a T4/S1 mismatch (which Grow describes as a delegating style of teaching paired with a dependent learning style) can frustrate and discourage a student who is not ready for independent learning. The lack of immediate feedback and close supervision can lead the learner to believe that their instructor is not interested in their work or does not care about their academic success. As a result, the learner will lack the confidence and motivation necessary to achieve higher self-direction.

Grow bases his theory on Hersey and Blanchard's (1988) Situational Leadership Model, which suggests that management styles should be matched to the employee's ability and willingness to perform or complete the specific task at hand. Similarly, Grow advocates that a learner must be ready to achieve higher levels of self-direction by demonstrating their capability and motivation to progress. Another key concept that he borrows from the Situational Leadership Model is that, like good management, good teaching is also situational. He advises that "there is more than one way to teach well" (p.127) and that many different teaching styles are useful and empowering when applied properly. Overall, his model is a guide to instruction that encourages teachers to match their teaching style to the learner's degree of self-directed learning while simultaneously empowering them to advance to higher stages of learning autonomy.

Toward the end of his article, Grow states that the SSDL model is meant to be "another statement in the ongoing conversation of those who encourage self-directed, lifelong learning" (p.147). In the spirit of this ongoing conversation, Mark Tennant responded to Grow in his own article "The Staged-Self Directed Learning Model" (1992). Tennant criticized Grow for describing 'lower level' (p.164) teaching styles in a stereotyped and demeaning manner, even though he claims that he appreciates a broad range of teaching styles. He also accuses Grow of contradicting himself by suggesting that all teaching methods, including lower level ones, can promote self-directed learning, but he labels the S1 teacher as authoritarian and punitive and says they create resistance and dependency; which he describes as a serious limitation.

He adds that Grow did not explain how progression through the stages is made possible and failed to clarify how teachers should empower learners. In addition, Tennant criticized Grow for implying that self-direction is synonymous with physiological growth and maturity, because one can be a mature dependent learner or an immature autonomous learner. Overall, Tennant depicted Grow's model as a "premature formulation" (p. 166) and labeled it just another theory that attempts to explain something so complex in such a simplistic manner. Grow addresses Tennant's criticisms in his article "In Defense of the Staged Self-Directed Learning Model" (1994) arguing primarily that many of the quotes in Tennant's article were misleading and not in fact his own words. He clarifies and answered most of Tennant's concerns and conclusively added that he appreciates a variety of teaching methods but stands by his opinion that they are only beneficial when applied in the proper contexts.

My Position on Self-Directed Learning

Overall, I support Grow's model and find it to be useful in understanding self-directed learning. However, there are two assumptions that Grow (1991) makes that I disagree with; that

is that feedback is associated with lower levels of self-directed learning and that the teacher is the judge of the ability of students to engage in a particular learning stage. In addition, Grow failed to explain how progression through increasing stages is made possible or what teachers can do to empower their students.

To clarify, the first step towards empowering learners to achieve greater self-direction is to adopt a teaching method that best matches the majority of the students in the class and ensure that the course plan is designed to help students transition from their current degree of self-direction towards greater independent learning. The instructor should communicate to the learners that the course is designed to gradually empower them to take control over their own learning experience and become less dependent on the teacher. This will allow the students to mentally prepare themselves for the transition and will lessen the likelihood of resistance.

Kirsten R. Butcher and Tamara Sumner (2011) make an excellent point in their article “Self-Directed Learning and the Sensemaking Paradox”; that is that self-directed learners often face a “sensemaking paradox” (p.122). They are expected to employ deep-level thinking skills, but they often lack the knowledge needed to deeply analyze information and successfully integrate it with their own existing knowledge (p.123). Instructors can empower students towards greater self-directed learning by minimizing, if not eliminating, the gap between the two.

Students require sufficient feedback and communication from the instructor to advance to higher stages of self-direction. Grow associates feedback with lower level self-directed learning, but feedback is an essential part of communication and a key component in the empowerment and confidence build for learners. The SSDL model specifically addresses “immediate feedback” (p. 129) as a characteristic of lower level self-direction, but the fact that it leaves it out all together in the proceeding stages is worrisome. Regardless if the teacher is coaching, motivating,

facilitating, or delegating, feedback remains crucial to the growth and development of the student. Lack of feedback can cause the learner to lose confidence in their ability to take charge of their own learning and reinforces dependence on the teacher as the “expert” (p.137). Feedback should be detailed and corrective, keep in mind that “how you provide feedback” makes a difference (Mouratidis, Lens, & Vansteenkiste, 2010).

While instructors can heavily impact the ability of students to learn on their own, it is not their role to determine if the student is capable of advancing to higher levels of self-directed learning. It is the responsibility of the student to judge and determine their own capabilities for autonomous learning. Grow does not share the same point of view, as he clearly states in his response article (1994), to Mark Tennant that the teacher is the judge of ability (p.111). But, the only one who can ever truly know what a student is capable of is the student! A teacher can get a sense or feel for the student’s capability, but it will never be as accurate of a judgment as the one made by the student them self. That is not to say that students do not make errors in judgment from time to time, but it is better for a student to have mistakenly thought they were ready for higher self-directed learning and then realize that they were not, than for a teacher to mistakenly determine and convince a student of not being ready, when they were.

With that being said, Grow refers to readiness as the “ability” and “willingness” to engage in a particular learning stage. But, what is left out of the equation is the emotional component of self-directed learning; which is sparked by a student’s genuine interest to explore learning on their own. An article titled “I Feel, Therefore, I Learn: The Role of Emotion in Self-Directed Learning” (Rager, 2009) sheds light on this concept by presenting an interactive model of self-directed learning that includes emotion as a component of the learning experience. Rager argues that the learner’s past and current experiences can influence their emotional desire to be

self-directed learners (p.29). In my own personal experience as a learner, I have found that emotions do play a key role in self-directed learning.

For example, when I was working on my undergraduate degree there came a point in time where family matters took a toll on my interest in school. I was able and willing to engage in self-directed learning, but I was not emotionally fit to move forward with it. It is almost like losing interest in a hobby when life gets out of balance. The issues were arising from my youngest brother's uncontrollable behavior, which in turn was causing serious issues in my parent's marriage. Since the issues going on in my family were not related to my studies at the time, they negatively impacted my interest for self-directed learning. However, someone in a different course of study experiencing similar family problems could have actually been motivated by the issues going on at home. For instance, a psychology major could have been intrigued by the dysfunctional behavior of their younger brother and could have been interested in wanting to learn what psychological factors were involved in causing his behavior. The motivation to diagnose and help their sibling could have genuinely motivated them to pursue greater self-directed learning.

Conclusion

Self-directed learning can be taught and learned, but constructive feedback is critical in the development of the learner; it builds confidence in their ability to take control of their own learning experience. In addition to willingness and ability the learner must also demonstrate genuine interest and emotional readiness to advance to higher stages of self-directed learning. The student is the judge of their own ability, willingness and emotional readiness to advance to higher stages of self-directed learning and it is the teacher's role to help them transition by maintaining flexibility in their teaching methods.

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