How to Identify, Develop, and Benefit from Readiness for Self-Directed Learning

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Introduction

This paper will examine aspects of self-directed learning (SDL), a particular type of educational process in the field of adult education. The focus will be on the significance to the learner of readiness for SDL. The first two sections present the historical development of SDL itself, summarizing the work of the foundational writers in the field. The next section describes a major tool proposed to measure readiness for SDL. A discussion follows presenting various theoretical and practical views on readiness in relation to business, distance learning, the homeless, and the elderly. Throughout, this paper will seek to identify the personal characteristics of readiness for SDL and which characteristics can benefit the learner in others areas of life.

The Development of the Concept of Self-Directed Learning

The Definition of Self-Directed Learning

Tough essentially codified the adult education field of SDL. He wrote in 1971 that “highly deliberate efforts to learn take place all around you” (Merriam and Cofferella, 1999, p. 289). Using the term self-planned learning, Tough observed that the average adult engages in a number of learning projects each year. However, the activity of learning on one’s own does not mean learning without the assistance of others; activities such as learning in a classroom or discussions with an expert are all included. These activities can include formal educational endeavors as well as informal pursuits through means such as books, people, or the internet. Tough wrote that learners engage in these learning projects to pursue a specific goal, such as using or sharing the
knowledge or skill, preparing for future learning, pleasure, self-esteem, etc. (Kasworm, 1979).

The Beginnings of the Self-Directed Learning Concept

Houle in a sense founded the concept of SDL when he published The Inquiring Mind in 1961. He wrote of his studies of 22 adult learners of widely varied backgrounds and stations in life. In attempting to understand how and why adults learn, he found that adult learners can be placed in three overlapping categories: the goal-oriented, who have a particular purpose or focus for the learning; the activity-oriented, who pursue learning for the sake of the learning activity itself; and the learning-oriented, who thirst for knowledge for its own sake (Houle, 1961).

Tough was influenced by Houle when he wrote Learning Without a Teacher in 1967 and The Adult’s Learning Projects in 1979. He laid out his observations of how adults actively pursue what he termed self-planned learning. He found that planning for a learning project contains four common elements: (a) a decision to begin, (b) the choice of a planner for assistance, (c) the reasoning for selecting a particular planner, and (d) the actual planning activities themselves (Kasworm, 1979). Each learning project then consists of several activities, which Tough termed episodes, to accomplish the learning. These episodes total at least seven hours – an arbitrary number that nonetheless provides a lower boundary.

Knowles, another significant early writer in SDL, wrote The Modern Practice of Adult Education: Andragogy versus Pedagogy in 1970. It was through his writing that the term SDL was popularized (Kasworm, 1979). He proposed that as adults age they
because ever more self-directed as learners (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999). SDL figures prominently in his concept of andragogy, which is founded upon the following five principles, the first of which is of special interest to us.

First, as adults age, they move from being dependent to independent. Second, adults acquire experience which greatly facilitates learning. Third, readiness to learn is driven largely by the expectations and demands of an adult’s social role. Fourth, as adults mature they move from a future application of knowledge to a more immediate application, and from being subject-centered to being problem-centered. And fifth, an adult’s motivation to learn is more internal than external.

The concept that an adult can effectively direct his/her own learning met with initial resistance, since many assumed the need for an expert teacher. But research verified that adults indeed intentionally learn on their own, and the field continued to flourish and broaden with new writers and researchers who built on the descriptions laid down by these early pioneers. Some of these new writers focused on creating a more sophisticated conceptual model for SDL. Some were intent on specifying goals for SDL, while still others analyzed the characteristics of self-directed learners (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999).

Grow devised a scale of self-directedness, postulating that all learners fall within one of four stages (Grow, 1991). At Stage 1, the student is dependent and in great need of coaching from the teacher; the teacher uses authority frequently. At Stage 2, the student is interested and the teacher uses his/her skills to motivate the student. An involved student characterizes Stage 3, where the teacher acts as a facilitator and as an
equal. The highest level of self-directedness is found at Stage 4, where the student is *self-directed* and needs only consultation or delegation from the teacher.

*Self-Directed Learning Readiness*

Through his scale of self-directedness, Grow asserts that an adult’s ability to be self-directed falls within a range. This in turn implies some set of characteristics that define an adult’s readiness to be self-directed; as these readiness characteristics are strengthened so is the adult’s self-directedness strengthened. Research has been done to begin the process of identifying these characteristics.

As reported by Hsu and Shiue (2005), Guglielmino

“...contends that self-directed learning indicates a readiness or openness to learning ways to confront or solve problems in life situations. The implications of the term ‘readiness’ are that (a) an individual normally has the capacity to develop self-directed learning skills to some extent, and (b) readiness for self-directed learning exists along a continuum and is present in each person to some degree” (p. 145).

Hsu and Shiue go on to identify two of these characteristics as *independence* and *a degree of control over the learning process*. Also, particularly in regard to distance learners, they include being “self-motivated, autonomous, emotionally independent, and capable of coping with learning problems on their own in order to conquer the barrier of physical separation.” (p. 145).

But our study of SDL readiness characteristics is incomplete until we consider the Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale and its associated research.
Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale

In an attempt to identify and quantify the SDL readiness characteristics, Guglielmino developed the Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale (SDLRS) in 1977. The SDLRS originally consisted of 41 characteristics that were measured in order to quantify an individual’s readiness for SDL. Guglielmino performed analysis on these characteristics and interpreted the results to be reducible to the following eight (Straka, 1995, p. 3-4).

1. Openness to learning opportunities
2. Self-concept as an effective learner
3. Initiative and independence in learning
4. Informed acceptance of responsibility for one’s own learning
5. Love of learning
6. Creativity
7. Positive orientation to the future
8. Ability to use basic study skills and problem-solving skills

Guglielmino later expanded the 41 characteristics to 58 and did not further reduce them.

Additional studies continued to modify the inventory of readiness characteristics. A study by Mourad and Torrance in 1979 adjusted the total number of characteristics and found that they reduced to a different set of eight (Straka, 1995). As we compared these to the eight listed above we find that these three additional characteristics appear:

1. Attraction to new and unusual situations
2. Internal control
3. Self-understanding

Straka (1995) reported on a study by West and Bentley in 1990 done to clarify the readiness characteristics. This study changed the 58 characteristics to 33 and found they were reducible to six. Straka goes on to examine these two studies (Mourad and Torrance, West and Bentley) and analyze their statistical soundness and cultural variations. His conclusion is to call for further research, due to the lack of clarity.

Overall, Straka found the research in the field supported the idea that these SDL readiness characteristics were difficult to separate into discrete, independent items. In many cases they influenced each other in complex ways. In addition, different characteristics were more prominent depending on the sample of people or culture selected for study. From this we conclude that there is no single set of characteristics that uniquely and compactly define an adult’s readiness for SDL.

There is another issue with the SDLRS, raised by Brockett (1977). He states, “Self-directed learning readiness, as defined by the SDLRS, is very much oriented toward learning through books and schooling” (p. 21). When these type of learners are in view, the SDLRS has been shown to be “an appropriate instrument.” But the author casts doubt about its effectiveness for those learners that have not had at least a high school education.

Nevertheless, readiness characteristics have been used in a variety of settings over the years to help understand how to enhance an adult’s readiness for and effectiveness in SDL. Later sections in this paper address some of the useful possibilities for expanding an adult’s readiness characteristics.
The Uses for Readiness for SDL

Some Areas of Study of Readiness for SDL

SDL readiness is studied and applied in many fields today. One review of literature by Owen (2002) names 43 different studies directly related to readiness for self-directed leaning. A few of the studies mentioned in that review cover topics such as self-concept, temperament type, learning climate, faith maturity, enthusiasm for learning, motivational orientations, and wellness.

Readiness for SDL in the Business and Industry

One of the trends in SDL research today is the ability of SDL to meet job-related training needs in industry, according to Ravid as cited by Hiemstra (1994).

Business in particular has many valuable applications for SDL. Among the most useful is the need to fill jobs which require self-direction and continuous learning with people who possess these abilities. It is also more cost- and time-effective to encourage SDL within an organization than to provide traditional formal training.

Researchers have determined that in order for SDL to be effective, a high degree of readiness for this kind of learning is required (Durr, Guglielmino & Guglielmino, 1996). Therefore, much of the study and application of SDL readiness takes place in the business arena.

Guglielmino’s Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale (SDLRS) is used in many of the studies conducted in business environments. The findings of these studies provide information and insights which are valuable tools for educators, business leaders and human resources personnel.
Self-Directed Learning Readiness and Occupational Categories (Durr, Guglielmino & Guglielmino, 1996) describes this kind of research. Employees of Motorola, Inc. in Schaumburg, Illinois were studied to discover if a relationship existed between readiness for SDL and various types of occupations. The results of this study suggest that such a relationship did exist within this study. Groups having the lowest readiness scores included nonprofessional jobs, and managers had higher readiness scores than nonmanagers. The authors suggest that those individuals scoring lower on the readiness scale receive instruction in SDL, while those scoring higher should be given opportunities to participate in SDL. Through this type of readiness testing, the business community can more efficiently direct the use of valuable resources.

Another example of the application of the SDLRS in use in business is described in the study, Self-Directed learning Readiness at General Motors Japan (Beitler, 2000). In this study, interviews were conducted and the SDLRS was administered to MBA students at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and to Japanese managers at a GM plant in Japan. A comparison of the scores indicated that the Japanese managers were more suited to SDL. The interviews revealed that the American MBA students were self-directed learners for the purpose of advancing their career, while the Japanese managers seemed to be self-directed learners just for the sake of learning. These findings seem to suggest cultural influences on readiness for SDL.

This study also cautions that some people are not ready for SDL. Hiemstra (1994) suggests that SDL involves both external factors which facilitate a learner taking responsibility and internal factors that predispose a learner to accept responsibility for
learning. He also suggests that these influences must be balanced with SDL opportunities in order for optimal learning to take place. This research offers business leaders insight into the need to create the conditions and opportunities for employees to experience success in SDL.

Another example of industry research in SDL readiness is a study conducted by Cho and Kwon (2005) in which researchers tried to determine if a high level of self-directed readiness was a variable in the employee’s level of organizational commitment in Korean business. The study found that SDL readiness was indeed a meaningful variable in terms of predicting both how an employee feels about the company and how long an employee would choose to remain with the company.

These three studies are just a few examples of the importance and impact SDL readiness could hold for business and industry. Many other studies have been and are being conducted. These seek to discover the additional applications of SDL readiness in areas such as success in job performance and professional development (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999). SDL readiness is an important consideration for business and industry leaders as they realize the benefits of a workforce of self-directed learners.

SDL and Distance Learning

Understanding the effects of SDL readiness on distance learning is necessary to identify possible implications. Distance education is a movement that seeks to extend the traditional university and to overcome its inherent problems of scarcity and exclusivity (Matthews, 1990). With a long history dating back to the 1800s, there is a debate on the conception of distance learning. Holmberg (1986) cites an advertisement in a Swedish
newspaper offering instruction on composition in 1833 as the first instance of distance learning. Matthews (1990) cites the invention of mail-based correspondence courses by Sir Isaac Pitman in 1840. Pittman used it as a means to teach those who were limited in receiving educational instruction. Due to advances in technology distance learning no longer has to depend on mail and advertising. Technological advances have been increasing, forcing changes in practices of instruction and its results. The most prominent advance was the advent of the World Wide Web (Johnson, et. al., 2003). A change that affects us all is the way people now communicate.

The way the student and teacher communicate has been affected; however, the goal of education is still the same with distance education. Communication occurs through one-or-two way text, graphics, program sharing, video, audio, or the Internet, as well as the traditional modes of communication such as; the telephone, faxing, and the mail service. ANTANIA - cite the quote Communication has become somewhat impersonalized because the face-to-face interaction is limited.

The freedom and flexibility of on-line environment require personal responsibility, tremendous commitment, and discipline to keep up with the flow of the process (Uhlig 2002). Assimilating information and executing the right decisions require critical thought. Distance education courses require students to have higher levels of self-direction, compared with students in more traditional learning environments (Wesley, 2003). In graduate school, instructors will not tell the students what to think. They will present information, facilitate discussions, and guide studies, but the teacher must be willing to think critically about the content he or she receives from students. Without
face-to-support support of faculty in the distance learning environment, learners must be
motivated to direct their own learning process because the teachers and students are
physically separated Hsu and Shiue (2005).

Students who are distance learners are required to use their experiences and are
provided time to consider their answers and comments. Online learning encourages
sharing life, work, and educational experiences as part of the learning process (Uhlig,
2002). It also affords the adult flexibility and availability for them to seek further
education. Education via an Internet-linked computer offers the promise of educational
advancement without relocating to campus and adversely impacting job or family
(MacGregor, 2001). The requirements for online courses are no less than that of any
other quality educational program.

A study of a 126 Taiwanese college students enrolled in an International Relations
class was conducted by Hsu and Shiue (2005). They characterized a motivated learner as
self-directed, self-motivated, autonomous, emotionally independent and able to cope with
learning problems. Participants were split into two groups, on-campus or distance
learning sites. Each had the same instructor and course content; however, they differed in
accessibility to teacher, instructional method and class location. They found that SDL
positively correlated to their academic performance in different educational settings.
Also, there was an indication that the SDLRS and prior GPA explain 48% of the variation
in achievement for students in distance education. Hsu and Shiue suggest that if the
course developer knows a student’s level of readiness, better course designs and services
can be implemented.
There are multiple levels of readiness and as a course developer it would be essential to know these levels in order to provide the best and most efficient service for the student. Someone who has a lower level of readiness would not fare well in a distance learning program. The person assessing the student should identify this deficit in readiness and offer them other means of reaching their goal in education. It might be suggested that these students would do better in the traditional classroom setting because of the support that would be offered. Also, administrators could develop learning activities within the whole educational system that would provide for more SDL.

The autonomy and convenience of an online environment brings about a sense of responsibility. Distance learning takes discipline and commitment to keep up with the flow of the process of learning online. Although learners can work at the time and place of his or her choosing, they must still meet assignment deadlines. Learners with high SDL readiness will tend to thrive in a distance learning environment.

SDL and Homelessness

Matuazowicz (1996) sees a link between techniques to make the situation of homelessness better and techniques to attain readiness for SDL. He suggests the common thread between the two processes is depression. Social issues of the homeless population include limited or lacking social networks, substance abuse and emotional problems leading to an overall experience of feelings of helplessness and dependency; these are manifest in depression. Matuazowicz says that the steps in the development of SDL readiness are similar to those used in treating depression to the extent that characteristics of the one when achieved mitigate the barriers to escape from the other. When a learner
is ready to accept responsibility for his own learning experience, he can be said to possess
those characteristics which would lessen the trauma and dependency of the homeless.

Two of the primary steps shared by these processes are:

1. The same social interaction that helps to develop self-directedness also helps to
   alleviate the social isolation of the homeless. This in the homeless victim would
   help break through the isolation of no social network at all.

2. Developing confidence in one’s own abilities to find and access valuable
   resources necessary to achieve personal goals is as beneficial to the homeless
   shelter resident as it is to the learner.

Eliminating social isolation and gaining confidence in one’s own ability, says
Matuazowicz (1996), provide relief to depression and are the beginning of solving the
problems which keep the homeless victim trapped.

Matuazowicz (1997) suggests classroom techniques that may support this process
for the homeless learner. Since the primary goal of the instructor is to address the social
isolation and a sense of social valuelessness, simple and small first steps are suggested.
These include encouraging students to identify the visible characteristics of people they
admire. This begins the process of allowing learners to create a picture of where they
would like to be. The instructor can help the learner to see that this is a form of goal-
setting. Another exercise revolves around setting small goals and enlarging upon them
as they are achieved. This method allows goal setting and achievement to start small and
as confidence is built, broaden the scope of learner responsibility.
Matuzowitz's studies with the homeless and his suggestion that breaking a cycle of depression is attained through processes learned through studies of the self-directed learner further enriches our understanding of the self-directed adult learner.

**SDL for the Aging Adult**

Brockett (1985) conducted a study in a population of adults over 60 years of age which showed results relating readiness for SDL with a self-perception of life satisfaction. His study found that traits from the SDLRS of particular significance to this self-perception were (a) possessing a conception of self as an effective learner, (b) the tendency to see learning as a lifelong process and (c) feeling a confidence in self-understanding. As a further product of his study, Brockett found no significant correlation between age and readiness for the SDL, but he did find a relationship between previous formal education attainment and readiness to continue as a self-directed learner.

This study's results would suggest that qualities which make a good self-directed learner can also be those viewed as desirable by persons who are satisfied with life in general. Feeling confident in one's ability to find resources, acquire new knowledge, work with others to access needed information helps to builds the independence and feeling of control associated with readiness for SDL.

Brockett's work suggests that while the older population shows this feeling of satisfaction from SDL traits that age is not directly correlated to the result, but at the same time educational attainment does correlate. Combined, these study results may put forward the idea that the self-confidence associated with SDL comes from past formalized education but that the aging process alone does not provide this outcome.
Conclusion

SDL is a conceptualization that invests a learner with independent spirit and the ability to visualize a particular learning goal, seek out resources and then successfully accomplish learning projects. The process is marked by self-reliance and confidence in self-judgment and in self-selected resources. There is a socialization component to the process of SDL which suggests a comfort in partnering with others, placing the learner in contact with a social network. Thus there is no need for isolation from community in the pursuit of SDL.

This ability to navigate the gathering of new information has the potential to benefit the adult learner in others areas of life as well. The business community has come to realize the value of employee readiness for self-direction in learning.

The Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale (SDLRS) was developed to enable the quantifying of characteristics that suggest the readiness of the learner to take responsibility for learning projects. Studies have determined there is no one set of characteristics that identify readiness for SDL; nevertheless, knowledge of such readiness is becoming valuable to the business community. Businesses tend to seek out employees with traits identified with SDL readiness, believing that these performance-enhancing skills complement productivity in the work place.

Studies have shown that the skills developed by the self-directed learner are valuable in distance learning and are necessary for this field of education to flourish. The learner who is self-motivated, emotionally independent yet socially connected, and self-confident in problem-solving will have no difficulty in an environment of fax machines,
email, and internet instruction and research. The ability to bring more students to this readiness level allows them to benefit from this efficient manner of education.

The techniques for developing readiness as a self-directed learner are the same as those techniques used to develop skills to combat depression. Studies of the homeless population suggest this interesting link between these seemingly disparate areas.

Others studies have shown that the over-60 population, when involved as self-directed learners and possessing a readiness for SDL, feel a satisfaction with life that is not seen in those not ready for or not involved in SDL.

Overall, readiness for SDL has been shown to provide benefits in a number of endeavors. The adult learners showing these readiness characteristics are well positioned to reap benefits in more than a few areas of life.
References


