

Chapter 34

The Single Most Popular Theory: Self-Directed Learning as an Effective Adult Learning Model

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ABSTRACT

Although Westerners have used over 200 terms to describe Self-Directed Learning (SDL), few Western scholars realize that educators in Confucius Heritage Cultures (CHC) have successfully promoted and implemented SDL. In those cultures, self-directed learning is considered the single most popular theory in teaching and learning. For decades, American educators have argued that American students do not compare with students from other industrialized countries. This chapter proposes that for learners in the Western cultures, especially in the United States to catch up with learners in other industrialized nations including newly emerged China and India, SDL must be promoted and implemented at all levels of education, not only within adult education. Self-directed learning is the single most popular model that helps learners master skills for the sake of competency development. The goal in learning is to achieve the changed status on the part of learners or “perspective transformation.” Unless students are learning in a self-directed manner, it may be difficult to foster transformative learning; SDL and transformative learning are intertwined.

INTRODUCTION

Self-directed learning has been the cornerstone of adult education for more than three decades. SDL has been one of the six assumptions of andragogy

since the father of adult education introduced the concept of andragogy to North America in the late 1960s. In adult education conferences, SDL is still discussed at length, and in practice, self-directed learning is commonly implemented. SDL as a model is taught in almost all adult education courses on methods and strategies for teaching,

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and it is often addressed in research in adult education. The international conference on SDL is still being held in the United States annually, where international adult educators present their research related to promoting and implementing SDL (International Society for Self-Directed Learning, 2012). A search of the literature reveals that over 200 different names have been given to SDL. There has been increased interest in further exploring SDL from different perspectives.

Why is such SDL so popular in adult education especially in Western countries (i.e., North America, West Europe and other English speaking countries)? In these Western countries, SDL is directly related to the cultural norms of independence and autonomy. People, young and old, living in these countries are encouraged to learn to live independently. Competition is valued over collaboration; autonomy is valued over connectedness. People are “frowned upon” if they depend on others such as parents or relatives, which could be a cultural norm in some other countries. People can be taught to become independent. For the most part, people learn to be independent via SDL. SDL has become a powerful model in terms of maximizing learning on the part of learners. In Confucius heritage cultures, SDL is instilled among learners at a very young age.

Self-directed learning is also related to the values of autonomy and free will, especially in Western cultures. Becoming an autonomous person and exercising free will are advocated, debated, and studied by scholars such as Jarvis (1992). Autonomy is seen to be a characteristic of being an adult, and free will is seen to be a characteristic of a democratic society.

As powerful as it is, why has SDL not helped produce the best learning outcomes, especially in the United States? The Nation at Risk Report of 1983 indicated that our high school students did not compare with students in other industrialized nations. The No Child Left Behind Report of 2002 brought educators’ attention to the same problem. While the Nation at Risk Report was generated as

the result of the former Soviet Union successfully launching “Sputnik,” the No Child Left Behind movement came out as the result of two emerging economic power houses, China and India. In both cases, the United States felt an imminent threat coming from other military and economic powers. For the first time, students (15 year olds) from mainland China participated in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), which compares the performance of 15-year-olds from 60 nations and half a dozen so-called regional economies (Mervis, 2010). Chinese students took the world by storm: they were the first prize winners in reading, mathematics and science. The US students, in contrast, ranked 17th in reading, 23rd in science and 31st in math. While some scholars and researchers quickly pointed out some reasons for the performance of Chinese students shone like this for the first time in history, no one has touched on one compelling reason, that is, SDL as a driving force behind Chinese students’ accomplishments in a second language, English. While reasons such as more time spent in schools, more efforts made on the part of the learners, and higher expectations from teachers and parents all count, none is more important than SDL initiated by the Chinese learners themselves. Both educators and learners take SDL seriously and go the extra mile to implement it.

The purpose of this article is not to compare American students with Chinese learners, nor to claim that SDL is the most effective model among all models in education. Rather, the purpose of this article is to encourage educators to promote and implement SDL in all levels of education. Self-directed learning has become the single most popular theory, and all levels of education would benefit from its implementation. Although the literature on SDL has been rampant especially in adult education, not many schools or universities in the United States have benefitted from this model as has occurred in other countries. In our experience as educators working in higher education, and in our experience working with

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