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# APPLYING AN ANDRAGOGICAL APPROACH TO FOSTER LIFELONG SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING IN 21ST CENTURY HIGHER EDUCATION CLASSROOM SETTINGS

Article by Suwithida Charungkattikul, EdD and John A. Henschke, EdD

## Abstract

The relationship between adult learning and self-directed learning (SDL) is a topic worth exploring on both theoretical and practical grounds. It is essential to provide a nourishing and encouraging environment for fostering self-directedness in adult learners. This will allow adult students to actively take responsibility for their own continuing lifelong learning. This study aims to explore the practical application of Andragogy as an overarching instructional element for fostering self-directed learning in the higher education classroom setting. We examine the role of self-directed learning in adult education; explore the implementation of the andragogical approach; and propose strategies to foster more sustainable self-directed learning. The lessons learned may further guide and enhance adult education teaching and learning.

## Introduction

Most people recognize that 21st century teaching carries with it a complicated mix of challenges and opportunities. Challenges include the issues of teacher turnover, accountability, changing student populations and student expectations, mounting budget pressures, and intense demand to build students' 21st century learning competencies. Meeting this challenge require changes in the way teachers teach and learners learn, as teachers take on a more facilitative role and learners take more responsibility for setting goals, identifying resources for learning, and reflecting on and evaluating their learning (Collins, 2009).

Educators stated that helping adults become more independent, self-directed, lifelong learners is every bit as important to their ultimate success in life as helping learners develop skills for reading, writing and math. Successful learners do not wait for their

instructors to tell them where they need to grow. They are committed to lifelong self-directed learning and they are deciding and driving their own development directions. In addition, a good 21st century teacher is aware of the career opportunities that will be available in the coming years for their students, and are always advocating towards forward thinking and planning to ensure all students will not be left behind.

Beginning in the 1960s, practitioners and scholars began an active pursuit of understanding self-directed learning (Long, 2009). Significant foundational contributions to this field of study were made by Houle (1961) and two of his doctoral students: Tough (1971) and Knowles (1975) and others such as Brockett (2009); Brockett and Hiemstra (1991); Caffarella (1993); Candy (1991). Several important elements remained: 1). One cannot read research on SDL without acknowledging the influence of Tough. His work is lauded in every literature review and is recognized as the beginning of research on self-directed learning. 2). The influence of Gugliemino's SDLRS gave researchers impetus to attempt to quantify this growing body of evidence. 3). This led to a growing body of qualitative paradigms which have attempted to fill in the gaps reflected in quantitative measures by conducting research on overlooked groups. 4). Long defends the applicability of SDL to all aspects of culture, arguing against Brookfield's stance that SDL reflects hegemony. Several significant studies have added foundational knowledge to the concept of SDL.

The studies in SDL indicated that it is appropriate for discovering specific topics. SDL is a powerful force against the negative aspect of ageing, each SDL is unique, and SDL occurs within the agency of leisure. "So, too, in communities and in society in general, as with personal life events, there is a continuous need for people to be active and informed learners" (Caffarella, 1993, p. 32). Merriam and Caffarella (1999) also pointed out that "If we are to cope with issues such as AIDS, poverty, prejudice, and social justice, all learners need to be encouraged and allowed to develop the ability to be self-directed in their learning throughout their lives" (p. 315). Therefore, it is the authors' intention to describe lifelong self-directed learning as the important skill for learners and how to apply it within the overarching umbrella framework of the Andragogical approach (as foundational adult learning theory) to foster lifelong self-directed learning in the 21st century higher education classroom settings. Finally, review of the perspectives of self-directed learning has provided useful information to further investigate on this concept.

## Lifelong Self-Directed Learning Concept

The recognition that self-directed learning has a number of different facets and that conceptions differ with which aspect is studied. Therefore, the concept can be grouped into four broad categories: self-directed learning as a characteristic of personality, as a process or form of study, as an instrument, and as the goals of self-directed learning.

### SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING AS A CHARACTERISTIC OF PERSONALITY

Self-direction is more than a fad of adult education, and is one of the two pillars of the adult education movement (Merriam, 2001). Various scholars have presented different

perspectives on SDL. Some scholars see SDL as a process of organizing the instruction (e.g., Harrison, 1978), focusing their attention on the level of learner autonomy over the instructional process. Others view self-direction as a personal attribute (e.g., Guglielmino, 1978; Kasworm, Rose, Ross-Gordon, 2010), with the goal of education described as developing individuals who can assume moral, emotional, and intellectual autonomy (Candy, 1991).

As a theoretical field, andragogy gives special attention to the attributes that tend

to be characteristic of adult learners and the learning processes they engage in. One of these processes which has taken on a theoretical and empirical life of its own is self-directed learning. Knowles' six assumptions of andragogy have influenced and are present in the theoretical construct of self-directed learning (Knowles, 1975; Long, 2007; Steinke, 2012). Later, the concept of self-directed learning has been synonymous with advances in civilization and seen as the format for changing society through the empowerment of these personal projects (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991; Candy 1991; Confessore & Confessore, 1992; Jarvis, 2001).

A prime characteristic of adulthood is the need and capacity to be self-directing. Besides, Guglielmino (2008) further clarifies self-direction in learning stating that it "can occur in a wide variety of situations, ranging from a teacher-directed classroom to self-planned and self-conducted learning projects developed in response to personal or workplace interests or needs and conducted independently or collaboratively" (p. 1). Therefore, the self-directed learner, as Dickinson (1987) stated, is one who retains responsibility for the planning, decision making and implementation of the decisions throughout the period of learning. Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2005) stated that there are two dimensions of self-directed learning prevalent in the literature: self-teaching and autodidaxy. Brockett and Hiemstra (1991), on the other hand, stated that "self-direction in learning is a way of life" (p. 16).

## SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING AS A PROCESS

Self-directed learning as a process of learning, in which people take the primary initiative for planning, carrying out, and evaluating their own learning experiences, has a great deal of attention in the literature. Within the broad category of self-directed learning as a process, Merriam and Caffarella (1999) pointed out that three types of models have been extensively discussed in the literature: linear, interactive, and instructional. The earliest models proposed by Tough (1971) and Knowles (1975) are the most linear, moving from diagnosing needs to identifying resources and instructional formats to evaluating outcomes.

*Linear Model:* In this model, "learners moved through a series of steps to reach their learning goals in a self-directed manner" (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 110). Tough identified 13 steps that represented key decision-making points in his self-planned learning model. The steps to becoming a self-planner of learning include: (1) deciding detailed knowledge and skill; (2) deciding activities, materials, resources, and

equipment for learning; (3) deciding where to learn; (4) setting specific deadlines or intermediate goals; (5) deciding when to learn; (6) deciding the pace; (7) estimating level of progress; (8) detecting clocks and inefficiencies; (9) obtaining or reaching resources or equipment; (10) preparing a room or other physical conditions; (11) obtaining money; (12) finding time for the learning; and (13) increasing motivation or dealing with motivational blocks. Moreover, Knowles (1975) indicated a six-step process which could form the basis of a learning contract for learners and instructors to follow in planning self-directed learning. The six steps are: (1) climate setting, that is, creating an atmosphere of mutual respect and support; (2) diagnosing learning needs; (3) formulating learning goals; (4) identifying human and material resources for learning; (5) choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies; and (6) evaluating learning outcomes.

*Interactive Model:* Proponents of this interactive model said that learning is not linear.

Spear's 1988 model identified three elements that work together for adult learning to occur: "opportunities ...in their...environment, past or new knowledge, and chance occurrences" (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 112). Brockett and Hiemstra (1991) came up with the Personal Responsibility Orientation (PRO) model. It includes both the actual instruction and the personality of the individual learning in a model that also features an instructor or facilitator. Garrison's 1997 model is both multidimensional and interactive. It incorporates "self-management..., self-monitoring, ...and motivational ...dimensions" in its approach (Merriam et. al., 2007, p. 114).

*Instructional Model:* This model focused on what instructors can do in the formal classroom setting to foster self-direction and student control of learning (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Grow (1991) found four types of learners: dependent, interested, involved, self-directed. His situational model identifies roles for the instructor and types of learning strategies that can be utilized for each type of learner. Hammond and Collins (1991) model includes "the examination of the social, political, and environmental contexts that affect ...learning, and stress developing both personal and social learning goals" (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 119).

Taylor (1986) studied the pattern of a transition process for self-directed learning in the classroom. The study revealed four different phases and four different transition points through which this change of perspective occurred. It starts and ends with equilibrium (Equilibrium - Disconformation – Disorientation - Naming the problem [Phase transition] – Exploration - Reflection [Phase transition] – Reorientation - Sharing the discovery [Phase transition] – Equilibrium). The phases occur in a consistent order and eventually an observer can discern the problem being worked on.

Hence, self-direction in learning refers to both the external characteristics of an instructional process and the internal characteristics of the learner, where the individual assumes primary responsibility for a learning experience. It is important to think of self-direction in learning from a lifelong learning perspective. Self-directed learning is the beginning and end of lifelong learning; the keystone of the learning society; a

supplement to and sometimes substitute for the formal education system; a vehicle for the mastering of established knowledge; and for the transformation of personal understanding. "It has often been said that the purpose of adult education, or of any kind of education, is to make the subject a continuing, 'inner-directed' self-operating learner" (Kidd, 1973, p. 47).

## GOALS AND IMPORTANCE OF SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

Those grounded in a humanistic philosophy posit that self-directed learning should have a goal - the development of the learner's capacity to be self-directed (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Knowles and Tough wrote from this perspective as did Brockett and Hiemstra (1991) in their Personal Responsibility Orientation (PRO) model of self-directed learning, human nature that is "basically good. . . accepting responsibility for one's own learning" and being proactive drive their model (p. 26). A second goal is the fostering of transformational learning (Brookfield, 1986; Mezirow, 1985).

Transformational learning posits critical reflection by the learner as central to the process. This critical reflection is an "understanding of the historical, cultural, and biographical reasons for one's needs, wants, and interests... Such self-knowledge is a prerequisite for autonomy in self-directed learning" (Mezirow, 1985, p. 27). Further, it is our job as adult educators "to assist adults to learn in a way that enhances their capability to function as self-directed learners" (Mezirow, 1981, p. 137). The third goal for self-directed learning is the promotion of emancipatory learning and social action. Just as andragogy has been critiqued for ignoring the context of learning, so too some writers would like to see self-directed learning positioned more for social and political action than individual learning. Both Brookfield (1993) and Collins (2009) called for a more critical, political analysis of SDL. An example of this orientation is a recent study by Andruske (2000), wherein she investigated the self-directed learning projects of women on welfare. She found that the women became "political change agents as they attempt[ed] to control and to initiate change in their everyday worlds in response to oppressive external structures" (p. 11). Therefore, the goals of self-directed learning can be grouped into three major aims: (1) to enhance the ability of adult learners to be self-directed in their learning, (2) to foster transformational learning as central to self-directed learning, and (3) to promote emancipatory learning and social action as an integral part of self-directed learning. Each of these goals is of equal importance in capturing the essence of self-directed learning.

Each individual's aspiration for self-learning must be realized by providing him or her - not in school and universities but elsewhere too, under conditions and circumstances of all kinds - with the means, tools and incentives for making his personal studies a fruitful activity (Faure et al, 1972). SDL is a model, not a law: Treat it as a tool to dig with. SDL talks not about a new educational fad, but about a basic human competence - the ability to learn on one's own - that has suddenly become a prerequisite for living in this new world

## What is the Connection Between Andragogy and Self-directed Learning?

“Andragogy is an organized and sustained effort to assist adults to learn in a way that enhances their capacity to function as self-directed learners” (Mezirow, 1981, p. 21). Through this view, these assumptions become a personal interactive agreement between the learner and the learning endeavor, the ‘experience” (Birzer, 2004).

## ANDRAGOGY

One of the most commonly applied frameworks of adult learning is andragogy, described as the art and science of helping adults learn. Malcolm Knowles commonly is credited with bringing this term to the attention of American adult educators during the late 1960s and 1970s (Merriam, 2001). The structure of the theory is comprised of two conceptual foundations: The learning theory and the design theory. This learning theory is based upon adult and their desire to become and/or to express themselves as capable human beings and has six components: (a) Adults need to know a reason that makes sense to them, for whatever they need to learn; (b) They have a deep need to be self-directing and take responsibility for themselves; (c) Adults enter a learning activity with a quality and volume of experience that is as resource for their own and others’ learning; (d) They are ready to learn when they experience a need to know, or be able to do, something to perform more effectively in some aspect of their life; (e) Adults’ orientation to learning is around life situations that are task, issue or problem - centered, for which they seek solutions; (f) Adults are motivated much more internally than externally. In addition, Zmeyov (1998) suggested that the principles might be successfully applicable when learners: (a) have a good amount of practical and social experience, (b) are aware of a life goal and of the applicability of their knowledge and skills, (c) have adequate background of the selected field study, and (d) are trying to attain short-term educational goals.

The Andragogical model focuses on procedures and resources aiding a learner in assimilating information and skills (Knowles, 1990). The andragogical teacher (facilitator, consultant, change agent) using the andragogical model prepares in advance a set of procedures that involve adult learners into the process based on the following elements (Knowles, 1990):

1. Learner preparation;
2. Creating amiable atmosphere that facilitates learning;
3. Initiating mechanisms enabling mutual planning;
4. Diagnosing educational needs;
5. Formulating aims that can fulfill the above-mentioned needs (curriculum content);
6. Designing the pattern of educational experiences;

7. Managing these experiences using suitable means and techniques;
8. Teaching assessment and repeated diagnosis of educational needs.

An Andragogical model is a process model, focused on procedures and resources aiding a learner in assimilating information and skills (Knowles et al., 2005, p. 107), as well as to improve the quality of adult life: Education is perceived as the way to better, subjective existing in the world; Knowledge is a symbol of everyday life experience; Searching for knowledge belongs to a learner; and Dialogue is an effective method of teaching.

## SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

Even as self-direction in learning was emerging as one of the most challenged assumptions within andragogy, a distinct body of theory and research on self-directed learning (SDL) was evolving. Grow's (1991) description of the Staged Self-Directed Learning model offered some guidance in this regard for college instructors. Grow (1991) described four stages of self-direction observed among college students and outlined possible roles for the teacher or facilitator based on each of the learner stages: coach, guide, facilitator, and consultant.

There is not one adult learning theory that successfully applies to all adult learning environments. Learning is about change, and adult learning is also about change. Cercone (2008) developed a framework for addressing all four adult learning theories - andragogy, self-directed learning, experiential learning, and transformational learning, especially, in the online educational environment context. Thirteen characteristics of adult learners are examined, and an analysis of how these characteristics influence the design of an online learning is presented. She indicated the recommendations follow regarding how to design an online classroom environment while considering the application of adult learning theories. Of the 13 characteristics identified by the author, andragogy is the most comprehensive as it considers 10 of the characteristics, experiential learning only considers four [4] characteristics, self-directed learning theory considers three [3] characteristics, and transformative learning theory considers three [3] characteristics. The author provided a total of 93 techniques for helping address and enhance the 13 adult learner characteristics.

Andragogy, therefore, is the overarching concept related to adult learning; and, SDL is the most important way of enacting andragogy – a complementary relationship between the two – Self -Directed Learning and Andragogy (Henschke, 2016).

## Roles of Adult Educators or Instructors?

What is the role of a teacher in a self-directed learning environment? If students are self-directed, then why do they need a teacher? The goal is for students to become increasingly independent, but self-directed learning is not about solitary learning. Similarly, while self-directed learning is about learners become increasingly



independent, it does not necessarily suggest independent learning. It can be highly interdependent, collaborative, and cooperative (Bull, 2013). Furthermore, the reality is that learners in a given context will likely have varying levels of competence and confidence with self-direction, especially those who spent years in a learning context that was dominated by a teacher-directed approach to learning. Even for students with significant confidence, a self-directed learning approach does not devalue the role of experts, mentors, coaches and guides. Self-directed learning is more about how people learn and create in an environment where they can flourish. It elevates the role of the learner, recognizes that learning happens when the individual learner takes ownership for her own learning.

Furthermore, Combs (1966) emphasized four essential aspects used to foster a movement toward self-direction in learners: (1) we need to believe this is important; (2) we need to trust the human organism to be able and willing to self-direct; (3) we need to adopt an experimental attitude toward supporting them as they learn (and make some mistakes as well as successes) to and grow in self-directing; and (4) we need to provide the opportunity to practice and become very competent in self-direction.

## Recommendations

Several recommendations (Candy, 1991; Grow, 1991; Knowles, 1975; Mickler & Zippert, 1987; Murphy & Fleming, 2000; Raven & Jimmerson, 1992) for classroom practice with adult learners in higher education seem warranted as we reexamine the theoretical frameworks and areas of research. Ross-Gordon and Brown-Haywood (2000) pointed out that providing opportunities for adults to exercise self-direction in the identification of personal goals, selection of learning strategies, and modes of assessment is necessary.

Recommendations for fostering lifelong self-directed learning in higher education classroom settings using andragogy may start with the following:

1. Recall your largest, most intentional change in the last two years. For instance, career, job training or education, self-insight and self-perception, body and physical health, emotions and human relations, enjoyable activities, methods for managing time and life, concerns: like in family life, spiritual growth, understanding the meaning of life, personal finances, home furnishing and maintenance, social and political action, volunteer activities, traveling, etc.
2. As a way to select your top choice, place a rating of # 1 for your top choice and # 13 for your lowest choice. Use each number only once.
3. Who chose, planned, and implemented the change? You or the suggestion from a book?
4. What resources stimulated the change? Identify one or more.

5. How did you go about making the change? List the steps that you went through for doing this.
6. Did you have a vision of what you would be doing when the project was completed? If yes, describe the vision.
7. Were there any unintentional or incidental changes that occurred accompanying the major change? If yes, describe them.

After students get done with this process, consider using this same process by suggesting to others or asking others to go through this same process (e.g., if you do this as a group of facilitators, then students will have different and unique processes to suggest for someone to enact SDL in their classroom setting or even in their life).

Other recommendations may include: recognize and foster relationships between academic learning and learning in the larger world. Use activities that stimulate cognitive development and growth, challenging adults to grapple with the kind of ill-defined problems they encounter in everyday life. Provide the support they may need during these times of transition, whether through on-campus programs or referral to community-based counseling programs. Design a curriculum that is inclusive with regard to students' cultural backgrounds, including those from marginalized groups.

Brockett (2009) suggested an agenda for future research in self-directed learning and observed that the field would benefit from examining self-directed learning through different lenses or approaches. Brockett specifically identified phenomenology as a promising approach.

## Conclusion

In our continuously changing world, those who are most successful in their work are the people who are committed to developing themselves by giving themselves goals or new levels of mastery to reach for. Successful employees do not wait for their annual performance review and their boss to tell them where they need to grow; they are committed to lifelong self-directed learning and they are deciding and driving their own development directions.

Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework of Andragogy as a key instructional element for fostering self-directed learning in the higher education classroom setting. To accomplish this learning process, a facilitator (or andragogue) and other relevant people should enact a structure and a process of the learning environment that is conducive to and fosters self-direction. Using the andragogical / self-directed approach and implementing it correctly creates a high probability of leading to improvements in content knowledge application, student learning outcomes (e.g., academic motivation / performance), and work / life fulfillment and accomplishment.

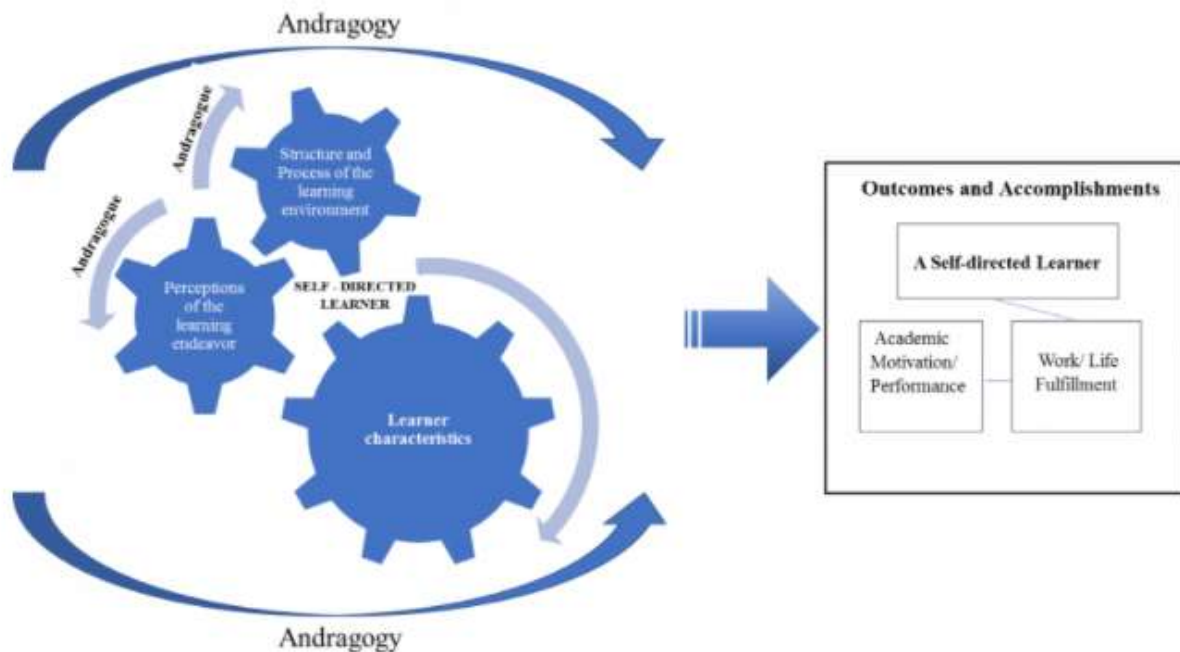


Figure 1: The conceptual framework of applying andragogical approach to foster lifelong self-directed learning in the 21st century higher education classroom settings

It is important to underscore that many of the andragogical / self-directed learning strategies described above, especially those that are knowledge, understanding, skills, attitudes, values, and interest-based, are not mutually exclusive; but, it is likely that these would be used in ever-changing constellations or combinations, when needed as the particular self-directed learning challenges dictate. Finally, higher education institutions and corporations would be benefited to invest in preparing and encouraging their workforce to engage in self-directed learning.

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