In the Classroom 73

Why Is Self-Directed Learning Important and How Do You Develop It?

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Stan Skrabut: Well, hello there. Welcome back. Thank you ever so much for taking time to listen to this podcast. It certainly means a lot. You could be doing other things and on this gorgeous day, at least where I'm at, you probably are, but you're still hanging out with me and I really do appreciate it.

This week, we are going to take a look at self-directed learning and how to foster it in a classroom. I'm going to warn you upfront that self-directed learning can be rather messy, very different from teacher-based instruction. How to make it work, messy, messy, messy, messy, messy, but that's where learning takes place.

Self-directed learning is one of the holy grails, I guess, of what educators want. They want their students to be able to go out into the world and be lifelong learners and be self-directed learners. In order for them to get to that point, we need to guide their way. That's what this particular episode is going to be about that we want them to be able to direct their own learning.

My interest in self-directed learning has been for a long time, I have found myself to be a self-directed learner. Everything that I do is, primarily not everything, but primarily guided by my interest in being able to do it, and I have benefited tremendously from self-directed learning. I've learned how to program computers, write SQL code, and all of this was self-taught.

I didn't really take any classes specifically on how to do that. I took classes on Pascal, but I've never programmed in Pascal as part of my work. It was only for academic, but I learned a lot. I took what that foundation was and just built upon it. Back in high school, I was programming in basic, on some old computer that used card readers, but I learned how to do a lot of things self-directed.

This podcast, for example, is part of my self-directed learning journey because I tried to get a podcast episode out every week which I have done for 73 episodes. Each week takes me down a learning path. I am forcing myself to go out and explore new topics or revisit topics that I think I'm well-versed in, but there's always something new to learn. I consider that part of my learning journey as I keep trying to strengthen my knowledge and skills related to instructional technology and design.

When I worked on my dissertation, my dissertation was focusing on how University of Wyoming extension educators developed and maintained skills in their specialty as educators and through the use of technology. This was all done primarily through

informal learning that they went out and they had to figure it out themselves primarily.

They didn't take any special classes on how to do this and they went out. They had a terminal degree like a master's degree or a doctorate in a specialty, so how did they keep maintaining this? This is all wrapped up in the self-directed or informal learning in ways they went. That was my dissertation. I thought it was quite fascinating. I enjoyed all the things that I learned.

Let's get back to what is self-directed learning? In 1991, Sharan Merriam and Rosemary Caffarella, noted that self-directed learning is a form of study in which learners have the primary responsibility for planning, carrying out, and evaluating their own learning experiences.

Malcolm Knowles adds to this and says that, "Self-directed learning is a process in which individuals take the initiative with or without the help of others in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes."

That gives you an idea what self-directed learning is, but you may be asking yourself, well, in a classroom really the instructor guides this, and it's true. We have, therefore, a dependency that we need to win students off the instructor to let them go guide their own learning. Why should you participate in this?

Malcolm Knowles, once again, gives three reasons for self-directed learning. When somebody is doing self-directed learning, they typically are more motivated about the learning because they chose it. As he said, they enter into learning more purposefully and with greater motivation. They also tend to retain and make use of what they learn better and longer than do the reactive learners. That's the first reason.

The second reason he adds that self-directed learning is an essential aspect of maturing, is developing the ability to take increasingly responsibility for our own lives and to become increasingly self-directed. This is where that winning comes into play. That you want them to go away from being dependent on somebody to where they can take responsibility around their own learning.

Then finally, the third one, there's more responsibility on the learner. Because of this ever-changing world, they need to go out and be able to learn and adapt in this world. Malcolm Knowles said, "Students entering into these programs without having learned the skills of self-directed inquiry will experience anxiety, frustration, and often failure, and so will their teachers."

Things are changing so rapidly that we need to really develop a skillset of lifetime learning, the self-directed learning. Those who do not learn and adapt will be left behind. What should educators do? Gerald Grow developed this four-stage self-directed learning model. The idea is that learners and educators should work through the self-directed learning model.

The first stage, the learner is dependent. The teacher is the teacher, the coach. Basically the teacher sets out what is exactly is to be learned and is requiring that those things specifically are learned. Like I said, there is a whole dependency on this. Where the second stage is called "Interested", that learner is interested and teacher is a motivator or a guide that the teacher presents material, guides the discussion, helps the student with goal setting, and learning strategies around that particular topic. There is a little bit more of a shift when students are interested.

I think back to my days in civil air patrol, that we were on our own. When I was a cadet in civil air patrol, when I was still in high school, I think this is where the self-directed learning really started because this was something I was interested in. I didn't have anyone specifically guiding me or telling me what I needed to know in that. I had to go out and set my own learning plan in order to move forward. There's a lot of value and I think a lot of voluntary organizations, if designed correctly, help with that.

Stage three is involved. The educator is off to the side. Basically, they are facilitator. They facilitate the discussion, but everybody is equal at the table. This is a good opportunity for those group projects, it's a seminar-type environment where the students are really shaping where they want to go in designing the learning.

Then finally, stage four is self-directed. This is where the educators way off to decide. They are a consultant. The self-directed learning, those independent projects where they're doing independent study could be a dissertation, an internship. It's really important for the educator to match the teaching style with the appropriate stage and figure out where best to get the students, but try to really move them where your more of a consultant. We'll talk a little bit about strategies on how to do that.

One of the things that you want to take into consideration is, rather than tell students what they need to know on a subject, have the students design that learning, have them outline what should be known about a particular subject, and allow them to do it within the parameters that you outlined. Part of this is have them, like I said, create this outline and you can, through guided discussion, help them flush that outline out before having them dive into learning on the particular topic.

As I said, this is messy. The easiest way is for you to have the outline and systematically, work through the material. Learning takes place when you actually wrestle with this stuff, when you have this dialog with the content and the topic and the dialog with others. That's where learning is really taking place. The more that they can interact and help build the outline of what needs to be known around the topic, the more interest that they will have in learning that material.

Malcolm Knowles has a five-step self-directed learning model. His first step in this is diagnosing the learning needs. Step two is formulating learning needs. Step three is identifying the human and material resources for learning. Step four is choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies and step five is evaluating learning outcome. Take a look at this real quick. Diagnosing learning needs.

As John Dewey notes, "Something is triggering the need to learn." For self-directed learning that what sets everything in motion that there is a desire to learn something specific. Very often, in a formal environment, signing up for a class that triggers the event, and more likely it is because the student is trying to get the diploma in the end. If you can tap into that interest, that desire to learn something specific, that sets things in emotion. Then Allen Tough adds to this that, that particular desire transform into a learning project. This is where they're going to set learning goals. In a classroom environment, this can take the shape of a learning contract. You may not necessarily have them, have the students rewrite your entire curriculum, or you may, Malcolm Knowles has a very interesting book on self-directed learning where he does exactly this.

What you can do is have them work on a piece of your curriculum, where they develop this self-directed learning project that you can do. You can write this into perhaps a learning contract where it outlines what the goals are, the structure, the sequence, the timeline for completing these things, what specific resources that they're using, details about grades, how they're going to get feedback, what type of feedback there is.

This is all shaped in those particular learning contract. That's really focusing on the developing or diagnosing of the learning needs. Then it's a matter of formulating them, you know, taking time to write those things down. Like I said, it could be a learning contract identifying where the student has a gap, where they need to learn more about a particular topic. Part of that is self-assessment to be able to do those types of things.

That's where the instructor would come into play to make sure that students understand how to do this. There could be a lot of upfront work explaining why you're taking a self-directed approach, and how self-directed learning works, and guiding them through each of the phases, each of the steps of this learning model in order for them to be able to implement this.

Number three, is identifying human and material resources for learning. For each of that areas that a student has outlined of areas of exploration, they need to go out and identify how they will learn this content. What resources are they going to use? One of the things that I think is really critical is they need to also know that other humans are useful resources, that they should not shy away from asking a teacher or asking somebody who is an expert in this. They can do this in Twitter. They can do this on Skype, but being able to reach out and building their network around learning.

Number four is choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies. This is where you can help them learn to be better learners. One area specifically is being able to vet their resources. They pull together resources. Are they in fact, good resources and teaching them how to identify what good resources are?

Then finally evaluating learning outcomes. Different ways that you can do this. One is working with that instructor. Ideally, it'd probably be you, if you're the instructor, getting students to regularly check in and explain where they are in the process and

how well it's going. Be open to that feedback that they're going to get on how they can improve that particular learning journey.

Then part of this is also the reflection piece, being able to reflect on what they were able to accomplish, where they still had gaps, everything dealing with that and how to attend to those gaps. Those are some different learning models and what educators can start doing to guide students.

Now here's some specific strategies that you may want to consider for developing self-directed learners. A number of these strategies initially came from an article, *10 Ways Technology Supports 21st Century Learners in Being Self-Directed*. One of the first ones was Personal Learning Networks in *Episodes 45 and 46*, which I'll link in the show notes and everything, all the different resources I use, it'll certainly be in the show notes.

Episodes 45 and 46, I encourage you as educators to develop a personal learning network. Personal learning networks don't only apply to educators. Learners also should be building out their personal learning network. It allows them to learn about any particular topic that they can continuously pivot and dial in a different topic that they want to learn about, but having a network that they can do this is really important. It's just a matter of teaching them how to build a personal learning network. Introducing the concept to them and incorporating it into the class. Part of what you need to do is require that a personal learning network is designed and being able to tap into it.

Using online educational resources. They are great for a lot of reasons. I talked about this in a previous episode that I will link to, but not only provide those to students, but also have them create their own open educational resource. Have them contribute to the world knowledge base, make their learning real, where they are adding to the world's knowledge. This allows them to really hone in on academic interests and shape their pursuit of lifelong learning.

Online learning is another place where you can point students to. Students should be encouraged to supplement their classroom with personal selected online classes. There are all kinds of free classes out there and just opening the door, curating lists of where online classes are and encouraging students to go check them out.

Wonderful way to supplement the learning that you are doing personally in your classroom. You can supplement this by turning them on to playlists that you created in YouTube or pointing them to podcasts and other online content. Get them interested and excited about going out and doing some self-exploration.

Building learning portfolios, another strategy that students should be encouraged to develop a personal learning portfolio. This is where they can curate artifacts that reflect what they're learning. This can be related to what they're learning in school or on their personal learning journey. It's something that will help them in the future. Journaling is certainly another aspect of a learning portfolio, having an opportunity to reflect.

Having students self-reflect, self-reflect on the processes or self-reflect on what their knowledge is about a particular topic. When they build that initial outline of what they should know about a particular topic, part of that should be a self-assessment. Where do they think they sit in their knowledge on that particular topic before they dive into those resources and being able to understand where their learning gaps are?

That's just a strategy that will help them throughout their life. When you are building your class, another strategy is include self-directed learning outcomes as part of your syllabus, having activities as part of your course that are really self-directed that students have to plan these things out around a topic and set their learning and make that certainly part of their overall grade and have them set their own goals and set their own learning outcomes as part-- It could be contract learning.

As part of the reflective process, they should talk about how they are applying what they've learned. This could be a reflective writing assignment that what they have learned throughout the course, what strategies they took in order to get there, how well those strategies worked out. Part of this could be that they create a list of personal takeaways or future uses on how they are going to apply what they learned in this particular class or through this personal self-directed learning journey. Part of this is also reflecting on what they could do differently in order to do it better.

Then the last one I'm going to leave with you is, encourage students to read. I have been very passionate about reading, and this is a powerful way to have students continue to grow. One of the classes I took, part of the classes we had to write book reviews. Now I have continued that practice based on that instructor. I write book reviews for journals, peer-reviewed journals, but assigning these book reviews as part of a class is important. Getting students to read deeply about a topic rather than superficially, that we do most of our reading these days. That is a strategy. Speaking about reading, I want to put a quick plug for my book, which talks exactly about that.