RETHINKING EDUCATION: SELF DIRECTED LEARNING AS THE CALL OF THE DAY

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Abstract

Leslie Dickinson defines self-directed learning as a "particular attitude to the learning task, where the learner accepts responsibility for all the decisions concerned with his learning but does not necessarily undertake the implementation of those decisions." Self-directed learning is an integral part of education system in the era of digitization where technology aided smart classroom are approaching and replacing our traditional class-rooms. Historically, getting education at an institution or school was not compulsory or not established as the fixed social norm. Today, pilot programme that demand autodidactic learning is in high demand among smart-generation learners. Self-directed learning involves a significant change in the roles of the teachers and learners. The role of a teacher is getting changed from an instructor to facilitator.

The present research paper revolves around exploring the discussion of what self-directed learning involves, how it is different from self-instruction and what are the problems in introducing self-directed learning in teaching-learning pedagogy. The researcher also aims at suggesting some remedies for the effective implementation of the self directed learning. The paper takes into consideration the view points of the established educationists like Ash, Bauer, Brookfield, and Cross to discuss the ways of facilitating self-directed learning. The difference between self-instruction and self-directed learning has also been taken into account to make the concept clearer and more feasible for implementation.

Key Words: *Self-directed, Self-instruction, Teaching-learning Pedagogy, CALL, Facilitator.*

1. Introduction

Self-directed learning is "*a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others,*" to diagnose their learning needs, formulate learning goals, identify resources for learning, select and implement learning strategies, and evaluate learning outcomes (Knowles 1975).

Self-directed learning involves a significant change in the roles of the teachers and learners. The learners have to know what they need and identify the types of materials that suit them. Teachers need to know how to help learners learn on their own (with the help of self-learning materials) and evaluate their own progress through self-assessment. Finally, the problems of self-directed learning need to be analyzed and appropriate solutions have to be worked out.

2. SDL and Teaching-Learning

A detailed discussion of what self direction involves, how it is different from self-instruction and what the problems are in introducing self directed learning in the teaching-learning programme are discussed in detail in the following sections and some suggestions are offered for the effective implementation of self directed learning.

Self-instruction and Self-direction

Leslie Dickinson (1987) uses the term 'self-instruction to refer to "situations in which a learner, with others, or alone, is working without the direct control of a teacher." According to him this kind of independent learning could be for short periods within a lesson, for whole lessons or in extreme cases of learner autonomy for the whole of learning. Leslie Dickinson defines self direction as a "particular attitude to the learning task, where the learner accepts responsibility for all the decisions concerned with his learning but does not necessarily undertake the implementation of those decisions." He differentiates self-instruction from self-direction. The self-directed learners, take up the responsibility for their own learning but will seek expert advice and help as and when they need it.

According to Lowry, Cheryl Meredith (1989) whether or not learning is self-directed depends not on the subject matter to be learned or on the instructional methods used. Instead, self-directedness depends on who is in charge, that is, who decides what should be learned, who should learn it, what methods and resources should be used, and how the success of the effort should be measured. To the extent the learner makes those decisions, the learning is generally considered to be self-directed.

Problems in Self Directed Learning

Educators have found that some adults are incapable of engaging in self-directed learning because they lack independence, confidence, or resources. Not all adults prefer the self-directed option, and even the adults who practice self-directed learning also engage in more formal educational experiences such as teacher-directed courses (Brookfield 1985). In cases where the learners are used to very strict teacher control, the learners find it very difficult to take up the responsibility for their own development.

In India, most of the learners have to learn from overcrowded large classrooms and the teachers cannot pay individual attention to the learners and cater to their preferred learning styles. In a way, the learners have always been on their own in classrooms mainly because the teachers find it difficult to provide individual feedback. Hence it would be very helpful if some part of the learning programme is offered in the self-directed mode and learners are prepared to take up the responsibility for their own learning.

To implement a self-directed learning programme successfully, it is necessary to understand how it changes the roles of the educational institutions, teachers and learners.

Educational Institutions and Self-Directed Learning

For educational institutions and employers engaged in providing self-directed learning experiences, Hiemstra (1982, 1985) and Brockett and Hiemstra (1985) recommend the following:

The educational institutions should

➤ provide staff training on self-directed learning and broaden the opportunities for its implementation.

➤ conduct research on learners' interests.

➤ promote learning networks, study circles, and learning exchanges.

➤ obtain the necessary tools to assess learners' current performance and to evaluate their expected performance.

➤ recognize and reward learners when they have met their learning objectives.

Teachers and Self-directed Learning

Several writers like Ash (1985), Bauer (1985), Brookfield (1985), and Cross (1978), have discussed the ways of facilitating self directed learning. The teachers should be prepared to

➤ become managers of the learning experience rather than be information providers;

➤ provide the means to identify the needs and select the appropriate materials;

➤ help learners identify the starting point and discern relevant modes of examination and reporting;

➤ create a partnership with the learners by negotiating a learning contract for goals, strategies, and evaluation criteria;

➤ encourage the setting of objectives that can be met in several ways and offer a variety of options for evidence of successful performance.

Learners and Self-directed Learning

The learners who are used to working in dominant teacher-centred classrooms may have a number of assumptions about language learning which are contradictory to the principles of self-directed learning. The learners might think that

➢ they cannot learn without being controlled by a teacher,

➢ there is one ideal method and their teachers possess it,

➢ their knowledge of and experience of learning other subjects cannot be used to learn languages better and

➢ they are not capable of making any valid assessment of their own performance.

Holec (1980) says that learners need a psychological preparation for self learning. This would be a gradual 'deconditioning process' through which they can free themselves from prejudices about language learning. Through psychological preparation learners can develop self confidence in their ability to work independently of the teacher. So, the psychological preparation is concerned with three issues,

1. persuading learners to try self-instruction

2. facilitating a change of attitude about language learning after overcoming false assumptions and prejudices and

3. helping them build self confidence in their ability to work independently of the teacher.

Stern (1983) identifies four basic sets of strategies which are exhibited by good language learners. He describes

1. an active planning strategy,

2. an academic(explicit) learning strategy,

3. a social learning strategy and

4. an affective strategy.

These strategies refer to the way good language learners cope with learning problems. Good language learners have the ability to select goals and sub-goals and are able to identify the stages of development. They are able to view language as a system and understand the relationship between form and meaning and are able to monitor their performance and improve it. They recognize that they will have a dependent status in the initial stages of learning and get actively involved in participating in exchanges. They are able to cope with the emotional and motivational problems of language learning. They develop positive attitudes towards the whole experience of language learning.

Learners can become self-directed learners by

· taking up the responsibility for deciding what to learn, how to learn, how much to learn and how well to learn;

· taking an active role in learning, seeking every opportunity to understand, practice, learn and assess their own performance; and

· taking the responsibility to decide whether to continue learning.

Those learners who have no ambition towards learner autonomy and who are reluctant to take up responsibility for their own work could benefit from preparing learner contracts. The learners could prepare a contract to work individually or with others in a group and structure the work. As Leslie Dickinson (1987) rightly points out,

"This structuring includes determining goals, determining deadlines for completing work, and determining intensity of work. It also includes specifying the means of evaluating how well the goals have been achieved. Thus, it helps the learner to develop autonomy from the teacher and from the control of a single textbook."

The learners prepare contracts for themselves wherein they specify the decisions regarding the work they are going to take up, the activities they are going to engage in, the resources they are going to use and the way of demonstrating that they have met the objectives. Learners could also be asked to reflect on their learning experience and maintain a record of what they learnt, how they learnt it and what problems they faced while learning it and what they intend to do next. Once learners learn how to learn they would be on the path to development and much of the teachers' burden in terms of information transfer can be reduced. In this era of constant change and knowledge explosion, learning how to learn is the most important lesson of life and is a worthwhile endeavour to be taken up by everyone concerned with education.

Summary

Self-directed learning can be gradually introduced in any learning programme wherein the learners have the opportunity to revert to a more teacher-controlled way of learning, if they so desire. It is important to facilitate autonomy and independence in language learning. But it cannot be done unless a special effort is made to understand the issues involved in introducing self-directed learning and prepare the institutions, teachers and learners to benefit from it. Though it sounds contradictory learners need to be taught how to learn on their own and they need to be prepared for this new role.

4. Tasks for Consolidation

1. Prepare a plan to introduce self-directed learning as part of a course, either partially or completely.

2.   Suggest the necessary steps to prepare a teacher who facilitates self-directed learning and explain how she should help her learners develop autonomy.

3.   State the problems of introducing self-directed learning. Mention the precautionary steps to be taken to overcome the problems.

4.   How can we ensure that a self-directed programme combines the advantages of teacher control with independent learning?

5. Review a book or a website providing information on self-directed learning.

References

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This website has a number of articles and this article particularly discusses Self Directed learning, the role of the educational institutions, teachers and learners and the preparation required for implementing self directed learning successfully.