A Teacher's Model of Self-Directed Learning

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ABSTRACT

This paper shows how one teacher used technology as a tool to model self-directed learning for his students. This was done so that other teachers can gain ideas and flexibly apply them to their own teaching contexts to motivate students or apply ideas to their own self-directed learning to motivate themselves. Three key points are discussed following an introduction to a shortcoming and the benefits of self-directed learning. They include: (1) constructing a personal self-directed learning plan using PowerPoint, (2) sharing self-directed learning plans as well as progress on self-directed learning on Moodle, and (3) sharing the teacher's personally selected online resources.

INTRODUCTION

Self-directed learning involves a process in which individuals take the initiative to diagnose their own learning needs, formulate their own goals, carry out their plans, and evaluate their own learning with or without help of others (Knowles, 1975). One of the shortcomings for self-directed learning, particularly for the goal of enhancing the ability of individual learners to be more self-directed is that the goal is too narrow with the focus of that being primarily instrumental learning and assisting individual learners (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Specifically, they are viewed as a way to condition the individual into taking for granted acceptance of what is offered (Collins, 1996). In order to overcome such shortcomings, there is an emphasis on focusing on emancipation as a core concern (Collins, 1996). For instance, research conducted by Andruske (2000) investigating self-directed learning projects and welfare found that women became political change agents as they attempted to control and initiate change in their everyday worlds in response to oppressive external structures. Political change agents would mean shifting from acting based on self-improvement that can be criticized as self-centered or egotistical to focusing on the benefits to society as a whole. However, Brookfield (1993) points out that changing the political culture of institutions can be difficult where the culture itself is highly controlling.

On the other hand, one of the benefits of self-directed learning as an instructional approach is its capacity to develop learners into life-long learners, as with the development of technology, knowledge is accumulating quickly and one needs to continue to learn to be effective (Williams, 2001). Dunlap and Grabinger (2003) point

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out that in order to prepare students in higher education to be lifelong learners, educators need to develop their capacity for self-direction, metacognitive awareness, and a disposition toward learning. As for workers, Smith (2002) claims that by encouraging employees to be self-directed, they can contribute to competitiveness without needing an instructor all the time. Furthermore, as Cho (2002) points out, although the primary purpose of self-directed learning has been personal growth, interaction and collaboration with others are also important. Due to spontaneous opportunities occurring within a learning environment, the benefits of self-directed learning are not only personal growth but also interacting and collaborating with others.

For the past two years, I have been teaching a course called Self-Directed Learning at a university, and I wanted to set a good example for my students by being a good role model as a self-directed learner, who is linked to an increase in student achievement and motivation (Brophy, 2010; Bruning, Schraw, & Norby, 2011). Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2006) categorize self-directed learning as one form of *informal learning* which as Coombs (1985) defined as "the spontaneous, unstructured learning that goes on daily in the home and neighborhood, behind the school and on the playing field, in the workplace, marketplace, library and museum, and through the various mass media" (p. 92). However, the self-directed learning course itself is *formal education* which according to Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2006) is formally recognized with grades, diplomas, or certificates. With the shortcomings as well as benefits of self-directed learning recognized, this paper attempts to show how one teacher used technology as a tool to model self-directed learning for his students. This way, other teachers can gain ideas and flexibly apply them to their own teaching contexts, to motivate students, or apply ideas to their own self-directed learning to motivate themselves.

CONSTRUCTING A PERSONAL LEARNING PLAN USING POWERPOINT

I had students create PowerPoint slides for their own self-directed learning over the course of five weeks during each semester. This is my third year teaching self-directed learning, and as I became used to making my self-directed learning plan, the components of self-directed learning that I included in my overview page for this year were: (1) what self-directed learning means to me, (2) what is my personal method of time management, (3) what effective goals mean to me, (4) how to engage in downstream effort, and (5) what are my personal methods of self-regulation. First, self-directed learning according to Knowles (1975) is planning, organizing, and conducting our own learning. However, to me (as the teacher), it means planning, organizing, and conducting my own learning to be a good role model for my students. This also helps me enjoy my job as a teacher of self-directed learning. Second, in terms of time management, I use Covey's (2004) time-management matrix and focus on tasks that are not urgent but important. Not urgent but important use of time includes time with family and friends or learning to become a better teacher. I consciously try to structure my time around these activities. On the other hand, what is urgent but not important for me was the use of social networking services and mindlessly watching television. I consciously try to minimize my time with this. Covey (2004) points out that when one

is focused on urgent and important matters such as work or homework assignments, one can become burned out. For this, I try to avoid trying to handle too much work at once. Writing out my own samples is just an example. For instance, ERG theory is consistent with the finding that cultural differences influence needs, needs are influenced by each individual's personal values, and people are motivated by the different needs at different times in their lives (Verplanken & Holland, 2002). Third, effective goals mean goals that are authentic and have personal meaning (Butzer, 2018), and to me, being a more knowledgeable teacher is an important authentic goal. Fourth, according to Butzer (2018), downstream effort means effortless effort. For me, I enrolled myself in a doctoral program after one year of teaching self directed learning to be in the students' shoes and motivate students. In order to complete online coursework, I have tried to engage in downstream effort by using at least four hours of commuting time on the train to read assigned reading and using three sets of four-hour chunks of time or twelve hours of time total allocated for writing every week during the semester. Finally, my personal methods of self-regulation, which is a way for effective self-control (Eggen & Kauchak, 2015) include: (1) watching movies, (2) playing music, (3) exercising, (4) spending time with colleagues, friends, and family, (4) getting enough sleep every day, (5) eating healthy, and (6) not trying too hard or try to overachieve and go beyond what I planned, as that can lead to burnout (Covey, 2004) and is an example of upstream rather than downstream effort (Burtzer, 2018).

SHARING LEARNING PLANS AND PROGRESS ON LEARNING ON MOODLE

When the teacher's learning plans on PowerPoint are shared on an online platform such as Moodle for students to see (Moodle, 2018), students can imagine a way to construct a plan. According to Knowles (1984), some adults who may know little or nothing about a topic will be more dependent on the teacher for direction, and at the other extreme, children who are naturally curious and are very self-directed in learning outside of school could also be more self-directed in school. So sharing becomes a teacher's choice considering factors such as group dynamics, students' personalities, and their stages of learning. Kouzes and Posner (1995) examined case studies and questionnaire surveys to see what practices marked personal-best examples of leadership and found that one of the five basic practices that marked such leadership was: challenging the process, one of which is the students' thought process for conducting their self-directed learning. Furthermore, persuasive communication expressing confidence that a person can attain a goal can lead to enhanced self-efficacy and goal commitment (Bandura, 1997; White & Locke, 2000). A way to be persuasive is for a teacher to actually do what he or she is asking students to do, and show that the teacher is benefiting from the activity. At the same time, however, the pressure to conform can lead to a sense of alienation instead of appreciation (Norasakkunkit & Uchida, 2014). For students who need to know how to get started, teachers can provide his or her sample learning plan, and also, the students can look at other students' learning plans shared on an online platform such as Moodle for ideas on creating his or her own learning plan, so pressure is alleviated in terms of following any one particular model.

Aside from sharing plans, having students make a record of what they learn each week and making them accountable by posting what they learn every day throughout a self-directed learning period is another way of getting students to form a habit of self-directed learning (Young, 2017). Furthermore, teachers can look at the self-directed learning plans and also look at the actual posts that students have made online of what they are reporting they have learned every day to see if students are following through with their plans. Now being my third year and having finished five semesters of teaching Self-Directed Learning, many students have reported honestly that they could not do what they planned to do for a particular day of the week because they were busier than expected, or they had to deal with unexpected urgent matters. Part of the issue with not following through is lack of intrinsic motivation. Knowles and Associates (1984), most powerful motivations are internal rather than external and adults need to know why they need to learn something (Knowles, 1984). However, they are countered with the reality that there is a lot of socially mandated learning such as driving schools, welfare programs, and prison education (Valentine, 1997). Again, teachers can have students not just look at their learning plans as samples but also other students' learning plans as samples. Looking at different plans can help students come up with plans that they are intrinsically motivated to follow through.

SHARING PERSONALLY SELECTED ONLINE RESOURCES FOR LEARNING

Having observed students for the past two years on what self-directed learning activities they engage in, it is interesting that many students like to learn English by watching TED talks and movies and listening to music, and others choose to study for TOEFL, IELTS, and TOEIC. Obtaining high scores on standardized tests can help them meet the basic requirements for studying abroad as part of their school's program. It can also help them feel well-prepared for their future job using English that they aspire to use. Understanding such tendencies, I have selected few TED Talks that might match students' interests such as themes that are directly relevant to their personal lives including relationships (McMillan, 2004), careers (Wapnick, 2015), and happiness (Waldinger, 2015). Considering group dynamics and the differences in what students are interested in listening to, based on interaction within each class, listening materials were shared on Moodle, sometimes as an in-class listening activity and sometimes as optional listening materials. Reading materials were also shared particularly regarding time management (Hallowell, 1998). Online platforms such as Coursera (2018) which has a variety of free online courses were shared with students as well. However, as many students are already taking many courses during the term, only a few students have decided to sign up and try Coursera as part of their self-directed learning during the school term. However, given that story-based interventions can often lead to lasting changes in people's behavior (Ricketts, 2015), as the students' teacher, I talk about online courses that I enjoyed taking in the past so that my students might be motivated to take them for themselves during their university years (HBX, n.d.) and after they have started working (Stanford Center for Professional Development, n.d.).

CONCLUSION

This paper attempted to show how one teacher used technology as a tool to model self-directed learning for his students so that other teachers can gain ideas and flexibly apply them to their own teaching contexts to motivate students or apply ideas to their own self-directed learning to motivate and help themselves. Three key points were discussed following an introduction to the shortcomings as well as the benefits of self-directed learning. They included: (1) constructing a personal self-directed learning plan using PowerPoint, (2) sharing self-directed learning plans as well as progress on self-directed learning on Moodle, and (3) sharing the teacher's personally selected online resources. One of the main assumptions of adult learning, that learners become increasingly self-directed as they mature (Knowles, 1980) has been criticized. However, using online platforms such as Moodle to share teachers' self-directed learning plans can help students understand a way to make their own self-directed learning plans and encourage them to continue engaging in self-directed learning after graduation. It is hoped that this paper also motivates teachers to construct their own self-directed learning plans for professional development.

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