

Chapter 3

Becoming a More Self-Directed Learner

Why and How

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THIS CHAPTER IS DESIGNED TO ASSIST YOU in exploring an approach to learning that will support your e-learning success. The following questions will be addressed:

1. Why is becoming a self-directed learner important for your e-learning success?
2. What do you need to know about self-directed learning?
3. How can you develop your readiness for self-directed learning?
4. What learner support systems should you develop or ask for?

THE WHY OF SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

You know some of them—the *innovators* who seem to be always one step ahead of everyone else: thinking, analyzing, identifying needs for new learning, and finding ways to meet them. In times of rapid change, learners like these acquire new skills, discover new techniques, and implement new processes; and they prosper. You also know the *clingers*—individuals who hold on to the old ways of doing things despite evidence that these approaches are no longer effective—the people who shy away from new technology and live defensively, not proactively.

Based on extensive research, the *innovators* are likely to be the highly self-directed learners. They are also more likely to be high performers on the job, to be at higher levels in their organizations, to

26 GETTING THE MOST FROM ONLINE LEARNING

be creative and entrepreneurial and to have greater life satisfaction. The *clingers* face a different scenario. Those who do not accept responsibility for identifying their own learning needs and making sure that these needs are addressed may find themselves to be obsolete (and possibly unemployed). (Curry, 1983; Durr, 1992; Guglielmino, 1994; Guglielmino & Guglielmino, 1981; Guglielmino & Klatt, 1994; Roberts, 1986).

Why is SDL readiness so important for e-learning? Because your best preparation for e-learning success is to enhance your readiness for self-direction in learning. In a national survey of trainers, professors, and learners involved in e-learning (Guglielmino & Guglielmino, 2001) two components of learner characteristics emerged as the most important for success in e-learning: readiness for self-direction in learning and technological readiness. Several studies have shown that the technical skills necessary for most e-learning are usually quickly mastered and very seldom, by themselves, reduce e-learning completion rates; therefore, enhancing your readiness for SDL becomes your most powerful avenue for e-learning success.

THE HOW OF SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

Now that you have some idea as to why SDL is important for you as an e-learner, let's look at how you take advantage of that knowledge: What do you need to know about self-direction in learning?

Self-direction in learning has been described both as a process and as a psychological predisposition of the learner (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991). SDL is a very natural process, and each person is a self-directed learner to some degree. The innovator and the clinger described earlier are two extremes of the spectrum. Similarly, learning situations offer varied levels of opportunity to exercise your self-direction.

The most frequently used definition of self-directed learning as a process was developed by Malcolm Knowles (1975), whose work

BECOMING A MORE SELF-DIRECTED LEARNER: WHY AND HOW 27

provided a foundation for SDL in both educational and workplace contexts. He described SDL as a process in which the learner, with or without the help of others, identifies learning needs, defines learning goals, develops and implements a learning plan, and evaluates the learning gained. This cyclical process often results in the identification of new learning needs. The learners who are most likely to be successful in this process are those who have the highest levels of readiness for self-directed learning: a complex mixture of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and habits. Before proceeding, complete the exercise in Exhibit 3.1.

Exhibit 3.1. Action: Past SDL Projects

Write down at least three learning projects you have conducted in the past three years. Use the following criteria to define a learning project:

1. You took the major responsibility for the learning, especially in setting your goals for the learning and deciding which resources to use (books, videos, other individuals, classes, or experimental equipment, for example).
2. You spent at least seven hours on the learning project (not necessarily continuous). Include your planning time.

Write your projects in a grid like the one below:

Learning Project	Hours Spent	Resources Used
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REFLECTION ON PAST SDL PROJECTS

What was your first reaction to being asked to name three self-learning projects? Which of the following reactions was closest to how you felt: “Have I done any?” “Suppose I can’t think of any?” or “No problem, I can name more than three.”?

If you had to think a while before listing your learning projects (“Have I done any?”) or even had vague twinges of panic (“Suppose I can’t think of any?”), you’re completely normal. If “No problem” was your initial response, you are far more aware of yourself as a capable self-learner than the vast majority of adults are of themselves. A major study of self-learning projects (Tough, 1978) revealed that most adults are not very aware of themselves as continuing learners. Many people, in fact, are unable to list a single project they have conducted in the previous six months when first asked. Only after going through an extensive interview process could they recognize and describe their learning projects. Topics cover the range of human experience, from the most typical current learning project, mastering some aspect of computer technology or software, to learning for health reasons, leisure pursuits, home improvement, improvement of relationships, or for use in the workplace. Based just on the brief prompt provided by that list, you can probably now add many more projects to your list. Take a moment to think of some.

Were any of the learning projects you listed job-related? If so, are they listed on your resume?

Typically, many of the learning projects reported by adults are job-related, sometimes as many as half. You will not usually find learning projects conducted outside of formal educational institutions listed on résumés, however. This is easily understood in light of the fact that Tough found that most people vastly underestimate the value and extent of their learning projects.

How many self-directed learning projects would you guess the average adult conducts per year?

According to Tough’s research, the average adult conducts eight learning projects per year. The average number of hours spent in learning projects in one year was 816, representing a range from 0

to 2,509. Average length of time spent on an individual learning project was 104 hours. Remember: The number of learning projects you listed in the previous exercise was based on an unprompted list. The figures cited from the Tough study are based on an in-depth interview, including examples of typical topics.

Once you begin thinking of things you have learned on your own and what others around you might have learned on their own, it becomes obvious that all of us are self-directed learners to some degree. Think for a moment about the people you know who seem to be always learning something new. Write down a few characteristics you would use to describe their attitudes, skills, and habits. The learners that you thought of are probably highly self-directed.

When a group of experts was asked to describe learners who would be likely to be successful in SDL, they arrived at this consensus:

A highly self-directed learner is one who exhibits initiative, independence, and persistence in learning; one who accepts responsibility for his or her own learning and views problems as challenges, not obstacles; one who is capable of self-discipline and has a high degree of curiosity; one who has a strong desire to learn or change and is self-confident; one who is able to use basic study skills, organize his or her time, set an appropriate pace for learning, and develop a plan for completing work; one who enjoys learning and has a tendency to be goal-oriented. (Guglielmino, 1977–78, p. 73)

The definition suggests a variety of knowledge, attitudes, skills, and habits that are involved in readiness for self-directed learning. How can you develop these to enhance your readiness for self-directed learning?

How can you develop your readiness for self-directed learning? Now that we have looked at the past and present, we need to consider the future.

Knowledge of SDL

The first step in improving your readiness for SDL is gaining an understanding of self-direction in learning, which you have already

30 GETTING THE MOST FROM ONLINE LEARNING

begun by reading this chapter. It is important to realize that SDL is a very natural way of learning and that you can consciously improve your SDL readiness through your efforts and experiences.

Self-Knowledge

Readiness for self-directed learning requires self-knowledge: an understanding of yourself as a learner based on an honest appraisal. To assist your analysis of yourself as a learner, you can use any of the following:

- Learning style assessments to determine your preferred ways of taking in and processing information (see www.vark-learn.com/english/index.asp)
- Multiple intelligences inventories to determine your learning strengths (see www.multi-intell.com/mi_overview.htm), or
- The Learning Preference Assessment (Guglielmino & Guglielmino, 1991) to assess your current level of readiness for self-directed learning (see www.guglielmino734.com)

Answer the questions in Exhibit 3.2 after trying one of the assessments mentioned above.

Exhibit 3.2. Action and Reflection: Self as Learner

Develop a learning profile for yourself:

1. How do you usually prefer to take in information? Are you a visual, aural, kinesthetic, or interactive learner?

32 GETTING THE MOST FROM ONLINE LEARNING

your own that you wrote down in Exhibit 3.1 and recognizing that much of your most important learning has been self-learning should provide a strong base for this attitude.

Closely related to this attitude are two others: *accepting responsibility for your own learning* and *viewing problems as challenges rather than obstacles*. The successful self-directed learner believes that the primary responsibility for learning belongs to the learner, not the instructor, professor, or trainer. You are the one who must recognize your own needs for learning and take the responsibility for making it happen, regardless of the course design, other inviting activities, unforeseen occurrences—all the distractions that are used by some as an excuse for avoiding, postponing, or giving up on a learning project.

Creativity and independence in learning are also crucial in many of the well-designed e-learning settings, settings that require analysis, independent work, and the creation of products that must combine theory and practice. If you are accustomed to very structured learning settings built around memorization and following exact directions, you may need a bit of time to adjust to assignments requiring more creativity and independence, but don't hesitate to ask questions and compare notes with other learners.

A *willingness to seek help* also facilitates self-directed learning. The idea of the self-directed learner as a lone wolf struggling to find answers in isolation is a myth. An effective self-directed learner uses all the tools available, then invents those that are not.

Individuals who are reluctant to “show their ignorance” by asking questions, seeking clarification, or seeking out expert advice handicap themselves in terms of learning progress. Those who are willing to ask for help reduce the time involved in responding to problems and challenges and avoid frustration that can lead to poor completion rates.

Another helpful attitude is *valuing your own learning*—a belief in the importance of learning achieved on your own. In most of your experiences in our formal educational system, you have had an instructor who tells you what to learn, how to learn it, and when you will be tested on it and who then gives you a grade to let you know how well you met the expectations imposed on you. This type

of experience naturally leads us to devalue the learning achieved outside of formal classroom situations. Learners soon get the idea that learning that takes place outside of a classroom or a training room doesn't count. The expansion of knowledge in the information age makes this concept not only foolish, but potentially damaging. New challenges and obstacles now arise daily, and if individuals wait for someone else to tell them what to learn, they and their organizations will lag behind instead of leading. Check your own attitudes about learning in Exhibit 3.3.

Exhibit 3.3. Action and Behavior: Attitudes

Adopt your attitudes toward learning on your own as a continuous self-improvement project. Become more aware of the messages you send yourself about yourself as a learner and consciously monitor your self-talk to develop your SDL attitudes. Examine your thoughts, attitudes, and your self-talk when engaged in learning by using the following questions:

- Do I feel capable of finding a way to learn almost anything I might need to learn?
- Do I usually take the initiative in learning, or do I wait for someone to tell me what needs to be learned and how and when it will be learned?
- Am I focused on gaining the information and skills, or just meeting the requirements of a class or training session?
- When problems and barriers occur, do I feel overburdened or defeated, or do I remind myself that overcoming obstacles is just a natural part of the learning process and quickly begin to mentally play with ways of meeting the challenge and accomplishing my learning goal? Does my self-talk sound more like "What if I tried it this way?" than "If only this hadn't happened!"?
- Am I willing to admit that I need help sometimes and seek it from learning facilitators, experts, friends, co-learners?
- Am I proud of what I learn on my own? Do I acknowledge my learning accomplishments and gain satisfaction from them?

Once you have thought through the questions, identify areas that you want to target for improvement and design a plan for addressing them (see the information on developing a learning plan in the next section of this chapter).

SDL Skills and Habits

Logically, basic academic skills are an important part of readiness for e-learning, especially reading skills. Depending on the instructional design, writing skills can also be critical. Self-directed learners are also usually skilled at identifying and analyzing their learning needs. Key skills related to meeting these learning needs include the ability to set learning goals, develop a learning plan, identify resources for learning (both human and material), implement the learning, and evaluate the learning. Time management skills and document or report preparation skills support this process as well.

Both habits of thought and habits of action can provide vital support for SDL. Highly self-directed learners have a high level of curiosity and a strong desire to learn, so they are continually thinking. They habitually analyze their own learning processes and learning outcomes, engaging in a process called *meta-learning*. In other words, they are in the habit of observing and analyzing things in a search for new insights, new meaning, new questions. A part of this reflection is environmental scanning, an ongoing, active awareness of changes in the environment and their possible implications, including possible needs for new learning.

One of the most important habits of the successful self-directed learner is the habit of persistence—the refusal to be deterred from reaching a goal because of problems, boredom, or other factors or events that might derail a less determined learner. Habits such as systematic planning, productive organization of learning media and materials, and completing tasks within the time scheduled can streamline and anchor effective e-learning.

SDL SKILLS AND HABITS

Obviously, some of the SDL skills and habits develop over long time spans and could not be adequately addressed in this chapter. We will focus on a few brief guidelines and planning tools, which, if used regularly, can help to develop SDL skills and habits.

Organize

Analyze each new learning situation to maximize your gain and the gain for your organization. Assess what will be most useful to you, plan an approach to learning, and set a timetable. Two tools that could be helpful to you in this process are learning contracts and time/task calendars.

A *time/task calendar* can be extremely useful in any learning situation. It simply requires you to look at the task before you, break it into manageable segments, and commit to logical deadlines for completing each part of the task. You might want to keep one copy with your learning materials, but be sure to transfer the deadlines to whatever type of daily calendar you use. When you do this, you are creating a type of tickler file that will help you to meet your deadlines.

In less structured e-learning situations, or for major projects within a learning situation, you may want to use a *learning plan* or *learning contract*. A learning contract simply lays out, in a very brief and easy-to-read format, four essential components of your learning: your specific objectives, your learning process and resources, a target date, and an evaluation standard. To develop a learning plan, ask yourself four questions:

1. "What do I need to know or be able to do?" Your answer becomes your learning objective.
2. "What steps will I take to learn this and what resources will I use?" Your list may include a variety of resources, both human and material.
3. "When will I complete this?" A target date for completion of the learning objective facilitates your planning.
4. "What will my evaluation standard be?" It is important to decide from the beginning how you will measure your success. Is total mastery required, or just a working knowledge?

For more detailed information on learning contracts, see Knowles (1977) and Guglielmino and Guglielmino (1991, 1999).

36 GETTING THE MOST FROM ONLINE LEARNING

Use Support Systems

Get in the habit of using learner support systems or developing your own. Check the online help options, ask a friend or colleague with expertise, consult a learning resource center facilitator, if available, and explore mentoring options.

Seek Appropriate Delivery Systems—or Adapt!

Regularly apply your new knowledge of yourself as a learner to choose an e-learning delivery option that you believe you can be successful with. Do you need an onsite facilitator? Would you prefer learning that is totally online? Do you function better in audio-based learning platforms? Seek appropriate learning environments when the choices are available, and adapt your approach when they are not.

All learning options offer varied levels of opportunity for self-direction, but the highly self-directed learner is better equipped to gain from any learning experience.

SUMMARY

Enhancing Your Readiness for Self-Direction in Learning: The Short List

Become a more ACTIVE learner:

- **Assess** yourself as a learner. Become more aware of your preferred learning styles, your strongest intelligences, and your SDL KASH (Knowledge Attitudes Skills Habit).
- **Contemplate** your previous SDL projects. Think about what you learned and how you learned it. Recall the problems or challenges and how you overcame them. Remember the feeling of satisfaction you gained from your learning.
- **Take time** to think about all the possible resources for SDL. Depending on the type of learning you are doing, your list

may include books, articles, manuals, computer databases, Internet Web sites, human experts, experiments, or a variety of other resources.

- Investigate and practice using tools that can support and streamline your SDL, such as learning contracts and time/task calendars.
- Value and celebrate your learning.
- Evaluate and reflect continually, monitoring the accomplishment of your learning goals and identifying new needs for learning.

References

For all references cited in this chapter, see www.guglielmino734.com/newpage3.htm.

About the Authors

Dr. Lucy Guglielmino is currently professor of adult and community education at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton, Florida. Her doctorate is in adult education from the University of Georgia (1977). Dr. Guglielmino is best known for her development of the *Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale* (with a self-scoring form known as the *Learning Preference Assessment*). The *SDLRS* has been translated into twelve languages and used in more than three dozen countries. In addition, Dr. Guglielmino has authored or co-authored more than ninety books, chapters, articles, monographs, and other written materials on various aspects of adult learning, training, and development. She is listed in many honoraries, including *Notable American Women*, *Who's Who in America*, and *Who's Who in the World*.

Dr. Paul Guglielmino is an associate professor of management at Florida Atlantic University. He teaches undergraduate and graduate level courses in the area of general management, entrepreneurship, and new business formation. In 1998, Dr. Guglielmino was

38 GETTING THE MOST FROM ONLINE LEARNING

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