NURTURING EACH LEARNER'S SELF-DIRECTION

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"If being able to assume greater control for one's destiny is a desirable goal of adult education (and we believe it is!), then a role for educators of adults is to help learners become increasingly able to assume personal responsibility for their own learning," ~ Ralph Brockett and Roger Hiemstra

INTRODUCTION

In an ideal world of instruction and learning, instructor and learner assume collaborative roles, trusting one another and embracing the cooperative interaction that fosters individual growth and development. Not unlike coach and athlete or orchestra conductor and musician, one person leads and the other follows; together, they create a skillful and dynamic outcome.

They each see themselves as partners in the learning process. The coach observes the players both during the game and at practice to understand what to focus on during drills. The conductor matches music selection and his expectations with players' abilities. And the instructor provides the support, resources, and learning opportunities necessary for the learner to participate and learn. Participants in the game, orchestra, and training event count on this sensitivity.

Further, the leader guides the followers as they acquire the eventual ability to "do it" by themselves. The football coach does not step in for the quarterback when the going gets tough. The orchestra conductor refrains from joining the violins even when he may be able to play that section of the music better than any of them. And instructors focus as much on fostering lifelong learning skills and dispositions as they do on conveying content and building skills.

In many ways, the instructor, coach, and conductor are seriously involved with facilitating <u>process</u> over achieving <u>product</u>. The win and the flawless performance are hoped for but not meant to be achieved at the expense of growth and learning in participants.

During the process of acquiring knowledge, gaining practical experience, and improving essential abilities, there is one learner attribute that many educators think must be stimulated if there is to be any level of success. That attribute is self-direction. Whether the learner comes already self-directed or acquires self-direction through a deliberate process of instructor support, its impact on both current and lifelong growth and development cannot be overstated.

SELF-DIRECTION

What is self-direction then? Self-direction is the degree of personal commitment and ownership an individual exhibits toward a particular learning experience. It is regarded by many as the cornerstone of adult education and directly impacts the relationship between the individuals involved in a learning situa-

tion—teacher and student, supervisor and staff member, trainer and learner. Theoretically, as individuals accept more responsibility for their own learning, they are prepared—and expect—to exert more influence over the learning process as well.

> "[Self-direction] means more than merely taking initiative. It means that as human beings, we are responsible for our own lives. Our behavior is a function of our decisions, not our conditions. We can subordinate feelings to values. We have the initiative and the responsibility to make things happen." ~ Stephen Covey

INFLUENCES ON SELF-DIRECTION

Self-direction is a quality that varies from person to person and across situations. The degree to which an individual acts in a self-directed fashion is influenced by several variables:

- knowledge and understanding of the topic or content
- technical skills regarding a particular topic
- sense of personal competence
- context of the learning event

For example, during a learning experience, people's ability to direct their own learning is influenced by familiarity with the specialized knowledge or vocabulary needed to comprehend a new topic. An early childhood trainer may need to define "positive behavior guidance" or describe and give examples of what is meant by "developmentally appropriate practice."

The specific demands or limits of a particular learning situation also influence the degree to which an individual will act autonomously, such as:

- explicit expectations of the trainer
- structure of the learning event
- influence of others in establishing the learning goals or evaluation methods

For example, a center director may decide the teachers need more training on literacy issues. When he or she establishes the content of the training session without input from the teachers, it is likely that at least some of the teachers may be resistant and consequently, less self-directed.

Other contextual variables which influence an individual's degree of self-direction are connected to personal well-being, such as:

- level of interest in the content
- mood
- physical health
- energy level

LEVELS OF GUIDANCE

Let's use a four-point continuum to look at the characteristics of an individual's self-direction based on the level of guidance an instructor, trainer, coach, or supervisor may need to be prepared to provide. On one end of the continuum are those individuals who exhibit the least amount of self-direction and thus prefer a high level of guidance. At the other end are those who display a great deal of self-direction and require minimal, if any, guidance.

The continuum includes learners who prefer:

- a high level of guidance
- a good deal of guidance
- a little guidance
- minimal guidance, if any

As with any continuum, the four points are not disconnected, and distinctions are likely to be blurred. However, it is helpful to trainers to use these four points to describe individuals at each point and learn more about how to support them.

~ The learner who prefers a high level of guidance

Individuals who are least self-directed frequently ask for the trainer's viewpoint, suggestions, assistance in clarifying their thinking or wants, and help in narrowing their learning focus. These learners often wish the facilitator to act as an "expert" and to provide explicit directions on what to do and how to do it.

They may request prompts to ensure that necessary tasks are completed and need the trainer to encourage their reflection by asking specific questions.

This preference for learning and refining skills to be "teacher-centered" or "teacher-directed" may also be present when learners have little experience related to the topic. For some learners, a preference that someone else directs their learning is their predominant style in most learning situations. For others, this is a temporary stage while they practice new content and skills or because they believe this will be an efficient way to learn about a particular topic.

> "It is a misconception to assume that learners necessarily enter a learning experience with a high level of self-direction already intact. Self-direction is not a panacea for all problems associated with adult learning. Nor is it always necessary for one to be highly self-directed in order to be a successful learner." ~ Ralph Brockett and Roger Hiemstra

~ The learner who prefers a good deal of guidance

A number of people have developed or demonstrate some degree of self-direction but still prefer a good deal of guidance. Learners who express some self-direction are willing to participate in goal setting and communicate their interests and reactions but frequently request assistance from the trainer. These learners prefer to manage their learning only to a limited degree but readily respond to motivational techniques to support their self-direction.

Individuals with this level of self-direction show willingness to complete tasks or activities for which they can clearly see the purpose. Even when they are unfamiliar with the particular skill or topic, they demonstrate confidence that they will be able to succeed or master the skill; they just feel more comfortable with considerable oversight. These learners often respond positively to personal interaction with the trainer and to reinforcement for their willingness and enthusiasm.

~ The learner who prefers a little guidance

Some individuals have developed or demonstrate an increasing degree of self-direction but still prefer a little assistance. These learners express readiness to explore a new subject or to expand their current skills and knowledge but would like a "good guide." They almost always have some level of expertise (skill and knowledge) in a particular area. They describe themselves as participants in their own learning/education and require only a little direction.

They want to be respected for who they are and what they can do. They are ready to consider how they learn and examine their experiences, values, and goals. They think critically, initiate activities, solve problems, and cooperate with others in designing and implementing learning projects. Collaborative and cooperative learning is more effective for them than for learners displaying less self-direction.

~ The learner who prefers minimal guidance, if any

When individuals have developed and display a high degree of self-direction, they prefer to set their own personal goals and standards--with or without help from "experts"--and prefer to direct their individual learning or refinement of skills. They are often eager to take responsibility for their own learning and productivity independent of acclaim.

Learners who are highly self-directed expect to manage their own time and learning projects, set goals, evaluate their learning and their projects, gather information, work independently, and make decisions about which strategies or alternatives to pursue. They frequently prefer a great deal of autonomy in the learning situation. They prefer to choose the experts, materials, institutions, and other resources they wish to use to pursue their learning goals.

> "There is convincing evidence that people who take the initiative in learning (proactive learners) learn more things, and learn better, than do people who sit at the feet of teachers passively waiting to be taught (reactive learners). 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." ~ Malcolm Knowles

TRAINING STRATEGIES

Throughout the learning process, trainers can encourage and support learners' self-direction in a number of ways:

~ Provide "graduated assistance" by providing more support at first and less support as time passes and the need wanes. Assistance may begin with direct guidance, such as actually helping to develop or write a product or demonstrating how to conduct circle time. Assistance may then decrease to verbal intervention--ranging from giving specific directions to making comments or suggestions to offering observations of the learner as he or she practices.

> There is an "ethical responsibility when engaging adults by crafting self-directed learning experiences" ~ Robert Donaghy

~ Encourage learners to "grapple with" or "sort out" their own ideas. Assist individuals to identify problems, clarify assumptions, and select alternatives. Plan activities and dialogue that helps them differentiate between judgments based on values or biases and those based on observations or "data."

~ Encourage learners to manage the learning process. Ask them:

- what they would prefer
- what they believe is possible
- what they have already thought of
- what they value

- what relationships or influences they believe exist
- how they will assess their progress

> "Aligning goals makes it clear from the beginning that participants are expected to solve problems and actively process information rather than sit passively and receive the gift of your wisdom." ~ Paula Jorde Bloom

~ Encourage learners' critical analysis and reasoning. In other words, help the learner to identify and examine his or her own knowledge, concepts, understanding of relationships, experiences and examples, and assumptions. This includes:

- listening and watching for verbal and nonverbal cues to formulate and pose critical questions
- sensitively challenging their thinking and assertions
- reflecting attitudes and habitual ways of thinking, acting, or reasoning back to them so they see themselves from a different perspective
- prompting reflection about their own thinking and reasoning

> "The pedagogista works to promote within herself and among teachers an attitude of "learning to learn," an openness to change, and a willingness to discuss opposing points of view." ~ Tiziana Filippini, The Hundred Languages of Children

~ Encourage learners' consistent and meaningful reflection. This helps them learn to evaluate their own thinking and behavior and makes it more likely that they can eventually become "self-correcting."

> "The old adage that people learn from experience is only half of the story. People learn from reflecting on their experience, analyzing events, dynamics, conclusions; and from comparing the "official word" or theory with their own intuition and experience. Reflection may confirm or contradict previous understandings. Either way, it deepens insights and the disposition towards seeing oneself as a lifelong learner." ~ Margie Carter/Deb Curtis

~ Assist learners to clarify and articulate their learning wants and purposes for participating. When learners set their own goals, genuine learning is more likely. They can record goals on paper or verbalize them to a partner in an initial activity.

Learners may not be able to set goals from scratch; help them determine personal goals within the parameters of the learning outcomes for the session. Completing a KWL (<u>K</u>now, <u>W</u>ant to know, what they hope to <u>L</u>earn) chart at the start of the session helps participants build on each other's thinking as well.

> "A cardinal principle of training is that <u>teaching</u> does not equal <u>learning</u>. For learning to occur, your audience must see the relevance of the new ideas to their lives." ~ Paula Jorde Bloom

~ Help learners identify and overcome barriers that interfere with their learning. This may include explicitly pointing out--from a trainer's perspective and experience--those aspects of professional practice that may be especially challenging or difficult.

~ Vary the amount of facilitation to match a learner's changing needs and wants. In any case, step in to offer assistance if there is a sense that the learner is unsure or puzzled. Be prepared to step out when the learner is clearly ready to take the lead.

~ Promote learners' asking questions. Especially encourage questions about their professional practices, specific skills or techniques, or the learning process. Trainers can model this practice after a learning activity by simply asking, "Was this activity easy or hard for you? What made it easy or hard?

~ Support learners' attributing progress or success to their own efforts or skills. This is most often done in various pre and post assessments. Other ways to measure progress include going back to a previously completed KWL chart at the end of the session to check off what was accomplished. Trainers

might also simply ask participants to record "one new thing they learned" on the bottom of the evaluation or on a post-it note.

> "Bridging the distance from general expectations to personal expectations is important because it underscores your workshop philosophy that a workshop's success is the equal responsibility of the leader and the group." ~ Paula Jorde Bloom

CONCLUSION

Having now looked at various degrees of self-direction and reviewed a number of training strategies that support this capacity, it is necessary to offer a note of caution. As M.K. Smith put it:

> "We are left with some problems around the notion of self-direction. This is not to say that it has no use in exploring education and learning--but it does need treating with care. In a very real sense all learning is, by definition self-directed--it is, as [another investigator] has said, purposeful. The problem we have with the notion becomes most strong when it is reduced to technique."

It is apparent that self-direction is an important aspect of the teaching/learning partnership. After all, the teacher will not always be available when decisions need to be made or problems need to be resolved. At the end of the day, trainers have an obligation to teach in such a way that learners not only learn content and skills but, in the process, they acquire the necessary skills to go on learning.

RESOURCES*

* Self-direction (1996) by Mark K. Smith on Infed: www.infed.org/biblio/b-selfdr.htm

* *Training Teachers: A Harvest of Theory and Practice* (1994) by Margie Carter and Deb Curtis.

* Self-directed learning in adult education. http://sdlearning.pbworks.com/w/page/1898850/FrontPage

* *Workshop Essentials: Planning and Presenting Dynamic Workshops* (2000) by Paula Jorde Bloom.