

Promoting Self-directed Learning in Three Online Health Promotion and Wellness Courses

Corey Brouse
State University of New York at Oswego

This study assessed undergraduate students' perceptions concerning the extent to which participating in online courses may have facilitated self-directed learning. This qualitative study involved a convenience sample of 36 students from three online, undergraduate level health promotion and wellness classes at the State University of New York at Oswego. Students were surveyed and responses were grouped according to each class. Findings suggest that students were able to self-select and self-direct certain assignments, presentation topics, and readings. Considering different viewpoints, involving the students in the Socratic Method, allowing ample time for assignments and self-reflection, and making assignments enjoyable were also beneficial. Considerable work is needed to effectively define best practices for promoting self-directed learning in distance education classes. This study supports the importance of considering students' opinions in creating assignments and designing online courses to enhance self-directed learning.

Keywords: Self-directed learning, health and wellness, self-reflection.

Introduction

Self-directed Learning

Since the early 1970's, many institutions of higher education have made the facilitation of self-directed learning part of their mission. Merriam and Caffarella (1991) described the goals of self-directed learning as: (1) enhancement of the ability of adult learners to be self-directed in their learning, (2) fostering of transformational learning as central to self-directed learning, and (3) promotion of emancipatory learning and social action as an integral part of self-directed learning.

Just as there are many variations in the definitions, descriptions, and goals of self-directed learning (Houle, 1961; Tough, 1979; Knowles, 1975, 1980; Caffarella & O'Donnell, 1990; Maslow, 1970; Collins, 1985, 1991, 1998; Brookfield, 1986), there are a wide array of ideas and models of how self-directed learning should be promoted (Tough, 1971; Brookfield, 1985; Grow,

1991; Hammond & Collins, 1991; Jarvis, 1985) and how it fits into the instructional process (Hiemstra & Sisco, 1990; Brockett & Himestra, 1991). Many of these ideas focus on the factors that may influence adult learning, which include, but are not limited to, circumstantial factors (Spear & Mocker, 1984; Knowles, 1980; Candy, 1991), different personalities of learners (Brockett & Himestra, 1991), stages of learning and cognition (Cavaliere & Sgroi, 1992; Danis, 1992), and changes in perspective (Mezirow, 1991). Several studies have indicated that adults in different learning situations have spent considerable time on self-directed learning projects (Tough, 1978; Sheckley, 1985; Brockett & Himestra, 1985; Herbeson, 1991).

Self-directed Learning in Distance Education

Distance learning may be a promising medium for promoting self-direction (Moore, 1986; Himestra, 1994;

Gibson, 1992; Modra, 1989; Lee & Gibson, 2003). This may result from increased opportunities for interaction between instructors and students, and between students and their classmates (Moore, 1973; Moore, 1989). Research has demonstrated that student satisfaction is highest in courses where interaction with an instructor is greatest (Dziuban, Shea, & Arbaugh, 2005).

The Transactional Distance Learning Theory was developed by Moore (1993) to outline how distance learning programs operate successfully. The three main components of this theory are dialogue, structure, and learner autonomy. Each of these components is discussed briefly below.

Dialogue goes beyond interaction in that it is purposeful and multi-faceted. In order to be successful, Moore believes that interaction in a distance program there must be continuous interaction between all members of a course (1993). In other words, all members involved are part of a learning community. Not surprisingly, research suggests that a successful component of distance learning is the development of community (Swan & Shea, 2005; Garton, Haythornthwaite, & Wellman, 1997; Haythornthwaite, 1996; Haythornthwaite, 1998). However, according to the Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), the way in which the environment influences an individual depends, in part, upon personal attributes (e.g. knowledge, awareness, values, locus of control) and behavioral attributes (e.g. skills). Furthermore, this model recognizes that the environment not only has an influence on individuals, but that there is reciprocal determinism, whereby the individual may influence the environment (Bandura, 1977).

Influencing the environment is important for self-directed learning because a better psychological climate can lead to better discourse; debates can take place with courtesy and respect versus fearing the

possibility of being attacked when offering a contrary opinion.

Structure pertains to the way a course is designed. A distance course needs to be constructed in a way that enhances interaction, motivation and analytical skills. Just like face-to-face courses, the way information is presented and the choice of appropriate learning materials will influence opportunities for interactions. Clearly, the instructor has a great influence on how much purposeful dialogue takes place as the result of the way the course is structured. In contrast, the level of learner autonomy is controlled mostly by the learner, if the course structure permits.

To be autonomous, one must have developed a sense of self (Lindley, 1986) and be prepared for self-directed learning (approaching subject matter independently). At the undergraduate level, most students have gained a sense of self, but promoting autonomy should be implemented in light of considering others' needs and wants as well (Dewey, 1963; White, 1982; Burkitt, 1990). Autonomy and self-direction should be promoted in distance learning regardless of the audience. The challenge is how to tailor self-directed learning to individual users.

Relationship to Authentic Learning

Rule (2006) identified four components of authentic learning: real-world problems that engage learners in the work of professionals; inquiry activities that practice thinking skills and metacognition; discourse among a community of learners; and student empowerment through choice.

Two of the components of Moore's Transactional Distance Learning Theory directly support an authentic learning environment for students: purposeful and multi-faceted dialogue occurs among a community of learners and autonomy and self-direction occur when learners make choices about their learning. The structure of

a distance learning environment can also contribute to authentic learning when learners engage in the real-world work of professionals and pursue inquiry involving higher-order thinking skills and metacognition.

These three courses contributed to these components of authentic learning in various ways. Virtually all of the discussions dealt with real-world problems such as prevention and early detection of cancer, avoiding or minimizing the possible effects of the anticipated avian flu pandemic, ethical issues in conducting research, among others. There was also a substantial emphasis on the quality of the discourse itself, which was intended to not only promote a good discussion but to assist the learners to question the assumptions underlying their points of view. The questioning of students' points of view prompted them to articulate justifications for their opinions. This process was intended to help the learners to think about their thinking. Using these same analytical skills, students were also able to question and agree or disagree with the viewpoints of professionals in the field as articulated in current literature. Throughout the courses, there were various opportunities for the learners to make choices about their learning, for example with respect to which assignment were completed, the content and format in which assignments were completed, with whom to interact on the discussion board and when an individual's comments would be posted. Nevertheless, each course had weekly discussions in which students followed guidelines to submit substantive entries. Typically, these entries generated many questions and resulted in versatile discussions. These discussions help to form a community of learners within each class, which produced an impressive degree of collective ingenuity.

Enhancing Courses to Promote Self-Directed Learning

One way to learn how to enhance a course for self-directed learning is by eliciting student feedback. Because there is a connection between being self-directed and achieving success in an on-line class, students who consider themselves to be self-directed may have valuable insights about how professors can encourage self-directed learning and what type of assignments work best to promote self-directed learning. The purpose of this study was, therefore, to assess undergraduate students' perceptions concerning the ways in which participating in one or more online Health Promotion and Wellness courses may have facilitated self-directed learning.

Method

Students' perceptions concerning the extent to which participating in one or more online Health Promotion and Wellness courses may have facilitated self-directed learning were measured by a survey developed by the researcher/instructor of the courses (C.H.B) (Appendix 1). Students' opinions pertaining to what professors can do to promote self-directed learning were elicited as well.

Participants

This qualitative study involved a convenience sample of 36 students from the following three online, undergraduate level Health Promotion and Wellness classes at the State University of New York (SUNY) at Oswego: (1) Evaluation and Research, (2) Health Promotion Program Planning, and (3) Wellness Skills. These courses were chosen because their focus on critical thinking affords the opportunity to elicit opinions on self-directed learning.

The sample (N=36) comprised mostly females who were college seniors

and students between the ages of 20 and 24. Most had not taken a prior distance-learning course, but considered themselves to be self-directed learners (See Table 1).

Table 1. Demographics of Participants

Characteristics	N	%
Academic Year		
Junior	11	30.5
Senior	25	69.5
Age		
20	5	13.9
21	9	25.0
22	5	13.9
23	6	16.7
24	5	13.9
25 and older	6	16.7
Gender		
Male	13	36.1
Female	23	63.9
Taken Distance Learning Classes Before?		
Yes	9	25.0
No	27	75.0
Considered Self a Self-directed Learner		
Yes	32	89.0
No	4	11.0

Research Design

The research design was cross-sectional: data were collected from a single sample at a single point in time. The opportunity to complete the assignment was given to all 40 students registered in the three classes and 36 responded. It should be noted that the 13 students who were in more than one of these courses were only counted once, but offered insight into the specific assignments for the class that they felt

promoted self-directed learning to the greatest degree.

The students were given the opportunity to receive a small amount of extra credit for participating in the study. Students were asked to list their age and year in college, and whether or not they had taken an online class in the past. Self-directed learning was not part of the course content, and it was assumed that it was not a topic with which the students were familiar. Students were assured that they would receive extra credit for completing the task regardless of their answers. To provide context, they were given the following definition by Knowles (1990) and asked if they considered themselves as self-directed learners. Malcolm Knowles (1990, p. 18) describes self-directed learning as the 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.”

The second part of the survey contained two open-ended questions: (1) In what ways, if any, did this online class promote self-directed learning? (2) What can professors do to encourage self-directed learning? The project was described in each of the three classes on the discussion board and survey questions (Appendix 1) were posted in the class and sent to each individual in an e-mail. The directions and purpose were clearly stated and the students’ responses were submitted for the researcher’s view only. The institutional human subjects review board at the university approved this study.

The responses were analyzed using qualitative methods. All of the responses were grouped according to each class. Each response was read and the researcher took

notes in the margins to identify the categories for the specific questions. After reading the students' responses, the researcher generated a category variable that indicated what the researcher associated with the particular text. This is obviously influenced to a great extent by subjectivity. Once the categories were all specified, they were grouped according to similarity and fitting together. The text depicting different categories are repeated to illustrate examples of the different points made.

Results

The ways in which these courses reportedly promoted self-directed learning are highlighted in Table 2 and described with examples below. In the following sections I give excerpts from student responses to the survey to illustrate each assertion and discuss the implications for course instructors.

Table 2. Response Categories

Category of response	Implication
Importance of assignments that were relevant to students' interests	Students were more inclined to devote extra time and initiative needed to complete the work. Allowing flexibility in assignment structure can allow students to be more self-directed in their learning.
Self-directed reflection	Providing students with the opportunity to consider the origin of their opinions can not only help them justify their point of view, but can help them see where it needs to be strengthened and how they can self-direct their learning efforts.
Taking initiative and making connections	The more effort one spends at making connections, the more one can learn about others' viewpoints and initiate this type of self-directed information seeking.
Time flexibility	Providing students with the opportunity to complete work in an asynchronous fashion may afford students the opportunity to devote more time and effort on assignments. Self-direction is necessary to find times that are best to complete tasks.

Importance of Assignments Relevant to Students' Interests

Some of the responses in this category pertained, at least to some degree, to the importance of assignments that were relevant to students' interest, and how this, in turn, led to students' inclination to devote extra time and initiative needed to complete the work.

“Researching different disease-related web sites was something I was interested in and took time to learn extra about different topics.”

“Some of the discussion assignments we have done that involved going to other websites, such as PubMed, also give opportunities to search for things that each individual might be interested in, and put their own spin on things.”

“Online discussion about how different epidemics were handled let me form my own opinions on topics instead of simply taking on opinions of others. Also, it lets me tailor my learning to my specific interest in health so that I can easily apply all the concepts we are learning to actual work I do in the field.”

“I like being given opportunities with a lot of choices because I can learn about topics that actually interest me.”

Self-directed Reflection

Many students in Health Promotion Program Planning thought reading and discussing a non-fiction book, The Spirit Catches You and Then You Fall (Fadiman, 1997), provoked a great deal of self-directed reflection and that this self-directed reflection facilitated learning. This book was required reading for this course and was discussed throughout the semester. Examples of this are illustrated below.

“My online class promotes self-directed learning by making me think for myself about the questions that are asked of us. For the book we are reading we are asked to think about different themes or different

ways we would handle a situation the family in the book is going through.”

“An example of how this class has helped me become more of a self-directed learner is we have to read the books for every week and give our opinion. Instead of having material we can just regurgitate, we need to use our own skills to answer and complete tasks.”

Taking initiative and making connections

In Wellness Skills, other students' responses illustrated the importance of taking initiative and making connections.

“Our class promotes self-directed learning by having the student take the initiative to learn about and describe a specific disease, how it impacts our society, and what can be done to prevent other occurrences. By using outside sources such as the Center for Disease Control website, students can explore a variety of related fields and further their knowledge of existing diseases. It also impacts the rest of the class by reporting what you have learned about a particular disease.”

“The class involves a multi-dimensional approach to learn the material. We are encouraged to explore the relationship between ourselves and other cultures which creates alternative resources needed to connect the two.”

Time flexibility

Some of the responses suggested that the time flexibility characterizing online learning also may facilitate self-responsibility and self-directed learning.

“Being self-directed to me is all about time management.”

“Our online class promotes self-directed learning because you, the student, are responsible to get the assignment(s) completed within the allotted time. If it is

not completed, most of the time the blame rests upon no one other than yourself.”

“This course allows me to complete school work in my own time which means that I can fit it well into my crazy schedule and it becomes something more manageable and therefore I give better quality work since it is not rushed or something where I feel out of control.”

“You must take it upon yourself to set time aside to go into the course and do work and participate in discussions; there is nobody telling you what to do over and over.”

What Professors Can Do to Encourage Self-directed Learning

There were many insightful suggestions for ways instructors may encourage self-directed learning. The following ideas summarize the overall responses.

1. Give more assignments that require researching topics that the student is interested in.
2. Give projects where students can choose a topic so it belongs to them. Some guidelines are always helpful, but making it too structured squelches the chance for self-directed learning.
3. Encourage students to form and share their opinions whether they are yours or not.
4. Give freedom in applying concepts and focusing on something that is of interest to them.
5. Let students work at their own pace.
6. Encourage students to ask questions and to view things from different angles.
7. Ask many open-ended questions.
8. Have students keep journals of how they learn and react to various activities. This type of self-reflection might help them to assess their own needs.
9. Give students room to make the curriculum benefit them as much as possible, by giving assignments that offer choices.

Conclusion

There are several limitations to this study. First, the study was based on a small convenience sample. Second, despite the fact that the students were assured that their responses would have absolutely no bearing on their grade, there is no way of telling if their responses were biased. Third, the study design was cross sectional, which is limiting in that data is only collected at one point in time. Fourth, the data were collected and analyzed by a single researcher. Despite these limitations, the findings suggest that several factors identified as ways to promote self-directed learning warrant further research.

An obvious strategy for promoting self-direction in a distance learning class is to give assignments that are relevant to students' interests. This idea dates back to philosophers like John Dewey who promoted tailoring learning to students and experimentalism (Dewey, 1997, 1981, 1998). This study indicated that students benefited from the types of assignments, which allowed flexibility in subject matter and allowed them to have control over the focus of the content. Other strategies which proved beneficial entailed considering different viewpoints, involving the students in implementing the Socratic Method (in which they question the Professor and other students), allowing ample time for assignments and self-reflection, and making assignments as enjoyable as possible. The flexibility to complete assignments that is characteristic of distance learning may also promote self directed learning. Finally, to the extent that the instructor can help ensure a learning environment characterized by respect, this may encourage student involvement, which in turn may facilitate self directed learning. Overall, this study supports the importance of considering students' opinions in creating assignments

and designing online courses to enhance self-directed learning. Reflective practices can enhance learning for students and teachers alike.

References

- Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. New York: General Learning.
- Brockett, R. G., & Hiemstra, R. (1985). Bridging the theory-practice gap in self-directed learning. In S. Brookfield (Ed.), *Self-directed learning: From theory to practice* (pp. 31-40). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Brockett, R. G., & Hiemstra, R. (1991). *Self-direction in learning: Perspectives on theory, research, and practice*. New York: Routledge.
- Brookfield, S. D. (1985). Self-directed learning: A critical review of research. In S. Brookfield (Ed.), *Self-directed learning: From theory to practice* (pp. 5-16). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Brookfield S. D. (1986). *Understanding and facilitating adult learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Burkitt, I. (1990) *Social Selves. Theories of the social formation of personality*, London: Sage.
- Caffarella, R.S. & O'Donnell, J.M. (1990). *Self-directed learning*. Adults: Psychological and Educational Perspectives, No. 1. Nottingham: Department of Adult Education, University of Nottingham.
- Candy, P. C. (1991). *Self-direction for lifelong learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
- Cavaliere L. & Sgroi A (Eds.) (1992). *Learning for personal development* San Francisco CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Collins, M. (1985). Jurgen Habermas' concept of communicative action and its implications for the adult learning process. *Proceedings of the 30th Annual Adult Education Research Conference*. Tempe, AZ: Department of Higher and Adult Education, Arizona State University.
- Collins, M. (1988). Self-directed learning or an emancipatory practice of adult education: Re-thinking the role of the adult educator. *Proceedings of the 29th Annual Adult Education Research Conference*. Calgary: Faculty of Continuing Education, University of Calgary.

- Collins, M. (1991). *Adult education as vocation: A critical role for the adult educator*. New York: Routledge.
- Danis, C. (1992). A unifying framework for data-based research into adult self-directed learning. In H.B. Long & Associates (Eds), *Self-directed learning: Application and research* (pp. 47—72). Norman, OK: Oklahoma Research Center for Continuing Professional and Higher Education at the University of Oklahoma.
- Dewey, J. (1963) *Experience and education*, New York: Collier Books.
- Dewey, J. (1997). *Democracy and education*, New York: Free Press.
- Dewey, J. (1981). *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, Editor McDermott, John J. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- Dewey, J. (1998). *The essential Dewey, vol. 1: Pragmatism, education, democracy* Bloomington, Indiana University Press.
- Dziuban, C. Shea, P. & Arbaugh, J.B. (2005). *Faculty roles and satisfaction in asynchronous learning networks*. In: Hiltz S.R., & Goldman, R. (eds.) Learning Together Online. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Fadiman, A. (1997). *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong child, her American doctors, and the collision of two cultures*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Gibson, C. (1992). Distance Education: On focus and future. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 42, 167-79.
- Grow, G. (1991). *Adult Education Quarterly*, 41, 125-149.
- Hammond, M., and Collins, R. (1991). *Self-directed learning: Critical practice*. New York: Nichols.
- Haythornthwaite, C. (1996). Social network analysis: An approach and set of techniques for the study of information exchange. *Library and Information Science Research*, 18, 323-342.
- Garton, L., Haythornthwaite, C. & Wellman, B. (1997). Studying online social networks. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 3. Retrieved June 16, 2006 from <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol3/issue1/garton.html>.
- Haythornthwaite, C. (1998). A social network study of the growth of community among distance learners. *Information Research*, 4. Retrieved June 16, 2006 <http://informationr.net/ir/4-1/paper49.html>
- Herbeson, E. (1991). Self-directed learning and level of education. *Australian Journal of Adult and Community Education*, 31, 196-201.
- Hiemstra, R., & Sisco, B. (1990). *Individualizing instruction for adult learners: Making learning personal, powerful, and successful*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Hiemstra, R. (1994). Computerized distance education: The role for facilitators. *MPAEA Journal of Adult Education*, 22, 11-23.
- Hiltz, S.R. and Shea, P (2005). *The student in the online classroom..* In: Hiltz S.R., & Goldman, R. (eds.) Learning Together Online. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Houle, C. O. (1961). *The inquiring mind*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Jarvis, P. (1985). *The sociology of adult & continuing education*. London: Croom Helm.
- Knowles, M. S. (1975). *Self-directed learning. A guide for learners and teachers*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.
- Knowles, M. S. (1980). *The modern practice of adult education: From pedagogy to andragogy*. New York: Cambridge Books.
- Knowles, M. S. (1990). *The adult learner: A neglected species* (rev. ed.). Houston: Gulf Publishing.
- Lee, J., & Gibson C. (2003). Developing self-direction in and online course through computer mediated interaction. *The American Journal of Distance Education*, 13, 173-187.
- Lindley, R. (1986) *Autonomy*. London: Macmillan.
- Maslow, A. H. (1970). *Motivation and personality* (2nd Edition). New York: Harper & Row.
- Merriam, S. B., & Caffarella, R. S. (1991). *Learning in adulthood*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mielke, D. (1999). Effective teaching in distance education. ERIC Digest EDO-SP-1999-5; Washington, D.C.: ERIC Clearinghouse on Teaching and Teacher Education.
- Modra, H. (1989). *Using journals to encourage critical thinking at a distance*. In: Evans T, & Nation, D. (eds.) Critical Reflections on Distance Education. London: Falmer Press.
- Moore, M. (1973). Towards a theory of independent learning and teaching. *Journal of Higher Education*, 44(9), 661-79.
- Moore, M. (1986). Self-directed learning and distance education. *Journal of Distance Education*, 1 (1) [Online], Available: <http://cade.athabascau.ca/vol1.1/moore.html>

- Moore, M. (1989). Three types of interaction. *The American Journal of Distance Education*, 3 (2), 1-6.
- Moore, M. (1993). *Theory of transactional distance*. In: Keegan D. (ed.) *Theoretical Principles of Distance Education*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Rule, A. C. (2006). The components of authentic learning. *Journal of Authentic Learning*, 3(1), 1-10.
- Sheckley, B. G. (1985). Self-directed learning among adults enrolled in a community college. *Community-Junior College Quarterly of Research and Practice*, 9, 165-175.
- Spear, G. E. & Mocker, D. W. (1984). The organizing circumstance: Environmental determinants in self-directed learning. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 35, 1-10.
- Swan, K., & Shea, P. (2005). *The development of virtual learning communities*. In: Hiltz S.R., & Goldman, R. (eds.) *Learning Together Online*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Tough, A. (1971). *The adult's learning projects* (Research in Education Series No.1). Toronto: The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.
- Tough, A. (1978). Major learning efforts: Recent research and future directions. *Adult Education*, 28, 250-263.
- Tough, A. (1979). *The adult's learning projects* (2nd ed.). Austin, Texas: Learning Concepts.
- White, J. (1982) *The aims of education restated*, London: Routledge.

Appendix 1: Survey Instrument

Purpose: To improve understanding about self-directed learning in 3 undergraduate health education courses.

Please complete the following section to describe some of your characteristics.

Sex _____

Age _____

Class standing _____

Taken an online course before? _____

Please complete the following section to describe your opinions about self-directed learning.

Malcolm Knowles describes self-directed learning as the 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.”

Do you consider yourself a self-directed learner? Please explain.

In what ways, if any, does your online class promote self-directed learning? (Please give specific examples from this class. Look through the specific activities and describe how they helped promote self-directed learning.

What can professors do to encourage self-directed learning?

What are the skills of an individual who is highly self-directed?

What are the characteristics of an individual who is highly self-directed?