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Is it Time to Move On? Reflections on a Research Agenda for Self-Directed Learning in the 21st Century

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Abstract: *Self-directed learning has been one of the most studied areas of adult education over the past three decades. Instead of abandoning this line of inquiry, more research is needed that explores the topic from new perspectives.*

Few topics dominated the research agenda of the last three decades of the 20th century more than self-directed learning (SDL). These studies have followed several approaches, including learning projects research, the measurement of self-directedness and related constructs through the use of standardized instruments, and a wide range of qualitative approaches. In addition, a number of books have examined SDL from very different perspectives and the annual International Symposium on Self-Directed Learning has published a set of proceedings for the past 13 years.

In recent years, however, the level of interest in SDL across the field as a whole seems to have diminished. A recent content analysis of 14 periodicals in adult education and training between 1980 and 1998 revealed that 122 articles on SDL were published in these periodicals (Brockett, Stockdale, Fogerson, Cox, Canipe, Chuprina, Donaghy, & Chadwell, 2000). Among the periodicals with the largest number of articles on self-direction were *Adult Education Quarterly*, *Journal of Continuing Education in Nursing*, and the annual proceedings of the Adult Education Research Conference. The “heyday” for articles on SDL in these publications was in the mid-late 1980s and the first two years of the 1990s. In the past 2-3 years, however, the number of articles on self-direction in these publications has dropped to as few as zero in some years.

It is possible to take the view that SDL “had its day” and that it is time to move on to new areas of inquiry. At a time when the emphasis of much research is shifting away from understanding the individual adult learner toward looking at the sociopolitical context of adult education drawing largely from constructivist, critical, and postmodern perspectives, it is not difficult to think that SDL is somewhat out of touch. Yet, one of the historic problems with adult education research has been the

tendency of researchers to respond to shifting trends while abandoning lines of inquiry that have not been adequately mined. While it might be argued that after 30 years, we know as much about self-direction as we need to know, another view is that the real challenge facing those working in this area is how to take the study of self-direction to a new level.

How might this be accomplished? In this discussion, I would like to briefly highlight four directions for a future research agenda. First, there is a need to take stock of what we already know about SDL. While there have been various efforts to synthesize and categorize this literature, an update is needed. The SDL research group at the University of Tennessee recently reported the preliminary findings of the content analysis mentioned above (Brockett, et al., 2000). Other studies in progress (1) examine the 14 volumes of the International Self-Directed Learning Symposium proceedings and (2) glean recommendations for future research from the 122 articles identified in the content analysis. Similar studies involving literature from specific professional fields and, especially, from periodicals outside of North America, could expand our understanding of the total body of literature that already exists.

Second, we need to consider developing new ways to measure self-directedness. The Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale (Guglielmino, cited in Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991) is now over 20 years old. While the SDLRS has sometimes been controversial, it has nonetheless made an invaluable contribution to our understanding of self-directed readiness. In the future, however, I would suggest that we need to consider the development of new measures that more clearly reflect developments in theory and research on SDL that have occurred since the development of the SDLRS.

Third, there is a need for further research that explores SDL from a naturalistic perspective. As the content analysis revealed (Brockett, et al., 2000), a fairly substantial percentage of research articles on self-direction utilized qualitative designs; yet, I believe that if we are truly to go to the “next level” of understanding self-direction, it will be necessary to raise questions about the limits of self-direction, and how self-direction interfaces with issues of power and conflict in various practice settings. Qualitative designs are probably best suited for this type of inquiry.

Finally, I believe it is crucial to keep the dialogue alive across the field. While there is a core of scholars working in self-direction and sharing their work in a specifically-designated forum for doing so, the exchange of ideas with the larger field is limited. Similarly, many scholars in adult education seem to be inclined to dismiss what we have learned from SDL research. There is a need to work toward building a climate where (1) those who study SDL are open to challenges and questions about the limits of this area, and (2) those who have been inclined to dismiss SDL research remain open to the potential of what can be learned from three decades of scholarship.

In closing, many of the recent criticisms leveled at SDL research are based on misconceptions and

misunderstandings. At the same time, those who study SDL need to be open to critical examination of the limits of self-direction. For me, the answer to the question “Is it time to move on?” is a resounding “Yes!”. But rather than move *away* from this line of inquiry, it is important to go even further. The future of research on self-direction holds much promise, if researchers who work in this area are willing to identify new ways to examine the phenomenon, from a broader range of theoretical and methodological perspectives. Therefore, I believe that “moving on” means that, as a field, we need to move beyond the limits of current research in order to more fully expand the map of SDL.

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