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Revitalizing the Study of Self-Directed Adult Learning

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Abstract: Self-directed learning has been an important research area in adult education for the past three decades, and holds much potential for future scholarship. Three areas for possible future inquiry are examined.

Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, discussions of self-directed learning comprised a substantial portion of the adult education literature. Recently, however, the volume of work in this area has declined considerably (Brockett, et al., 2000). At last year's AERC, Brockett (2000) argued that rather than "abandoning this line of inquiry, more research is needed that explores the topic from new perspectives." Here, we will identify three ways in which it might be possible to revitalize scholarship on self-directed learning.

The PRO Model: A Decade Later

It has been a decade since Brockett and Hiemstra (1991) presented their "Personal Responsibility Orientation" model of self-direction in adult learning (PRO). This model identified self-direction as an "umbrella concept" and was intended to clarify and synthesize some of the different elements of self-direction that had been identified by previous authors. While the PRO model has received some attention in the literature, Merriam and Caffarella (1999) noted that no studies directly testing the model could be found. In thinking about the possible use of the PRO model in the future, several points might be worth consideration. First, in recent years, the term "personal responsibility" has taken on a political connotation in the larger society that is often identified with conservative political philosophy. This was not and is not the foundation for naming the PRO model.

Second, in retrospect, the use of "self-direction in learning", "self-directed learning", and "learner self-direction" has probably created some confusion. In the future, it might be more useful to revert to using "self-directed learning" as the umbrella term, encompassing (1) elements of the teaching-learning process, (2) personal characteristics of individuals, and (3) the sociopolitical milieu. To truly understand self-directed learning, each of these elements must be considered.

Finally, the PRO model might best be used to help future researchers define the map of self-direction. PRO was never intended to be a full-blown theory; however, if it can help researchers distinguish among different aspects of self-directed learning, it might have some value in revitalizing the study of self-directed learning.

The Measurement of Self-Direction

"Defining the map of self-direction" is complimented by current measurement theory. For instance, Cronbach (1988) suggests researcher's once-envisioned grand nomological networks for constructs such as self-direction should be replaced by a contextualist approach that clearly defines the boundaries of test score use. Within the last ten years, authors of approximately 50 research articles have begun to do just that. Self-direction is now defined and assessed within the context of setting, delivery method, learner motivation, learner goals, support for the process, and crucial conative facts; utilizing at least three new measurement instruments. It may be time to examine the trait validity (a construct is neither tied uniquely to any particular method of measurement nor redundant with other constructs) of self-direction utilizing all available research.

Authors of current measurement theory also extend the concept of validity beyond the traditional strands of content, criterion and construct validity. Cronbach (1988) argues discussions of scale validity must include perspectives on the political, economic, explanatory, social and operational appropriateness or consequences of test score interpretation and use. Adult educators would certainly welcome the inclusion of these perspectives in further quantitative research on self-direction.

Using Technology to Enhance Examination of the Existing Literature

A research group at the University of Tennessee has engaged in two studies to examine and synthesize the existing literature on self-directed learning. The efforts have resulted in a completed content analysis of selected adult education journals, and an emerging citation analysis of the same journals. As a part of the studies, advanced computer and Internet technologies were utilized and are considered vital to the assessment of the data collected and to preserving and disseminating our findings.

In the content analysis, bibliographical and survey data were stored in an electronic database produced using Lotus Notes Domino (R5) development software. The instrument allowed researchers to make entries via the Internet directly into a central file on the Lotus Notes Server and facilitated efficient assimilation of the initial four hundred seventy-four survey forms.

The expanded use of similar technologies promises to greatly enhance the efficiency of data collection, synthesis, and utilization in future research studies. This has important implications for research in self-directed learning and other facets of adult education. Among them are universal accessibility, efficient data management, and serving as repositories of information for future researchers. Such efforts can greatly enhance the opportunity for sharing "cutting edge" scholarship.

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