"It Permeates the Whole Fabric of Your Life": The Experience of Scholars Who Have Studied Self-Directed Learning

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Abstract: A recent dissertation presented a new and different view of self-directed learning. This research presents the stories of eight scholars who have studied this topic over the years. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

In a recently completed dissertation, a very different view of self-directed learning (SDL) was taken. The lens through which self-directedness has been studied in this research is through the experiences of eight of the scholars who have contributed to the literature on this topic over the past four decades. Because of the author's personal interest in this learning style and the criticism this area of study has experienced in recent years, a mode of inquiry was explored that would better address some of the critiques rather than just adding one more empirical study to the knowledge base (Brookfield, 1984, 2000). This study could be construed to represent a *living*

Literature Review

Self-directed learning has been one of the most widely studied topics within the field of adult education (Brockett, Stockdale, Fogerson, Cox, Canipe, & Chuprina, 2001; Caffarella, 1993). It has gone from being a revelation for some, to a topic heavily criticized by others. For those who have studied the concept, it has been a continued area of scholarly writing and research, while for others it is no longer a core area of interest. Much of the effort has moved from academe into practice over the past decade (Stockdale, Fogerson, Robison, & Walker, 2002). Some have even suggested this area is dead, and it is time to move on (Brockett, 2000).

During this dissertation the method utilized was the personal interview, in the qualitative tradition. However, due to the author's knowledge of the experiential process, a decision was made to utilize phenomenological methodology to examine the actual experience of those scholars who were there (Collins, 1983, 1995; Merriam, 2002; Stanage, 1987). The purpose of the study was to describe the evolution of self-directed learning as experienced by the people who have created and studied it. Furthermore, while giving consideration to the past criticisms and the reasons for research and scholarly writing on SDL declining over the past decade, part of the objective was to determine its viability as a future area of study. The framework through which the author considered the future, was Kuhn's (1996) notion of a paradigm shift. This study consists of interviews with those scholars who have made major contributions to the literature of self-directed learning over several decades (Donaghy, Robinson, Wallace, Walker, & Brockett, 2002). The eight scholars interviewed for this study were, in alphabetical order: Brockett, Brookfield, Caffarella, Guglielmino, Hiemstra, Kasworm, Long, and Tough.

The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of the research completed and to add some new information about how this study has evolved since the dissertation was defended in November, 2004. This presentation also makes reference to a series of presentations made with seven of the eight participants at the International Self-Directed Learning Symposia during the years 2005 and 2006. These discussions continue in the tradition of creating an environment for

stimulating the co-construction of knowledge between the audience and the guest presenters (Caffarella, Donaghy, & Beswick, 2006; Donaghy, in press; Kasworm & Donaghy, 2006; Tough & Donaghy, 2006).

Similar Studies and the Significance of Findings

Some background information for this dissertation is offered. The original idea for this study was conceived by Ralph Brockett in 2001 (Donaghy, 2006). Furthermore, the inspiration for the study came from Patricia Maher's (2002) dissertation. It is worth mentioning that seven qualitative studies have been done on longtime adult educators over the years (Garrison & Baskett, 1987; Hensley, Maher, Passmore, & James, 2001; Hilton, 1981; Jacques, 1973; Maher, 2002; Maher & Passmore, 2000; Reybold, 2002).

Hanson (as cited in Donaghy, 2006) suggests this type of research is important because seeking expert opinion through qualitative research could help in determining where this line of study might be headed. The findings in this paper are presented and discussed through three lenses. First, the results provide insight to contributions to scholarship, the participants have made, through a mini-case study. Second, four basic qualitative, descriptive categories are identified and this led to narratives. Third, the experiential component is shared through a phenomenological lens.

Results of Mini-Case Study

The results in this section are presented through the individual contributions of the scholars as participant profiles. A short summary is presented, which contains excerpts from my dissertation and is supplemented by recent personal communications with the participants. The decision to utilize each participant in this study was made for two reasons. First, they were the most cited authors in the citation analysis results (Donaghy et al., 2002). Second, each has been recognized to contribute to the scholarship of self-directed learning over the years. From the information furnished by each participant, their collective contributions to the scholarship of self-directed learning, through chairing dissertations and personal publications, could also be determined. One half of the participants own dissertations dealt with some aspect of self-directed learning (Donaghy, 2006). The total number of dissertations chaired was 351 with approximately 28% or 99 dealing with a topic related to SDL (Donaghy, 2006; Hiemstra, Brockett, Canipe, & Fan, 2006; Caffarella, 2006). Regarding publications, 21 % or 200 of the 963 total publications written by this group dealt with SDL.

Results of Descriptive Categories

The results of this section are presented in four categories: personal histories, personal theories of learning, personal importance of collaborative learning, and personal ideas about the future of self-direction learning. This summary contains excerpts from the dissertation. Some items that stood out for me during the narrative phase are summarized in this section.

Personal Histories

The idea of developing a history of self-directed learning is an area that has not been fully implemented in the literature. Throughout the literature of SDL, only bits and pieces of the history have been described. Similar to the way in which participants talked about other categories of data, the discussion of history was not through a recitation of their or anyone else's scholarly work; it was through the telling of personal story related to their own life. The participants' stories involved the naming of committee members and included a recollection of

other scholars who had a role in inspiring their interest in SDL. Some of the scholars, such as Long, expended considerable effort, without any prompting from me, to talk about the history of SDL.

Personal Theories of Learning

This section is about each participant's personal theory of learning. The category emerged as individuals told personal stories of their own learning experiences, learning experiences of their students, learning experiences of colleagues, or learning experiences resulting from research studies. For those espousing some notion of self-directed learning in their personal life or teaching philosophy, I suggest the points mentioned represent key components of the participant's personal definition of self-direction.

The results reported present examples from each participant's transcript about how each individual makes meaning. Throughout the literature of SDL, there are numerous ways of defining the term self-directed learning (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991) and those same multiple possibilities exist herein. For all of the participants but one, the way in which they defined self-direction was not through a recitation of their own or anyone else's scholarly work, it was through the telling of personal stories related to either their own or some other person's life experience.

Personal Importance of Collaborative Learning

One surprising outcome of the present analysis was the need to have others involved in the learning process. The context for collaboration is not necessarily the contributions of a teacher; it is the recognition of needing another resource to help in the learning process. Collaboration is utilized as a possible component of SDL by the participants, in their own individualized description of the learning process, to convey an important part in the way they accomplish things and learn. Some participants may have used different words, such as the "social aspect," "working as a group," "someone having influence on them," or "communities of learners" to describe this category. Similar to other categories, no question was directed toward participants asking them to talk about collaborative relationships or collaborative learning, or to define it as a component of self-directed learning. The participants did not state, or hint, that self-directed learning was a prerequisite for collaborative learning to take place, nor did they say the opposite. However, the participants offered the position that collaborative learning was a component of or resource necessary for SDL.

Personal Ideas About the Future of Self-Direction in Learning as a Meaningful Concept

In this last section, the projections for where this line of study is headed are discussed. Implications for the future of SDL were the only categories specifically solicited by a question in the interview guide. Prior to cueing for this question, participants in most cases had already said something about their vision for self-directed learning. Some participants openly mentioned technology and its association with the personal computer/Internet as a strong catalyst for sustaining and even increasing the level of activity in SDL.

Any inquiry into the future of SDL speaks to the criticism this area of study has encountered for not considering the social implications. Gelpi, Griffin, Candy, and Hammond and Collins (as cited in Brookfield, 2000) all consider the effect or lack thereof for self-directed learning to consider "the political context, cultural contingency and social construction" (p. 9). Some of the participants considered this criticism during their interviews and made suggestions

for what must be included if self-directed learning is going to receive a fresh reception within the field of adult education. Brookfield suggests the field of adult education will continue to see SDL in a negative vein, so long as research centers on quantitative measures. Brookfield (2000) acknowledges that even though Brockett and Hiemstra (1991) recognized a problem with the issues of power and control, the apparent neglect of these implications over the past decade is broadening the gap in the field of adult education. This category divulges more than does the participant see a future in SDL and in what is the nature of that future. It also covers related areas such as how the participant talks about change, future research needed, modifications to or new emphasis on teaching philosophy, and any negative side of SDL that might require attention or at least consideration.

Results of the Experience

This last and final section of the findings was analyzed using a hermeneutic interpretation of the participants' transcripts. An overall summary of the stories told include very precise words. The words are presented here as the *title* of each individual story. These quotes or paraphrased versions are presented as follows:

1. The process a person follows to take control over their life.
2. Becoming a productive member of society.
3. The "ethical . . . responsibility . . . we . . . [have in] structuring environment[s] where we engage adults."
4. "The serendipitous way that people, . . . learn, to become experts in their own field, and the importance of participating in communities of practice, through that process."
5. Knowing "the kind of professor I wanted to be"."
6. Amazement at how well people "find [the] human resources" they need.
7. Surviving "because I was a self-directed learner."
8. A "career long forgotten."

Specifically, with regard to how scholars experience self-directed learning, each shared a unique set of stories in their individual protocols that built an overall thematic structure. This structure consisted of four themes that were contextualized against the ground of a person's developmental adjustment to the world. For the process of SDL to work satisfactorily for each of the eight participants, it appears the four figural components all need to exist. Each of the themes, including "Lifelong Learning," "Can't Do It Alone," "Some Get It" "A-Ha," and a "Need for a Model"/"Mentor," exhibit an interaction, producing a theme structure of the expert's perception of SDL. In essence, the elements described above represent a definition of SDL emanating from participant protocols.

Discussion

Eight professors discussed their experiences with self-directed learning in personal interviews. The study is unique in that all eight scholars gave their permission to be quoted, by name rather than being kept anonymous. This technique of quoting the scholars provided a marvelous opportunity to disclose who said what and when about this area of study over the years (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991). In addition, the rich nature of the transcripts, presented an opportunity to look at the contributions to scholarship and the personal stories of each participant.

This study disclosed these eight scholars contributed 200 publications to the literature of self-directed learning and directed 99 dissertations on SDL. Each of the professors provided

insight into her or his own theories of learning through personal stories. In addition, personal histories disclosed how she or he came to know and understand the topic over the years. The history is presented through the lens of each scholar, presented as an evolution of ideas, and presented through how it represents each participant's on-going adjustment to change. Each participant's vision helped divulge new ideas for research and gave an opinion about the future of this topic. A model evolved from the thematic structure of the experience that explains an alternative meaning for the way self-direction could be viewed. An interesting part of the conclusion was that two of the scholars, who have moved on so to speak, had much to say about the viability of SDL's future.

Implications for research were far reaching in that participants, especially those who are doing other areas of scholarly work, had much to say about studies that need to be done in self-directed learning. Regarding practice, others talked about the impact of technology, impact on the classroom, impact on socio-economic issues, impact on dealing with change and life's circumstances, and the impact in situations where SDL does not always work.

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