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## Recommended Citation

Oh, Jeong Rok and Park, Cho Hyun (2012). "Self-Directed Learning in the Workplace: Implications for the Legislation of Trade Union Education in South Korea," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <http://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2012/papers/38>

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## **Self-Directed Learning in the Workplace: Implications for the Legislation of Trade Union Education in South Korea**

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Keywords: self-directed learning, trade union education, adult education

**Abstract:** The purpose of this study is to theorize self-directed learning (SDL) in the workplace from the perspectives of human resource development (HRD), adult education (AdEd), and lifelong learning in order to suggest the implications for the legislation of trade union education (TUE) in South Korea. Since legislation at the national level can promote workers' participation in TUE in the context of SDL for industrial democracy through humanization of education, the South Korean government should provide trade unions with appropriate legislative, financial, and administrative support.

### **Introduction**

The Amendment Draft of the Lifelong Education Act (2007), which was presented at the Korean National Assembly in July 2007, permits trade unions to establish and manage lifelong education facilities. Trade union education (TUE) is an ongoing critical issue in the legal system affecting not only human resource development (HRD), but also adult education (AdEd) and lifelong learning in South Korea (Amendment Draft of the Lifelong Education Act, 2007). The labor workers, the employers, and the government confront one another as they lobby for their individual interests (Oh, 2008).

Self-directed learning (SDL) is one of the critical characteristics of TUE because TUE is initiated by workers or learners, not employers or the government (Oh, 2008). As TUE is a type of labor education involving not only HRD but also AdEd and lifelong learning, it is necessary to analyze SDL from these three perspectives. TUE is important in the context of SDL, as it can be an effective method of enhancing employees' rights and responsibilities (Schmidman, 1990). Moreover, TUE can improve workers' participation in their own development in the workplace (Shelley, 2005). However, TUE has not yet been legislated in South Korea (Kim & Lee, 2001; Oh, 2008). This is a serious problem as the legislation of TUE is closely related to the status of HRD, AdEd, and lifelong learning in the legal system (Kim, Noh, Park, & Kang, 2002). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to theorize SDL in the workplace from the perspectives of HRD, AdEd, and lifelong learning in order to suggest the implications for the legislation of TUE in South Korea.

### **Literature Review: Self-Directed Learning in the Workplace**

SDL can be explained by three aspects: definition, goals, and characteristics. SDL is defined as "a 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" (Knowles, 1975, p. 18). The goals of SDL are to improve adult

learners' self-directedness in their learning, to promote transformative learning, and to stimulate emancipatory learning (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007).

SDL also can be explained by its characteristics. The first characteristic of SDL is autonomy and independence, which enables learners to learn by themselves (Brookfield, 1985). The second set of characteristics is a learner's responsibility for self-management of planning, carrying out, and evaluating their own learning experiences (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991). The third characteristic is self-reflection (Mezirow, 1985). SDL can be nurtured and developed in the workplace by creating learning environments and networks among worker-learners. Workplace SDL can be viewed from the three different perspectives of HRD, AdEd, and lifelong learning. *Self-Directed Learning from the Perspective of Human Resource Development*

According to Garavan, McGuire, and O'Donnell (2004), levels of analysis can play a critical role in modeling HRD theory and practice. These different concepts of HRD from the individual, organizational, and community-societal levels of analysis are suggested in order to analyze distinctiveness, usefulness, and tensions within and between them, such as assumptions, characteristics, and delivery of HRD. According to their comprehensive framework, HRD should be analyzed from a systemic perspective because not only organizational but also individual and community-societal levels of approach analyses are necessary to better understand HRD.

SDL can be applied to this three-level analytic approach to HRD. First of all, SDL can be related to the individual level of analysis in that SDL is about whether or not learners are independent and participate voluntarily in their learning processes. Secondly, SDL can be connected to the organizational level of analysis of HRD because SDL can be promoted and enhanced within the organizational context. Lastly, SDL can be linked to the community-societal level of analysis of HRD because SDL can be supported and influenced by a society or nation. *Self-Directed Learning from the Perspective of Adult Education*

SDL is a key issue in AdEd (Garrison, 1997), and SDL plays a critical role in AdEd in that one of the goals of SDL is to promote adult learners' capabilities in their learning processes as self-directed learners (Merriam, 2001; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). SDL and AdEd are closely associated with each other because SDL is one of the most critical elements in fostering and enriching adult learning (Garrison, 1997; Merriam, 2001). Garrison (1992) pointed out self-directed learning along with critical thinking as the two major theoretical frameworks in AdEd. According to Merriam (2001), self-direction is the most critical point in distinguishing andragogy, a persistent effort to support adult learners to improve their capabilities as self-directed learners (Mezirow, 1981), from pedagogy. Andragogy assumes that adult learners can direct their own learning based on their own experientially-based learning resources, and their learning is driven by intrinsic motivation (Merriam, 2001).

Moreover, informal learning in the workplace, which is one of the main issues in AdEd (Eraut, 2004), is important as it promotes reflection-in-action, beyond formal training, which focuses on behaviors and skills (Marsick, 1988). Through informal learning, learning continuously takes place, ongoing learner reflection is stimulated, and individual and group learning is encouraged (Watkins & Marsick, 1992). Marsick suggested SDL as a form of informal learning that should be encouraged in the workplace. Also, Brookfield (1986) identified the most ideal form of adult learners' SDL as "one in which critical reflection on the contingent aspects of reality, the exploration of alternative perspectives and meaning systems, and the alteration of personal and social circumstances are all present" (pp. 58-59). Therefore, the critical

reflective aspect of SDL can enhance informal learning in the workplace, and SDL can be applied effectively to an education-friendly workplace.

#### *Self-Directed Learning from the Perspective of Lifelong Learning*

SDL and lifelong learning are inseparably and reciprocally related in that on the one hand, SDL is the aim of lifelong learning; and on the other hand, SDL is a crucial means of lifelong learning. Brookfield (1985) regarded adults as innate self-directed learners. Knowles (1975) deemed that SDL is a fundamental capability that enables a human being to learn by him or herself and that a learner matures into a more self-directed learner as he or she ages. Learner's self-directedness means a critical awareness of one's own learning process (Mezirow, 1985), and lifelong learning occurs throughout one's lifespan (Merriam & Brockett, 1997). Therefore, a human is born as a self-directed learner and becomes more self-directed through lifelong learning activities during their whole lives. In this view, the ultimate aim of lifelong learning can be regarded as self-direction.

Meanwhile, SDL is a crucial means of lifelong learning. Mocker and Spear (1982) suggested that lifelong learning can be practiced through formal, nonformal, informal, and SDL and emphasized SDL as an important means for achieving lifelong learning. Self-direction is one of the essential ways to realize lifelong learning. SDL helps adult learners better seek and pursue their own learning throughout their lifespan. At the same time, through lifelong learning, adult learners also become self-directed in their learning by acquiring appropriate skills and competencies for SDL. Therefore, SDL can be considered not only as a means of lifelong learning but also as a goal of lifelong learning. For this reason, SDL and lifelong learning are intertwined, and the relationship between them is reciprocal (Candy, 1991).

#### *The Need to Promote Self-Directed Learning in the Workplace*

SDL in the workplace should be fostered because workplace SDL helps an organization meet the needs of rapidly changing climates and influences the economic benefit of the organization. The concept of education in the workplace has been revised as the knowledge and technology required for business and industry have been rapidly changing (Guglielmino, Guglielmino, & Long, 1987). To keep up with the changes, just-in-time workplace learning is necessary, and SDL could be an effective approach to it (Guglielmino & Murdick, 1997). Clardy (2000) contended that employee workplace learning, which frequently takes place in an informal and self-directed way (Ellinger, 2004), affects the organizational performance with the changes in organizational competencies. Smith (2001) also insisted that flexible trainings with SDL approaches have emerged as organizational responses to meet the complex demands associated with the current workplace. In addition, through SDL, an organization can be transformed into a learning organization (Confessore & Kops, 1998), in which workplace learning takes place continuously (Watkins & Marsick, 1993). Therefore, SDL can foster a learning environment within an organization, and it may enable an organization to keep up with the changes around it (Marsick, 1988).

#### **The Legislation of Trade Union Education for Self-Directed Learning**

According to the Amendment Draft of the Lifelong Education Act (2007), there is a core issue regarding the legislation of TUE in South Korea. Although trade unions' main goal is not to provide education, but to defend the employees' rights, the Amendment Draft of the Lifelong Education Act (2007) tries to enable trade unions to provide an additional service as lifelong education facilities. To develop the legal system for TUE, the government needs to establish additional educational facilities affiliated with trade unions (Amendment Draft of the Lifelong

Education Act, 2007). These facilities would secure labor workers' rights to pursue lifelong learning (Oh, 2008). However, in reality, the Framework Act on Education (1997) and the Lifelong Education Act (2001) cannot be applied to TUE directly because these acts do not include TUE in any categories of lifelong education. Therefore, it is necessary either to allow trade unions to have affiliated lifelong education facilities or to make specific provisions in order for TUE to be covered by the Lifelong Education Act (2001) and the Framework Act on Education (1997).

TUE's importance will be increasing because the initiative of lifelong learning in the 21st century is gradually moving from employers to workers (Forrester & Payne, 2000). Moreover, recent TUE is covering skill formation and vocational education while traditional TUE only focused on topics of trade union organizations and workers' rights (Perrett & Lucio, 2008). For instance, recent discussion on the Joint Union-Management Program is a partnership issue about the expansion of learning goals of TUE (McBride & Mustchin, 2007).

The necessity of the legislation for TUE lies in securing workers' rights to learn during their entire lives by expanding opportunities of lifelong learning effectively (Kim et al., 2002; Oh, 2008). While there have been various types of opportunities for lifelong learning, South Korean's participation in lifelong education is even lower than that of many Western countries (Korean Educational Development Institute & Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology, 2010). Therefore, it is necessary to provide citizens with even more lifelong education facilities (Amendment Draft of the Lifelong Education Act, 2007). A systemic relationship between education and labor is needed, as well (Kim & Lee, 2001; Oh, 2008).

TUE deserves to be supported through the legislation because the Lifelong Education Act (2001) aims to secure citizens' rights to learn and learners' rights to choose in order to secure opportunities for workplace learning. The legislation for TUE can expand learners' rights to choose lifelong education facilities (Amendment Draft of the Lifelong Education Act, 2007). As trade unions are geographically accessible and psychologically comfortable in workers' daily lives, the trade union has a crucial advantage as a lifelong education facility (Oh, 2008).

For TUE to succeed, it requires institutional support, which can only happen if it is legislated (Amendment Draft of the Lifelong Education Act, 2007). Administrative and financial support will improve the TUE program's quality and instructor's specialty (Oh, 2008) because TUE has difficulty with managing the educational budget and improving the learning circumstances (Amendment Draft of the Lifelong Education Act, 2007). For this reason, TUE in several foreign countries is supported by the government with administration and finance (Findlay & Warhurst, 2011).

### **Implications for the Development of Adult Education:**

#### **Trade Union Education in the Context of Self-Directed Learning**

Legislation of TUE should be initiated by the workers because this can improve the workers' rights to learn, and encourage them to join in SDL (Oh, 2008). TUE is one of the most critical elements that can foster adult learning in terms of SDL (Shelley, 2005). Specifically, TUE as lifelong learning can improve SDL because SDL is the end as well as a means of lifelong learning (Candy, 1991). Also, TUE can foster adult learning in that one of the goals of SDL is to promote adult learners' capabilities to be self-directed learners in their learning process (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartern, 2007). Moreover, SDL in the workplace should be used for TUE because SDL can help workers catch up with the current changes in globalization (Brown & Yasukawa, 2010). Therefore, TUE in the context of SDL can be

understood as a powerful tool to facilitate learning organization (Cooper, 2006). TUE can promote workers' self-directedness through voluntary participation in the workplace (Ball, 2002).

In summary, this paper provided an integrative review on SDL in the workplace and how it relates to the legislation of TUE in South Korea. With rapidly continuing changes in organizations and globalization, it is important for organizations to support workers by promoting SDL, which is more adaptable and responsive to change (Lee, 2001). As it is very important to develop the motivation of workers by promoting SDL for industrial democracy through humanization of education, the legislation of TUE should be considered seriously and enacted quickly in terms of social justice and equitable distribution of educational resources.

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