

Chapter 2

Autonomous Learning as a Transformative Experience

David A. Miles
Dr. Dave Leadership Corp., USA

ABSTRACT

Andrological processes comprise many facets in the overall learning experience, including, but not limited to, the field of self-directed learning. Self-directed learning itself is a broad field of study, but a particular subset of self-directed learning—autonomous learning—provides a potentially transformative process that higher education scholars, practitioners, and professionals can utilize successfully. Autonomous learning is related to the psychological underpinnings of self-directed learning. This chapter details how these psychological concepts can be utilized as a practical tool for experiential transformation.

INTRODUCTION

Self-directed autonomous learning does not simply describe yet another style of adult learning but suggests a truly transformative experience. Within the overall broad context of adult (andrological) self-directed learning, autonomous learning is a specific subset that is much more psychological than purely observational as external behavior. The manifest of external behavioral activities involving self-directed autonomous learning is typical of the traditional concepts of andrological self-directed learning.

This chapter discusses the constructs of self-directed autonomous learning and learner autonomy to see how they fit into transformation in adults. The experience of transformation and self-directed learning in adults is multifaceted and complex and requires a multivariate theory to adequately explain (Long, 2009). Each of the four constructs of autonomous learning and learner autonomy—desire to learn, learner resourcefulness, learner initiative, and learner persistence—are defined. How learning is transformational ranging from transformational learning theory (Mezirow, 2009), epistemic cognition, and self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1991), is also explored. Finally, transformational autonomous learning is analogously compared with the concept of coaching to provide the reader with a practical application of these principles for further use with clients or to foster their own transformation.

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AUTONOMOUS LEARNING AS A CONSTRUCT

Autonomous learning has been defined as “an agentic process in which the conative factors of desire, initiative, resourcefulness, and persistence are manifest” (Carr, 1999, p. 17; Ponton, 1999, p. 16), while Meyer (2001) defined autonomous learning as the outward behavioral expression of the psychological construct of learner autonomy. *Learner autonomy* is generally defined as a “behavioral syndrome that consists of four psychological constructs—desire to learn, learner resourcefulness, learner initiative, and learner persistence” (Confessore & Park, 2004, pp. 41-42). This means there is an underlying psychological reason behind the outward behavior of what is observed as andrological self-directed learning that is intentional and deliberate by the learner—hence, being agentic—and consists of the four constructs listed. These constructs when looked at separately and as a group are the keys to true transformational experiences.

Desire to Learn

The concept of self-directed autonomous learning is built into the human condition inasmuch that Confessore and Confessore (1992) commented that it is a “natural function of learning in the human species” (p. 2). Children are natural self-directed learners, and for them it is simply a fact of life as asserted by Deci and Ryan (1982) but the manifestation of that self-directed learning seems to diminish during adulthood. Deci and Ryan suggested a much higher degree of resistance to the natural condition of self-directed autonomous learning as an adult, although the importance of that autonomous learning does not diminish and becomes more important to learn as an adult in the form of intrinsic motivation. The basis of intrinsic motivation is “based in people’s need to be competent and self-determining” (Deci & Ryan, 1982, p. 9). Intrinsic motivation goes directly to the heart of the first of the four psychological constructs of learner autonomy—desire to learn.

Desire to learn is the pivotal and most important of the four components of self-directed autonomous learning but also of transformation as a whole. Many of the principal researchers in the field of autonomous learning have suggested that “in a causal model, resourcefulness, initiative, and persistence should follow desire” (Ponton et al., 2004, p. 62). If individuals have no intrinsic desire to learn, develop, or transform any part of their life, then the chances of any growth or positive change occurring are minimal and more likely nonexistent since the natural state is geared towards entropy, not growth.

The motivation to change and, ultimately, the choice that a person makes to support and participate in that change is what Hiatt (2006) defined as desire to learn. A deeper look at the concept of desire to learn steers the reader to investigate intentionality. Autonomous learning is an agentic process, and the formation of intention as it relates to a person’s desire to learn was a major course of Meyer’s (2001) research into desire to learn as a construct of learner autonomy. The idea of agency and intentionality as a model for desire is theoretically sound since most of the current motivational theories in management, leadership, and psychology have at their core the concept of intentionality (Deci et al., 1991).

Meyer (2001) proposed intentionality as a precursor for desire to learn and autonomous learning and deliberately looked at the psychological underpinning for desire to learn as intentionality based upon the work of Maslow. Meyer defined *intentionality* as “the ability to consciously direct our power towards some outcome” (p. 28), while defining desire more broadly as “an intuitive urge that captures the essence of one’s purpose and links it with one’s power . . . (with) intuitively directed energy” (pp. 9-11). Deci and Ryan (1991), the preeminent researchers in motivation theory, specifically self-determination

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