Promoting and Implementing Self-Directed Learning (SDL): An Effective Adult Education Model

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ABSTRACT

Although Westerners have used over 200 terms to describe self-directed learning (SDL), it is educators in Confucius heritage cultures (CHC) that have successfully promoted and implemented SDL. This article argues that for learners in the Western cultures, especially in the United States, to catch up with learners in other industrialized nations including newly emerged China and India, SDL must be promoted and implemented at all levels of education, not only within adult education. Amongst theories/models, SDL is the single most popular model that helps learners master skills for the sake of competency development. The goal in learning is to achieve the changed status on the part of learners or “perspective transformation.” Without implementing SDL, it may be hard to implement the theory of transformative learning. SDL and transformative learning are intertwined.

Keywords: Confucius Heritage Cultures, Critical Reflection, Nation at Risk Report, No Child Left Behind, Program for International Student Assessment, Self-Directed Learning, Sputnik

INTRODUCTION

In no other fields of education is self-directed learning (SDL) promoted and implemented more than in adult education. In no other fields of education can you find conferences closely related to SDL than in adult education. In adult education conferences, SDL is still discussed at length, and in practice, self-directed learning is commonly implemented. SDL as a model is taught in almost all adult education courses on methods and strategies for teaching, and it is often addressed in research in adult education.

As of February, 2012, the 26th international conference on SDL was held in Florida, USA, where international adult educators presented their research related to promoting and implementing SDL (International Society for Self-Directed Learning, 2012). A search of the literature reveals that over 200 different names have been given to SDL. All these different names address the same concept, “self-concept” in adult education.

Why is such SDL so popular in adult education especially in Western countries (i.e., North America, West Europe and other English speaking countries)? In these Western countries, SDL is directly related to the cultural norm of “independence.” People, young and old, liv-
ing in these countries are encouraged to learn to live independently. Competition is valued over collaboration; autonomy is valued over connectedness. People are “frowned upon” if they choose to depend on others such as parents or relatives, which could be the cultural norm in some other countries. People can be taught to become independent. For the most part, people learn to be independent via SDL. SDL has become a powerful model in terms of maximizing learning on the part of learners.

As powerful as it is, why has SDL not helped produce the best learning products especially in the United States? The Nation at Risk Report of 1983 indicated that our high school students did not compare with students in other industrialized nations. The No Child Left Behind Report of 2002 brought educators’ attention to the same problem. While the Nation at Risk Report was generated as the result of the former Soviet Union successfully launching “Sputnik,” the No Child Left Behind movement came out as the result of two emerging economic power houses, China and India. In both cases, the United States felt an imminent threat coming from other military and economic powers. For the first time, students (15 year olds) from mainland China participated in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), which compares the performance of 15-year-olds from 60 nations and half a dozen so-called regional economies (Mervis, 2010). Chinese students took the world by storm: they were the first prize winners in reading, mathematics and science. The US students, in contrast, ranked 17th in reading, 23rd in science and 31st in math. While some scholars/researchers quickly pointed out some reasons as to why Chinese students shone like this for the first time in history, no scholars/researchers have touched on the compelling reason, that is, SDL as a driving force behind Chinese students’ accomplishments in a second language, English. While such as reasons as more time spent in schools, more efforts made on the part of the learners and higher expectations from teachers and parents all count, none is more important than SDL initiated by the Chinese learners themselves.

The purpose of this article is not to compare American students with Chinese learners, nor to claim that SDL is the most effective model among all models in education. Rather, the purpose of this article is to promote and implement SDL as an effective model in all levels of education. Although the literature on SDL has been rampant especially in adult education, not many schools or universities in the United States have benefitted from this model as their foreign counterparts. Research on how SDL has been promoted and implemented is sparse. Some adult learning professionals claim, “SDL has come of age…” Others even claim, “SDL has become saturated; it is hard to know more about this model…” Yet others talk about promoting and implementing SDL in conferences. However, the talk remains within the four walls of these conference rooms and on the pages of scholarly journals only. Those in power may not have the understanding of the model necessary to promote SDL, let alone implement it. Administrators, teachers, researchers and practitioners talk about formal assessment of learning in all kinds of schools. Seldom do you hear them employ SDL or “learning contract” by Knowles as an effective means to assess learning. In a way, SDL remains an under researched area in education. To promote and implement such a model, it takes deeper understanding of this model, deeper understanding of those theorists who advanced it with their heart and soul.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As an effective model or theory, scholars/researchers may refer to different people who advanced such as theory. Scholars/researchers often neglect the fact that Carl Rogers probably advanced SDL as a theory prior to Malcolm Knowles. In the late 1960s, it was Carl Rogers who published some seminal work addressing SDL. His views for the sake of competency development have been widely adopted in other parts of the world if not in the United States.
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