Chapter 7
Navigating Self–Directed Learning in the Digital Era

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ABSTRACT

Emerging technologies have transformed traditional educational paradigms, elevating self-directed learning (SDL) as a pivotal instructional method aligned with the evolving demands of the digital age. This chapter explores how digital advancements and online technologies are reshaping SDL, particularly concerning learner attributes and the learning process. It begins with a historical overview of SDL, highlighting key concepts and methodologies developed since the 1970s. The chapter then examines online learning environments, discussing their benefits and challenges for SDL. Additionally, it investigates the expanding role of AI chatbots in SDL, offering considerations for their effective and appropriate use. By addressing the current dynamics of SDL, this chapter aims to provide insights for educators and learners navigating this rapidly changing educational landscape.

INTRODUCTION

The idea of self-directed learning (SDL) is a cornerstone of pedagogical discourse today, especially in the field of adult education. Since its emergence in the 1960s, several terms have been suggested to describe SDL, including "autonomous learning", "independent learning", "lifelong learning", "self-direction in learning", "self-initiated learning", "self-plan learning", and "self-teaching" (Du Toit-Brits,

2018). The introduction of adult education produced an ideal environment for the investigation and application of SDL concepts. John Dewey and Eduard Lindeman are regarded as the pioneers of adult education in the Western world (Brookfield, 1985; Davenport, 1993; Fisher & Podeschi, 1989; Long, 1991). Both Dewey and Lindeman emphasized the importance of experience in learning, viewing teachers as facilitators rather than transmitters of knowledge, and promoting democracy through education (Leach, 2000).

Humanistic approaches provide the theoretical framework for SDL. The humanist school of thought inspired adult educators to look for a different approach to standard pedagogical methods and influenced the way adult education was conceived (Loeng, 2020). SDL is based on the foundational works of American educator Malcolm Shepherd Knowles. A key component of Knowles' theory of andragogy—the art and science of assisting adults in learning- is self-direction in the learning process. According to Knowles (1975), adults' predisposition toward self-direction sets them apart from children and self-directed learners achieve deeper and more effective learning outcomes compared to those who passively await teacher guidance (Brookfield, 2009). Knowles (1975, 1990) proposed a transition from traditional teacher-led instruction to a more collaborative and learner-centered approach. Since then, SDL has received significant attention from scholars and practitioners due to its potential to empower learners and foster lifelong learning habits (Ahammad, 2023; Loeng, 2020).

SDL emphasizes the critical role of learners taking the initiative and accepting responsibility for their learning (Du Toit-Brits & van Zyl, 2017; Estaji & Jafari, 2022; Leatemia et al., 2016). In SDL, learners direct the conceptualization, planning, implementation, and evaluation of the learning process. More specifically, learners are autonomous as they control the learning process (Kharroubi & ElMediouni, 2024; Pokhler et al, 2024; Taylor, 2006), select and evaluate learning materials (Loyens et al., 2008), implement effective learning strategies, and assess learning outcomes independently (Knowles, 1975; Garrison, 1997; Merriam et al., 2007). This is not to say that SDL is highly individualized or done in isolation. Learners can work in self-directed ways while receiving external support or join in group-learning environments, if they believe it is beneficial to their learning (Brookfield, 2009).

The advent of the digital age has introduced new possibilities for SDL. Due to the rapid advancement of knowledge, and changing times, it is more important than ever for learners to learn on their own, and for educators to support them in doing so (Supe et al., 2024). The quest of knowledge is no longer restricted to a curriculum or the classroom. It is turning into a more independent endeavor motivated by personal curiosity and the desire for lifelong learning (Manzano Vázquez, 2017). Learners now have unprecedented access to vast repositories of information and resources. All these changes over the years have necessitated a reevaluation of traditional

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