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# Re-viewing Adult Learning: A Collaborative Self-Directed Learning Model for Adult Educators

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**Abstract:** The CSDL model for adult education suggests the incorporation of autonomy and collaboration to traditional SDL. An exploratory model that addresses individual and group choice, control, resources and benefits is proposed.

## Background Summary

In his five assumptions underlying andragogy, Malcolm Knowles suggested that an adult learner is one who has an independent self-concept and one who can direct his or her own learning. Knowles' concept of andragogy presented the individual learner as one who is autonomous, free, and growth-oriented (Merriam, 2001). His views on autonomy and choice as an indicator of educational maturity gave way to a tremendous and growing body of literature on self-directed learning (SDL). Evolving from the time of Knowles' first proposition of self-direction as a learning tool, adult educators have also highlighted motivation, responsibility, discovery learning, self-management, and transformational learning as benefits of this approach (Brookfield, 1986; Garrison, 1997; Merriam, 2001). Even beyond traditional classrooms, SDL is being utilized for its ability to increase initiative and employability such as in the workplace (Ellinger, 2004). The intention of this paper is to build upon our current understandings and assumptions about self-directed learning. The exploratory nature of the model we propose suggests that adult education must engage in a review of self-directed learning or a secondary viewing of what we already know. By this, we challenge adult educators to incorporate other best practices of the field such as engaging student learners through collaboration or restructuring group work to increase autonomous components.

## *Autonomy & Collaboration*

Autonomy was identified as the key and foundational component differentiating adult learners from children. While autonomy varies in definition, scope, and relationship to SDL, it is an important assumption underlying the idea of individual choice in the educational process. The degree of autonomy exercised by individual learners may also vary significantly, but the learner must have an understanding of their position as a primary stakeholder in their own education (at any stage of the learning process) and must also take action with this understanding.

Proponents of self-directed learning contend that independent learning is not synonymous with learning in isolation (Ellinger, 2004; Garrison, 1997; Grow, 1991; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Indeed, Knowles (1975) originally defined self-directed learning as "a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes" (p.18). Grow (1991) expanded upon this original idea by noting that each learner carries the potential to involve themselves in social clubs and informal learning groups to enhance learning. While ideal, an independent learner's active engagement in educational "extracurriculars" for the sole purpose of enhancing and supporting self-directed learning is lofty at minimum. More often,

adult learners engage in SDL for the purpose of exploring some aspect of educational autonomy such as in the cases of independent study, online continuing education courses, individualized research, etc. Assuming that learners will engage with others to enhance their own understandings may limit our view of the motivations of self-directed adult learners. Additionally, it may increase the gap between theoretical assumptions and practical applications. It is the primary role and responsibility of adult education to accurately discuss the needs of the learner as well as practical applications and the theoretical understandings.

Although the self-directed learner exhibits many autonomous behaviors, there are other characteristics that motivate the self-directed learner (Costa & Kallick, 2004). For instance, until recently self-directed learning literature has excluded an important tenant of adult education philosophy, that of intentional collaboration within the SDL framework. Webster's dictionary defines collaboration as working jointly with others or together especially in an intellectual endeavor. We define *intentional* collaboration as the purposeful inclusion of collaborative strategies that enhance self-directed learning or autonomous activities. According to Brookfield (1986), collaboration is "seen in the diagnosis of needs, in the setting of objectives, in curriculum development, in methodological aspects, and in generating evaluative criteria" (p.10). In isolation, collaboration has been attributed with enhancing retention, learner interest, participation, and critical thinking (Anuradha & Gokhale, 1995; Garrison, 1997; Hunter, 2006). Working within groups provides enhanced support and motivation for learners. Additionally, group members benefit from multiple and diverse perspectives and the feedback that originates from the group support function.

However, collaboration within the framework of developing a self-directed learning model for adult education initially appears to be disjointed. Mainly, SDL models have emphasized the learner with their associated needs and outcomes rather than the actual *process* of learning. Traditional SDL models have other challenges such as accounting for the learner's need to feel a part of a group while engaging in independent learning. Merriam and Caffarella (1999) defined this need for connectedness as homonomy, or the experience of being part of a meaningful whole.

Collaboration has had equal challenges for adult educators as an instructional format. Simply put, collaboration takes time, often requiring more time than independent work. Educators can also be limited by minimal "buy-in" that working with others is both useful and worth the additional time and communication that collaboration requires. Additionally, educators have also noted that facilitating groups through the somewhat inevitable problem-solving stages of group development can be challenging and cumbersome. These challenges leave adult educators in a precarious position in which self-directed learners can benefit from collaboration but may be unwilling to engage in group processes. On the other hand, the question remains—how can we include collaboration without forsaking individual autonomy even in traditional settings? It is at this divide that education and the educator must learn to be progressive, to shift with the patterns and needs of the learner, instead of trying to define a concept that has taken on new meaning.

The majority of literature currently available has highlighted the benefits or critique of self-directed learning and collaboration as isolated sectors of adult education. This led to the question of how the benefits of group process and individual choice can work together for enhanced learning, guided by what we already know through the principles of self-directed learning—that is, in what ways can the theoretical basis of self-directed learning be enhanced by our existing knowledge of collaborative benefits? In addition, in what ways can traditional adult

education be enhanced through the conscious balance of autonomy and collaboration? After an extensive review of literature on self-directed learning as well as a reflection of practical experiences within the classroom environment, it was determined that the existing knowledge and use of self-directed learning could be strengthened through the merge of collaborative elements, a concept minimally addressed in the literature. Hence, there is an emergent void in both the scholarly and practical applications of how autonomy and collaboration can work together in self-directed learning and general adult education for the ultimate benefit of adult learners.

### **What is Collaborative Self Directed Learning?**

Collaborative Self-Directed Learning (CSDL) is an exploratory learning model, particularly applicable for adult educators, in that it combines both components of traditional self-directed learning (autonomy) and collaboration. It is designed for widespread applicability in adult education including traditional classroom, community, corporate, and religious education.

Beside autonomy and collaboration, foundational tenants of the model, there are also assumptions. The first of which is individual engagement with the process and commitment to learning. This, while crucial, presents a challenge in that educators can never force students to learn. The responsibility for commitment and motivation lies with the learner. Second is collaboration with other learners. This collaboration does not necessarily mean that the participants are working towards the same learning objectives or using the same methods. Rather, it means that the learners are working together to motivate, critique, share diverse viewpoints and reflect with each other on the material and the learning process. As with commitment, this collaboration can be fostered by the adult educator, but ultimately cannot be forced.

As the name implies, the two foundational components of CSDL are collaboration and self-direction, which exist on opposite ends of a continuum (see Figure 1). These two components are not dichotomous to the degree that they may interact one with another during stages of the CSDL process. The need for individuals to feel in control of their behavior pulls them towards the autonomous side of CSDL while the need to feel related to a group pulls toward the collaboration. This dynamic allows for a group with mixed or different goals to form a shared agenda and process. However, instead of choosing one variable over another, the goal of CSDL is to incorporate both the components of autonomy and collaboration for the enhancement of individuals and the individual learning process. The learner can receive a great deal of help from a group, for example, without giving up control or responsibility in regard to the outcome of the educational experience (Long, 1989). Through collaboration within the group, learners are able to maximize their learning potential beyond what would have been achieved solely through independent study. More accurately, it is the tension and balance between collaboration and self-direction that fosters collaborative self directed learning. Therefore, assuming active and engaged participation and motivation in the learning process, the CSDL model also aids in bringing a balance to the interdependence and independence dichotomy of group dynamics. As Hunter (2006) described, “the centrality of the group endeavor in the learning environment does not diminish the role of the individual. The integrity of an individual’s contribution to a group endeavor is validated by the group.

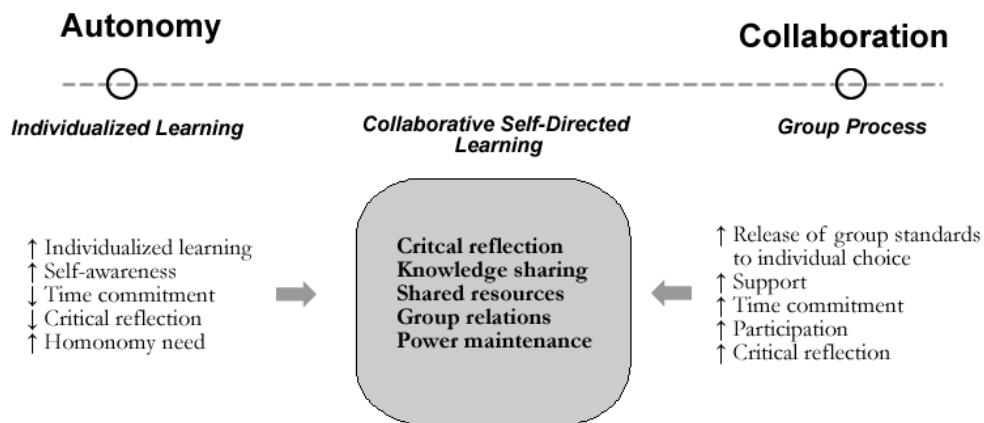
In CSDL a group of individual learners may be connected with other students in an effort to support one another and provide feedback to members of the group. Simultaneously, group members maintain the choice to release or withhold some aspects of control and learning to the

group—that is an individual may fully rely on the group knowledge sharing or may choose to participate but maintain full control over their own learning or operate at some stage in between these two points. Fundamentally, collaborative self-directed learning is designed not to infringe on the benefits of traditional self-directed learning, such as learner choice over some degree of study, methodology, or evaluation. But far beyond learner choice, the collaborative components also give additional benefits through the reflection and support that others can provide. Ideally, learners share some responsibility for both individual learning and the group process. CSDL relies on this reciprocal relationship wherein learners negotiate meaning and support one another through knowledge sharing, resources, and critical reflection, among other benefits. Group members, then, have a vested interest in one another. This is because they each carry the role of knowledge producer and critical reflector both for themselves and other members of the group. This can result in collaborative knowledge construction, a potential result of the CSDL model. Rowntree (1995) best summarized collaborative knowledge construction, a potential and viable outcome of CSDL:

What [students] learn, of course, is not so much product (e.g. information) as process—in particular, the creative, cognitive process of offering up ideas, having them criticized or expanded on, and getting the chance to reshape them (or abandon them) in the light of peer discussion. The learning becomes not merely active, but also interactive.

Simultaneous, then, to information sharing is the group’s collaboration as a means to extend the knowledge base, resources and critical reflection opportunities for each *individual* in the group to reach his goals. This collaborative effort within a group setting serves to challenge assumptions and broaden perspectives. The purpose of collaboration is to provide a peer support community where the participants serve as critical mirrors for one other.

Figure 1



### Collaborative Self Directed Learning Model in Adult Education

Current SDL within the field of adult education is largely situated in one of two extremes of this model by either cultivating autonomous or collaborative work. As noted, this dichotomy does not adequately reflect the full scope of their needs. Collaborative self-directed learning can be sharply contrasted with simple group work in that the learner maintains control of some aspect of the learning process, including the conscious interactions with the group. Within groups, for example, learners often operate under the unspoken assumption that anything less than a full willingness to release individual control for the purpose of collaborative gain compromises the group’s success. This presents an experience in which the learner must sacrifice

individual control for the good of the group or carry a stigmatic association of not operating well within teams. This presents a unique problem to societies such as the United States that are driven by individual success and competition (Hofstede, 1983).

### *Examples & Techniques*

There are many strategies to more closely align our practices with actual learner needs. There are a number of techniques that adult educators may use to encourage CSDL. One such technique is to allow students flexibility in designing individual assignments around the subject matter, and then have them critique and discuss each other's work. This allows learners to see how their peers are approaching the same learning material and prompts reflective practice on the feedback received from peers. Assuming that the instructor allows adequate time for small group discussions around these critiques and reflections, learners can act as 'critical mirrors' (Brookfield, 2005) for each other.

Another form of CSDL is through the use of learning contracts. The traditional learning contract fosters self-direction as the student determines his learning objectives and methods. To exhibit CSDL, however, the contract would need to be two-fold: one part encompassing individual learning and the other that is done within a group. Group members do not have to hold the same objectives, methods or aims of study. Nevertheless, the group can maintain unique goals and can articulate how the team will work together to stimulate and evaluate learning.

Action Learning / Action Research (ALAR) teams are an example of CSDL within organizations. Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) define ALAR as a "collective, self-reflective inquiry" (p.5). This usually takes the form of individuals engaging in learning methods such as research, reflection, and discussion with other team members in order to solve organizational problems. Presumably, individuals are on the ALAR team because they have an interest in learning about and solving the problems being addressed. The work of these teams may range from performing individual research on academic theory to team research on and specific to their organization. This approach has the potential to foster the individual commitment and group collaboration necessary for CSDL to occur.

### **Conclusion**

The collaborative self-directed learning model uniquely combines two prevalent concepts of adult education, autonomous and collaborative learning. What prior research has failed to incorporate, the useful consideration of individual and collective gain, the authors have attempted to address through this learning model. The idea of collaborative self-directed learning, however, is not an entirely new concept. Rather, we suggest that the ideas and uses of autonomy and collaboration should be viewed by adult educators as complimentary instead of opposing specifically in the area of SDL. Future research might explore the various means by which collaborative self-directed learning can be fostered and replicated. Additional insight and application may also address or expand the various limitations to this model.

There is much to be gained through the incorporation of collaboration in the SDL models currently utilized in adult education. Heightened collaboration and meaningful individual learning are only a few of the added benefits. Desirably, through future scholarly inquiry and professional practice, educators can continue to engage and support the adult learner. This support also happens we allow for re-adjustment, in essence a second reflection to our current understandings, practices, and assumptions about the adults we serve. There is a fundamental benefit in making this a goal in adult education. For consequently, in the process of supporting

one learner engaged in collaborative inquiry, benefits also extend to other learners involved in the individual and group processes and educators alike.

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