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Reframing the Meaning of Self-Directed Learning: An Updated Model

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Over the past several decades, self-directed learning (SDL) has been one of the most active areas of inquiry within adult education and learning. Several studies have identified trends in this body of knowledge (e.g., Brockett, Stockdale, Fogerson, Cox, Canipe, Chuprina, Donaghy, & Chadwell, 2001; Conner, Carter, Dieffenderfer, & Brockett, 2009; Kirk, Shih, Holt, Smeltzer, & Brockett, 2012). Since 1987, an international symposium has been held annually to share the latest thinking about SDL theory, research, and practice. In 2002 the *International Journal of Self-Directed Learning* also began publication.

Earlier, Guglielmino (1977) and Oddi (1986) developed measurement scales based on certain conceptualizations of SDL. Subsequently, there were numerous efforts to create models for helping explain the concept and elements of SDL. For example, in 1991 three different models of SDL were introduced. Candy (1991) presented his constructivist-oriented model, which emphasized four dimensions of SDL: personal autonomy, self-management, independent pursuit of learning, and learner-control of instruction. Grow (1991) developed his Staged Self-Directed Learning Model to describe a process for helping learners negotiate aspects of the SDL process. Finally, we introduced the Personal Responsibility Orientation (PRO) model of Self-Direction in Learning, which focused on SDL in relation to the distinction between the teaching-learning process and a learner's personal characteristics (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991).

For more than two decades, the PRO model helped to explain the concept of self-direction in learning and played a role in defining an SDL research agenda. For instance, in 2003 the PRO-SDLS was introduced as a measure of self-direction (Stockdale, 2003). The PRO-SDLS has been used in several studies, which have recently been reviewed by Holt (2011). Models therefore often are fluid because of subsequent research and enhanced understanding. In essence, a model should evolve over time based on ongoing investigations.

Therefore, this paper's purpose is to present an updated model of self-directed learning based our enhanced understanding. Using the original PRO model as a basis, the updated model is not a "revision," per se, as it still retains the essence of our initial thinking. However, the updated model incorporates new understandings of SDL and reconfigures relationships among the original model's key elements. Further, it intends to clarify and simplify some of the language in that original model. Thus, we begin with a brief description of the PRO model. This is followed by a presentation of our updated model and ends with possible applications and implications.

The PRO Model: Contributions and Challenges

The PRO model was our attempt to synthesize and organize several key ideas that existed in the SDL literature at that time (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991). The model is depicted in Figure 1.
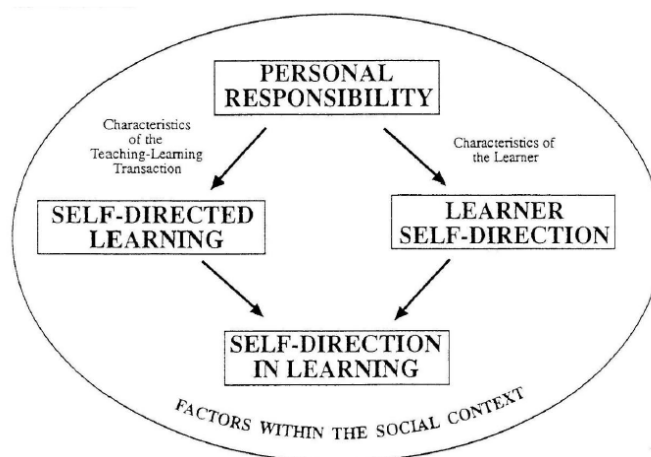

Figure 1. The "Personal Responsibility Orientation" (PRO) Model

One important aspect residing at the PRO model's core is the distinction between self-direction as personal learner characteristics and as instructional transaction characteristics. Another important feature of the model is that we used the term "personal responsibility" to guide these two different, but related, SDL dimensions. Finally, the oval surrounding these aspects indicates that self-direction in learning does not exist in a vacuum; rather it takes place within a larger social context that influences both the learner and the teaching-learning process. Basically, our thinking was that personal responsibility served as a starting point, leading to self-direction in learning via characteristics of the teaching-learning transaction (self-directed learning) *and* characteristics of the learner (learner self-direction).

Since the initial publication, the PRO model has been supported by some authors and challenged by others. Caffarella (1993), Merriam (2001), and Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007), for example, included descriptions of the PRO model within their overall discussion of SDL. However, Flannery (1993) in a review of our book raised concerns about the inclusion of humanism as a model for explaining self-direction in learner. She also argued that we "effectively ignore[d] the larger influences of the society" and "uncritically ignore[d] the cultural context of other countries" (p. 110). Another critique was by Garrison (1997) who suggested that discussion of the "psychological dimension," which we called our "learner characteristics" dimension, of the PRO model was limited to factors related to personality and did not incorporate discussion of "metacognitive issues related to the process of learning" (p. 20). We believe these concerns were instructive and have thought about them over the years as we reflected on our model.

What really prompted us to re-envision the model is that over the years we have come to believe that some of the language we used initially led to a certain degree of confusion. For example, we

originally used "self-direction in learning" as a broad term to describe the overall process. However, the term "self-directed learning" remains the one most often used and the one with which most scholars readily relate. In addition, while we believe that our distinction between "learner self-direction" and "self-directed learning" is still crucial in understanding learner and teaching-learning characteristics, the terms sounded so similar that they may have added to some confusion.

Perhaps the most important linguistic issue in the PRO model, however, centers on the concept of "personal responsibility." When we originally developed the model, we were searching for a way to connect the person and instructional process aspects. Hiemstra and Sisco (1990) had just completed their book and they had talked about such concepts as helping learners take personal ownership and responsibility for learning decision. Thus, as a connecting concept, we settled on the crucial notion that a self-directed learner is one who has the willingness and ability to accept responsibility for decisions about their life and learning. We believed that "personal responsibility" was a way to clarify this distinction. In subsequent years, however, the term personal responsibility has been somewhat politically co-opted. In particular, the term has often been used by the political right as a way of "blaming the victim" for their circumstances in life because they did not take responsibility to avoid getting into their difficulties. Thus, poor people are sometimes viewed as having put themselves into poverty because they did not take *personal responsibility* to get a job. People with Type II diabetes are responsible for their situation because they did not take *personal responsibility* for their eating and exercise habits. This is absolutely *not* what we intended when we initially used the term personal responsibility. Therefore, we have come to believe that it is not possible to further advance an understanding of self-directed learning with this somewhat confusing language. Thus, we reintroduce our thinking about SDL in language that is easier to understand but that does not lose the essence of the original PRO model.

The Person Process Context (PPC) Model: A 21st Century Vision for SDL

The PPC model is an outgrowth of our earlier model, combined with 20 years of shared experience and developments in SDL literature. It is important to restate that this is not intended to be a "new" model of SDL, but rather a reconfiguration and update of the PRO model. The basic elements – the person or learner, teaching-learning transaction or process, and the social context – remain. The PPC model is illustrated in Figure 2.
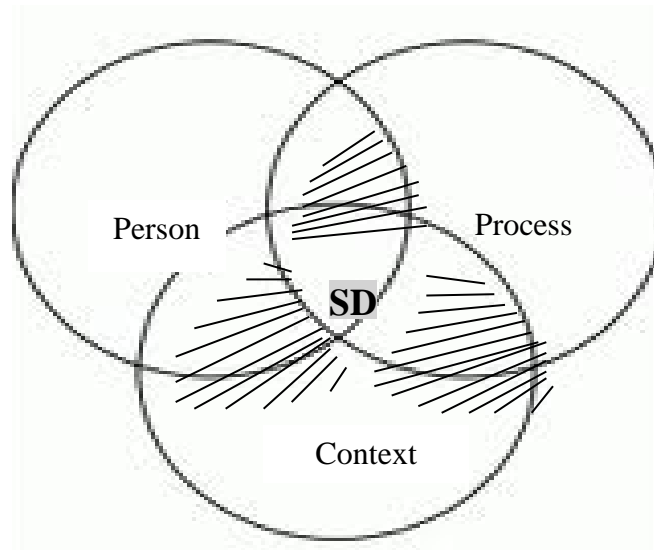
Figure 2. The "Person, Process, Context" (PPC) Model

The three elements can be summarized as follows:

- **Person**

  This includes characteristics of the individual, such as creativity, critical reflection, enthusiasm, life experience, life satisfaction, motivation, previous education, resilience, and self-concept.

- **Process**

  This involves the teaching-learning transaction, including facilitation, learning skills, learning styles, planning, organizing, and evaluating abilities, teaching styles, and technological skills.

- **Context**

  This encompasses the environmental and sociopolitical climate, such as culture, power, learning environment, finances, gender, learning climate, organizational policies, political milieu, race, and sexual orientation.

Dynamic Interrelationships between the Three Elements

As can be seen from Figure 2, all three elements of SDL as we are now calling them are treated with basically equal importance. Although there will be situations where one element may assume a greater role, on the whole our vision is that they are comparable in their influence. Indeed, it is the inclusion of context as an equal partner that makes the PPC model distinct from

the PRO model. The intent here is to show that context, which we did not address fully in the PRO model, is very much a focal point in understanding SDL.

In the PPC model, the optimal situation for self-directed learning to be most effective is when the person, process, and context are in balance. In other words, the learner is highly self-directed, the teaching-learning process is set up in a way that encourages learners to take control of their own learning, and the sociopolitical context and the learning environment support the climate for self-directed learning. Hiemstra (1991) and his colleagues describe various ways of thinking about the learning environment and climate.

Applications and Implications

We believe that the PPC model helps to streamline some terminology and interrelationships among factors that over the years have become somewhat unclear in the original PRO model. Perhaps most important, we suggest that the intersections between the three elements of the current model offer space for identifying potential directions for future research. Each of the areas where two of the factors intersect holds potential for a virtually unlimited number of research questions. To date, there have been quite a few efforts to study the link between the personal and process elements. For example, these would include studies examining how understanding psychological aspects of the self-directed learner can be used to create curricula and instructional strategies that can help the self-directed learner to thrive.

However, where the PPC model holds the greatest potential to guide the future of SDL research is at the intersection between the personal and contextual elements. One of the most contested aspects of self-directed learning over the years has been that it focuses on the individual learner without considering the impact of the sociopolitical context in which such learning takes place. Yet, there has been relatively little work at the intersection of these elements. Using the PPC model in this way suggests that there are areas within SDL that have been virtually unexplored. A good example of this line of inquiry is what Andruske (2009) has done with SDL and women's transitions from welfare. In describing her study of 23 women transitioning from welfare to work through the use of self-directed learning projects, Andruske offered the following observation: "Individuals strategize to navigate social spaces through self-directed learning projects. Self-directed learning is embedded within social contexts, not divorced from them" (p. 173). This is precisely the kind of comment that has helped us to rethink our understanding of the contextual dimension of SDL. Other writers (e.g., Brookfield, 1993; Collins, 1995) present similar kinds of challenges that further support the place of context in self-directed learning.

In closing, by presenting the PPC Model we are not attempting to create a "new" model of SDL as much as we hope to clarify existing thinking about such learning, but to do so in ways that can help to delineate new directions for research and practice. We have known for many years that successful self-directed learning involves a learner who possesses psychological and personal characteristics conducive to self-directedness, and we have known that there is much that teachers, trainers, or facilitators can do to increase or decrease self-directedness in a given situation. In addition, we have had important contributions that raise questions about the limits of self-direction in certain social contexts. However, what has been missing to a large degree is an

examination of the intersections between these various elements. Through the PPC Model, it is our hope that scholarship in self-direction can take on a more holistic focus in the coming years.

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