



Resources for Online Learners

Self-Direction: The Key to Success in Distance Learning

*In a world that is constantly changing, there is no one subject or set of subjects that will prepare you for the foreseeable future, let alone for the rest of your life. The most important skill to acquire now is **learning how to learn**.*

- John Naisbett, *Megatrends*

It has been estimated that by the year 2010, the amount of information generated around in our world will double every 73 days (Appleberry, 1992). In his 1970 classic *Future Shock*, Alan Toffler predicted that the illiterate of the 21st century would be those individuals who lack the skills to learn, unlearn, and relearn. In a distance education program, the capacity for self-directed learning is crucial. While instructors and peer groups can provide some support, distance learners are expected to provide the internal motivation and self-discipline to manage their learning during the program of study.

Self-directed learning occurs anytime an individual takes the responsibility for his or her own learning. This can include everything from identifying the learning need, to locating the appropriate resources, to self-evaluating one's progress. Although self-directed learning depends on personal responsibility, it does *not* mean learning in isolation.

What Traits Characterize the Self-Directed Learner?

A study by Lucy Guglielmino (1982) suggests that self-directed learners are similar in that they show *initiative, independence* and *persistence* in learning. They *assume responsibility* for their learning and see problems as challenges rather than obstacles. They have a high degree of *curiosity*, a strong *desire to learn*, and the capacity for *self-discipline*. They can *set goals, make plans, organize their time, and set an appropriate pace for learning*.

Guglielmino also sees a significant link between self-directed learning and the kind of behaviors that characterize good problem-solvers: *questioning assumptions, setting objectives, thinking holistically, and assessing alternatives on merit*.

How Self-Directed Are You?

The following simple test may help you determine how self-directed you are in your learning. Decide whether you agree or disagree with the following:

- I can usually generate highly creative solutions to my problems.
- I prefer learning on my own, and usually accomplish what I set out to learn.
- I'll never get tired of learning new things.
- I know that I am responsible for my own learning.

If you agreed with 3 or more of these statements, you're already highly self-directed. If not, you may benefit from the suggestions that follow.

Suggestions for Becoming More Self-Directed

1. *Decide on what you want to learn and how much you want to learn it.*
2. *Set objectives and plan out exactly how you will get the learning you want.*
3. *Stop planning and do it!*
4. *Evaluate your progress regularly and adjust your plan as needed*

Additional Resources

Confessore, G. J., & Confessore, S. J. (1992). *Guideposts to self-directed learning: Expert commentary on essential concepts*. King of Prussia, PA: Organization Design and Development, Inc.

Long, H. B., & Associates. (1994). *New ideas about self-directed learning*. Norman, OK: Oklahoma Research Center for Continuing Professional and Higher Education.

Merriam, S. B., & Caffarella, R. S. (1998). *Learning in adulthood: A comprehensive Guide (2nd ed)*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

[Self-Directed Learning Web Page \(http://www-distance.syr.edu/sdlhome.html\)](http://www-distance.syr.edu/sdlhome.html)