Using Self-directed Learning in HRD Practice

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Due to rapid changes in technology and globalization, self-directed learning is becoming more important in HRD practice. Hence, HRD professionals must create an effective environment for learning that encourages learners to be more self-directed in their learning. This study examines the implementations of self-directed learning in HRD practice and provides an understanding of self-directed learning in the context of HRD.

Keywords: Self-directed learning, Training

Self-directed learning (SDL) has influenced adult learning theories in the field of adult education for more than thirty years (Brockett, 2000; Ellinger, 2004; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Tough (1971) appears to have been the first researcher to propose adult learning projects, and self-directed learning has affected the work of researchers in adult education since then (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Additionally, Brockett (2000) emphasized that studies in self-directed learning include learning project research, the measurement of self-directedness and related constructs by using a standardized instrument; Brockett also suggested that studies need to go to a new level of understanding self-directed learning.

Organizations are being increasingly challenged because of new technologies, the rapid development of knowledge, and the globalization of business. Organizations are also being challenged with attracting, motivating, and retaining global talent. Training plays an important role not only in helping employees execute new technologies, but also in motivating and retaining them. As more learning methods become available for use in the workplace for training, such as CD-ROM, Internet access, and distance learning, the need for, and availability of, self-directed learning increases and becomes essential for HRD (Davis, 2006).

Self-directed learning and HRD are interrelated, and HRD professionals must create an effective environment that encourages learners to be more self-directed in their learning. Moreover, self-directed learning research strongly supports the conclusion that adults require self-direction for the acquisition of necessary job-related skills and knowledge. In the 21st century, technology in the workplace has extended human resource development in different ways. HRD professionals need to understand the benefit of self-directed learning and implement this process in their daily jobs.

Research Problem
Understanding the role of HRD practice in support of self-directed learning is a major key for effectiveness of organization development in the knowledge economy (Chien, 2004). The purpose of this study was to examine the following questions: (a) How does self-directed learning apply to HRD practice? (b) How is self-directed learning implemented in HRD practice? and (c) What are the implications of self-directed learning in HRD practice? The goal of this study was to provide HRD professionals and researchers with a deep understanding of the effectiveness of self-directed learning in HRD practice.

Methods and Limitations

The methodology used for this study was an integrated review of scholarly literature and books on self-directed learning. The study was limited to literature related to adult learning theories and HRD. Data bases searched included Google Scholar and ERIC.

Definitions of Self-directed Learning

Self-directed learning has been broadly defined in the literature. Demographics, the global economy, and technology are three constraints affecting all of society's aims, including adult learning (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Based on these concepts, Merriam and Caffarella (1999) defined three types of adult learning activities: formal learning, nonformal learning, and informal learning or self-directed learning. The first two activities involve organizational or community sponsorship. The third one is mixed. Most of the learning activities in the last type, informal or self-directed learning, are planned and initiated basically by learners in a natural setting. The learning processes and methods applied in self-directed and informal learning merged through formal and nonformal activities in settings in which instruction is delivered.

Thus, HRD professionals must understand the definition of self-directed learning when they design, develop, and implement training programs in their organizations. Based on Knowles's (1984) definition of 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 learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes” (p. 301). In self-directed activities, learners control the learning variables. Knowles (1984) also suggested that these learning variables include identification of learning needs, topic and purpose of the learning activities, objectives or expected outcomes, appropriate learning experiences, learning resources, environment, time, pace, methods of evaluation, and methods of documentation. These variables influence learning activities whether in the past or present.

Some concepts of self-directed learning from Knowles are similar to those defined by Long (1994): self-direct learning is “the learners' psychological processes that are purposively and consciously controlled, or directed, for the purpose of gaining knowledge and understanding, solving problems,
development or strengthening a skill” (p. 14). Long (1994) also asserted that self-directed learning is often combined with goal setting, identification and selection of resources, and time management. These two definitions suggest that self-directed learners involve themselves in reflection, self-assessment, and evaluation and voluntarily accept and internalize information. Moreover, Brockett and Hiemstra (1991) suggested that two dimensions of the learning process should be self-directed: learners are responsible for planning, implementing, and evaluating the learning process; and training should be responsive to learners’ desire or preference for learning. Spear and Mocker (1984) stated that self-directed learning is controlled by the learners and does not always occur in an educational setting. Hence, it recognizes the learners’ autonomy and free will. Spear and Mocker also claimed that self-directed learning occurs in a natural environment dominated by chance elements and is in contrast to the artificial and controlled elements which characterize formal instructional environments, it seems useful to investigate the possibly differing effects of the natural environments on the learning process. (p. 9)

According to Spear and Mocker, self-directed learning depends on circumstance that must have an organizing function and provide structure for behavior.

The above definitions of self-directed learning share similarities and show differences. For example, self-directed learning is a process that is controlled by the learners. Candy (1991) synthesized previous definitions and asserted that self-directed learning is the foundation stone and the keystone of the learning society; a supplement to and a substitute for the formal education system; a vehicle for the mastery of established knowledge and for transformation of personal understandings; simultaneously a process and a product, a precondition and a purpose. (p. 424)

These aspects underscore that self-directed learning plays a crucial role in adult education and has a close relationship with HRD practice.

Goals of Self-directed Learning

The most important initial stage of self-directed learning is selecting and committing to particular learning goals (Garrison & Archer, 2000). Merriam and Caffarella (1999) asserted that the goal of self-directed learning can be described with three major objectives: (a) to enhance the ability of adult learners to be self-directed in their learning, (b) to foster transformational learning as central to self-directed learning, and (c) to promote emancipatory learning and social action as an integral part of self-directed learning. (p. 290)

Moreover, Garrison (1997) suggested that self-directed learning can enhance educational experience when the three dimensions of management, monitoring, and motivation are strongly integrated. Such integration improves the quality of the effects of learning over both short and long periods, and the learners will be more responsible for and in command of their learning.
Ideally, self-directed learning offers an engagement between learner information requirements and the learning content, develops motivation, improves learning skills, and assists learners’ reactions to changing workplace needs (Davis, 2006; Dejoy & Dejoy, 1987). Candy (1991) also claimed that the objective of self-directed individuals is to develop the qualities of moral, emotional, and intellectual autonomy.

Additionally, Mezirow (1985) provided three interrelated but different functions of adult learning to explain the goal of self-directed learning: instrumental learning, task-oriented problem solving that is significant for controlling the environment or other people; dialogic learning, not to establish cause-effect relationships but to increase insight and understanding through symbolic interaction; and self-reflective learning, to focus on obtaining a clearer understanding of oneself.

Limitations of Self-directed Learning

Self-directed learning is a major concept in the study and practice of adult education. However, the concept, definition, and dimensions of self-directed learning are still misunderstood and faced with controversy (Candy, 1991; Kerka, 1999). Resistance to self-directed learning appears to come from the unfamiliar, uncertainty about how to involve oneself in self-directed learning, and lack of security in ones’ ability to absorb knowledge in a new kind of learning activity (Long, 1994). Brockett and Hiemstra (1991) recognized ten myths associated with self-direction in learning:

Myth #1: Self-directness is an all or nothing concept.
Myth #2: Self-direction implies learning in isolation.
Myth #3: Self-direction is just another fad.
Myth #4: Self-direction is not worth the time required to make it work.
Myth #5: Self-directed learning activities are limited primarily to reading and writing.
Myth #6: Facilitating self-direction is an easy way out for teachers.
Myth #7: Self-directed learning is limited primarily to those settings where freedom and democracy prevail.
Myth #8: Self-direction in learning is limited primarily to white, middle-class adults.
Myth #9: Self-directed learning will erode the quality of institutional programs.
Myth # 10: Self-directed learning is the best approach for adults (pp. 10-16).

Hiemstra and Brockett (1994) asserted that self-directed learning resistance usually emanates from the learners, facilitators, and the institution’s policies, practices, and attitudes. Moreover, instructors will often reject self-directed learning because of the many myths related to the self-directed learning process (Pilling-Cormick, 1994). For learners, two variables can be linked with resistance: self-concept and self-awareness, and these make it difficult for individuals to take the obligation for learning. For organizations, organizational change is often hard and very slow; if there is resistance, organizations will often show the most arduous obstructions to self-direction. (Hiemstra & Brockett, 1994).

Garrison and Archer (2000) claimed that...
the concept and study of self-directed learning originated in the field of adult education. However, over the last decade other fields of study have shown interest in self-directed learning. Increasing attention has been directed to applications of this concept in formal educational settings. (p. 93) Therefore, a limitation of self-directed learning is the shortage of “accurate studies of the range of learning styles observable with different learners in different settings” (Brookfield, 1986, p. 45).

Relationships between Self-directed Learning and HRD

Yang (2004) asserted that self-directed learning, as one adult learning concept and theory, supplies valuable methods for HRD professionals. Indeed, based on the notion of Straka and Schaefer (2002), if learners are motivated, self-directed learning will happen. By using learning and control strategies, learners will be driven by pleasure and not by annoyance and monotony. A close link exists between self-directed learning and HRD, both explicitly and implicitly, in an interrelated way. A close link between self-directed learning and HRD exists, and these two concepts are interrelated.

Self-directed learning seems to have been used most effectively in the HRD field in recent years. Ellinger (2004) stated that the benefit of promoting self-directed learning in HRD is that the organizations then have a more cost-effective learning environment and more flexible learning approaches to learning by integrating technology. To maximize the effectiveness of such approaches, learners need to be more self-directed. For example, e-learning or on-line programs have been set up in many organizations, including colleges and universities, businesses and industries, and government; all of these activities are forms of self-directed learning that contribute to HRD effectiveness.

Moreover, self-directed learning has been applied in HRD based on three major factors: “unprecedented rates of technological and society change that requires increased flexibility and continuous learning, trends toward self-directed teams in the workplace, and research findings that consistently demonstrate a positive relationship between readiness for self-directed learning and performance” (Guglielmino & Guglielmino, 1994, p. 39). These factors completely drive the requirements for HRD professionals who are using self-directed learning in organizations to become more competitive.

The relationship between self-directed learning and HRD is a reciprocal one. Self-directed learning is one of the most effective ways in which adults can pursue learning in the workplace. On the other hand, HRD, as one of its principal goals, facilitates employees’ learning with skills and knowledge required to create their own self-direction programs beyond their formal learning. These concepts demonstrate the similarity between self-directed learning and HRD. Furthermore, the success of self-directed learning requires HRD professionals to create the climate and provide the resources for learning, and doing this successfully will also improve organizations’ performance allowing HRD professionals to accomplish their goals. Hence, HRD professionals must recognize how to implement self-directed learning in their organization.
Implementation of Self-directed Learning in HRD Practice

Many self-directed learning references provide useful strategies that can help HRD professionals to support training in their organizations. Knowles (1984) offered seven practices that can be widely adapted in different programs by HRD professionals:

1. Climate setting: A physical environment which should have some features such as mutual respect, mutual trust, collaboration, support, authenticity, pleasure, and humanness.
2. Participating in mutual planning: Learners will commit to any decision when they actually are involved in the whole planning.
3. Diagnosing learning needs: Learners can distinguish the gap between the organization’s need and individual’s need by using a model of competencies.
4. Formulating learning objectives: Learners can translate a diagnosed learning into a learning objective.
5. Designing learning activities: Learners use the most effective resources and strategies to achieving their objective.
6. Conducting learning: Learners use the learning contract to execute their learning.
7. Evaluating the programs: The evaluation can be part of measuring the quality and worth of the whole program and part of assessing learners’ learning outcomes.

In Knowles’ view, creating an environment and setting goals before learning activities are important for self-directed learning. Indeed, Confessore and Kops (1998) described that HRD professionals must recognize the employees’ capacities for self-directed learning and make efforts to increase their own learning. The employee should be aware of the required skills, including analyzing themselves as learners, setting goals, gathering information, and managing time. Hence, HRD professionals must change their role to be facilitators, consultants, and catalysts. They can provide a range of services, such as independent study materials, development of learning plans, research assistance in specialized information, and development of external networking.

Similarly, Caffarella and Barnett (1994) asserted that HRD professionals need to act as resource advisors in helping learners develop their own learning objectives and select appropriate strategies for learning, and as facilitators in organizing and serving as process persons for activities that use the learners’ experiences as part of the learning process. As in Vann’s (1996) study, mentors or facilitators can use reciprocal methods of instruction to encourage learners to take responsibility for their learning, or they can assist learners in achieving their objectives through offering supportive psychotherapy in extreme cases and arranging regular schedules.

Rymell and Newsom (1981) claimed that, due to the rate of changes in technological development, employees must constantly learn in order to remain knowledgeable in their specialty. Hence, “more efficient ways of training will be necessary to accomplish organizations goals” (p. 50). They also suggested that a possible way to do this is to employ self-directed, job-related learning projects. Even though there are many resources available in a learning environment, how to implement self-directed
learning successfully is a crucial issue. However, four strategies for self-directed learning in HRD practice were suggested by Guglielmino and Guglielmino (1994): (a) awareness of company support for self-directed learning: management needs to recognize that self-directed learning is a learning approach and needs to be supported by the company; (b) internal promotion: HRD professionals need to made strong efforts and provide adequate resources to assist self-directed learning; (c) easy access: through networking with electronic data bases, companies can expand their resources for self-directed learning; and (d) formalization of the use of self-directed learning strategies, by combining contracts for self-directed learning into performance evaluation and planning meetings.

The challenge for HRD professionals is to create a culture in which environment can develop successfully. Foley (1995) highlighted the key elements essential to the success of HRD practice: adult educators’ ability to understand learning and teaching from the learners’ perspective, provision of clear procedures and support to enable learners to move from teacher-directed to self-directed learning, development of honest and caring interpersonal relationships, allowing all issues to be discussed and acted upon, development of a ‘learning – teaching dialectic’, enabling learners to direct their learning while at the same time being challenged and extended, rather than indulged, by their teachers, a deep understanding on the part of adult educators of the structure, culture and dynamics of the organizations in which they work. (p. 44)

All of these points state that self-directed learning should be facilitated rather than taught in adult education theories and HRD practices.

Based on this study, self-directed learning can be induced by the facilitator. However, if the learning environment is not motivating to encourage the learners constantly to learn, the learners will be quick to abandon their learning. Hence, the most important strategy to create self-directed learning in organizations is to build up a learning environment for the employees. In addition, HRD professionals should play the role of facilitators or resource advisors to assist or encourage learners to develop their goal and objectives, and extend their learning ability.

Implications for HRD Practice

Self-directed learning has important implications for understanding learning in adulthood and the quality of educational outcomes and cognitive development (Caffarella, 1993; Garrison & Archer, 2000). Rymell and Newsom (1981) claimed that, due to the rate of change in technological development, employees must constantly learn in order to remain knowledgeable in their specialty. Hence, “more efficient ways of training will be necessary to accomplish organizations goals” (p. 50). They also suggested that a possible way of doing this is to employ self-directed, job-related learning projects. Based on this study, self-directed learning can be encouraged by a facilitator. However, if the learning environment is not motivating to encourage learners constantly to learn, learners will be quick to
abandon their learning. Therefore, Confessore and Kops (1998) advocated that, if the organization identifies the existence and values of self-directed learning, and allows individuals to learn naturally and instinctively; then this condition is called a learning organization. They also imply that, if self-directed learning has been integrated into the organization, it would be successful in building a learning organization. However, self-directed learning has been recognized as a type of individual learning for the person’s progress. Self-directed learning can play an important role in building learning organizations, or employees’ self-directed learning can be encouraged in a learning organization (Cho, 2002).

According to Smith’s (2000) study, for the “flexible delivery techniques to be successfully used for training directed at workforce improvement, several preparations need to be made” (p.1). He also indicated that effective self-directed learning was one of the flexible delivery techniques. However, his study showed that there is a low preference for self-directed learning in vocational education training between Australian and Asian workplaces and within Australian small and medium sized enterprises. Thus, the skill of self-directed learning needs to be developed.

Similarly, due to the increasing request for self-directed teamwork in organizations, a high level of readiness for self-directed learning is demanded from learners. Durr, Guglielmino, and Guglielmino (1996) examined the relationship between readiness for self-directed learning and occupational categories at Motorola; the occupational categories require facilitating development of self-directed learning because of the low scores on the Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale (SDLRS). In addition, the authors suggested that research needs to develop a better understanding of self-directed learning for improving practice in organizations.

Further, self-directed learning is not going to be successful if organizations view self-directed learning as the only mode for employee growth and development. It will also not be successful if organizations expect the entire burden of growth and development to fall on the time of the employee outside of work hours. Thus, SDL needs to be viewed in practice as a piece of a greater whole. A systems perspective for learning must be in place if self-directed learning is going to work well in the organization’s developmental objectives.

Conclusion

This study was based on a literature review that shows the value and strategy of self-directed learning in HRD practice. However, in today’s rapidly changing technology, organizations are more interested in self-directed learning because it has the potential most effectively to improve organization performance and increase future global competitiveness.

Based on Ellinger’s (2004) research, learners are faced with the challenge of more responsibility for their own learning and professional development. This training and learning process can be assisted by technology. Through technology, learners may have a variety of learning resources and apply their experiences of self-directed learning.
The literature indicates that self-directed learning plays a crucial role in organizations. From the literature review: (a) self-directed learning is a psychological process because the process is controlled by the learners; these activities do not always occur in educational programs; (b) self-directed learning is one successful way in which adults pursue learning in the workplace; (c) several strategies are provided to assist HRD professionals in implementing self-directed learning in their organizations; the best way is to create an effective learning environment that encourages learners to be more self-directed in their learning; and (d) hence, self-directed learning and HRD need to be interrelated and reciprocal in organizations.

Recommendations for Future Research

In future research, the following questions should be considered: What is the impact of self-directed learning on individuals using technology in high-tech organizations? How do HRD professionals experience self-directed learning in their organizations? Why have self-directed learning approaches not been more successful in organizations? In addition to literature review, there continues to be a need for empirical research in the workplace. Much of the research on self-directed learning has focused on higher education rather than the workplace.

References


