Examining the Rhetoric and Reality of Teacher Expectation in Utilising Self-Directed Learning in a HE Business School

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Introduction

Self-Directed Learning (SDL) has attracted significant interest in both scholarly literature and work organisations, due to employees as learners being expected to take more responsibility for their own learning and development (Ellinger, 2004). Academics acknowledge that despite the interest in SDL in recent times, there has been a decline in research in the field (Brockett, 2000; Merriam, 2001; Rager, 2003, Follman et al, 2012), resulting in limited studies on its application in use, especially within the HE sector (Lunyk-Child et al, 2001).

In earlier research, Dawson (2015a) sought to establish whether specific acts of pedagogic practice could enhance her students’ abilities to self-direct in their learning. Having established a number of techniques that did facilitate SDL, and those that did not, a second, larger study set out to retest these findings (Dawson, 2015b). This cohort of 33 post-graduate international students completed an HRD module as part of their master’s degree in HRM in their second of three semesters. The module utilised a problem-based learning approach (Barrows, 1986; Dunlap and Grabinger, 2003) to identify potential solutions to a ‘live’ organisational issue. As part of the data collection, the author captured a weekly reflective diary of her own pedagogic practice and under analysis, identified both political and ethical issues in the use of SDL (Brookfield, 1985; 2013; Collins, 1996).

Theoretical Base

In examining her reflections on practice, Dawson (2015b) identified five key themes. One of these was;

- Student disinclination to engage in early problem-based learning tasks, led to teacher frustration and concern over the risk in utilising SDL approaches to meeting module learning outcomes.

She suggested upon further reflection, that a teachers role should be better supported, to encourage the teachers own volition (Corno, 1993)

Hiemstra’s (2013) reflections on ‘why do most still do it [SDL] wrong?’ acknowledged the control factor that many teachers exhibit, associating this with ego or fear of failure, and of unsureness in how the class might handle themselves, given this autonomy. He suggests practitioners should develop a ‘personal statement of instructional philosophy’ (Hiemstra, 2013, p.30), which would drive change in one’s teaching practice and be a useful supporting mechanism for oneself when experiencing inconsistency between intention and practice (Hiemstra, 1988). Lunyk-Child et al.’s (2001) study of faculty and student perceptions to SDL in a Canadian nursing programme acknowledge that staff doubted their own capabilities to implement SDL effectually, despite years of teaching experience, noting feelings of self-doubt and lack of expertise in judging the quality of their SDL pedagogy. Furthermore, it was posited that faculty members may have differing levels of appreciation and obligation to the philosophical underpinnings of the programme being taught, in line with Hiemstra’s (2013) suggestions.

It might be said that the tutors expectations were unrealistic given the fundamental shift required to fully embed self-directed learning; Knowles (1975) in his seminal work saw learners as fully autonomous, however for many advocates of SDL, simply seeing learners being active, doing what the teacher thinks they ought to be, may be a more realistic expectation (Farrington, 1991). This signals the need for educators to be well-prepared for
the experience of using SDL approaches – Doring et al.’s (1995) study into staff comfort/discomfort with using problem-based learning (a recognised mechanism for delivering SDL approaches), highlighted only 6 of 84 staff surveyed had received formal preparation and development in the philosophy and process associated with the method, with only 4 feeling this had been adequate. This therefore requires further consideration to support teaching staff as a key enabler to SDL success.

It is acknowledged therefore, that a teacher’s understanding of their own expectations in utilising SDL must be further examined to conceptualise their later self-assessment of the learning experience when evaluating its relative success.

**Research Purpose**

Action research was conducted with a cohort of 33 mixed nationality, post-graduate HRD students in a post 1992 HEI business school in Spring 2015. A reflective diary was kept weekly for the duration of the module and subsequently revisited for further consideration. Ethnographic content analysis (Holsti, 1969; Altheide, 1996) was used to examine the critical reflections of the teacher in the use of her own self-directed learning pedagogies.

Building on preliminary findings (Dawson, 2015b), this study therefore seeks to extend the examination of SDL in pedagogic practice by conceptualising the rhetoric and reality of teacher expectation in using SDL methodologies.

**Research Question**

In examining the expectations of the teacher in using self-directed learning methods;

*What differences exist between the rhetoric and reality of teacher expectation in the use of SDL in pedagogic practice? If so, how might a better understanding of teacher expectation influence the use of SDL in pedagogic practice in Higher Education?*

**Implications for Practice**

Teachers advocating SDL pedagogies can better understand issues and challenges in practice by being better informed of the idiosyncrasies experienced by others, and plan to minimise these potential challenges. This insight can aid their professional practice and facilitate ongoing development of pedagogies in using self-directed learning methodologies.

Where teachers experience challenge to their expectations, either from within themselves or by others, (learners/organisation context/ learning culture) they may be dissuaded in its use. This might dissuade them from developing innovative and student-centred approaches to learning (Doring et al, 1995; Moore, 1998).

Where teachers use SDL, but students do not positively respond (due to their learning maturity, misfit with previous learning culture, misfit with programme approach), the benefits of SDL approaches to the learning process may be lost (Hiemstra, 2013).

**Conclusions**

This conceptual paper aims to enable adult educators to prepare and plan in readiness for utilisation of self-directed learning methods.

**References**
Maidenhead: Open University Press


