



Self-directed Learning

Overview

What do you want to know? How do you want to get there?

These are simple questions, but the truth is that they are rarely (if ever) asked in traditional, mainstream education. The curriculum is set, learning goals preplanned, and lessons scripted out for the day ahead. So where, in all this, are learners supposed to express voice and choice? Where can they hone the skills to construct new knowledge, iterate and adapt, and reflect on their own learning? The world ahead is uncertain and we need future generations to understand how to learn when they are outside the traditional boundaries of a learning environment. Self-directed learning is when a person knows how to organise their own learning, set their own goals and find out important things about themselves as they work towards them.



In this Article

- What is self-directed learning?
- Why is self-directed learning important?
- How to foster self-directed learning
- How does self-directed learning happen at Learnlife?



What is self-directed learning?

Well, first let's ask what learning itself is. Learning involves

- Conceiving of areas of interest, ideas, sparks of curiosity
- Planning what we want to know and where we can begin
- Constructing mental models of understanding as we approach knowledge to acquire and internalise it, synthesise it from different sources and in different ways, and connect it to things we already know.
- Applying our knowledge to a wider context, to see it expressed and tested in different ways, and connect it to new areas of learning that we might want to explore.
- Continuously reflecting, where we ask how things are going, where we hit challenges, and what we can do about them.
- Building an overall understanding and appreciation of how we are learning, whether we enjoy it that way, if it was worth it, and what we learned about ourselves in the process.

Why is self-directed learning important?

Learning can (and does) happen anywhere at any time, and at any age. Unless we want to pay for a personal teacher to be with us at all times, then we best learn how to take charge of the process ourselves.

Learning to learn is one of the greatest gifts we can give ourselves. Learning opportunities surround us, but we do not acquire understanding through osmosis. How many nature documentaries have you watched, for example, and how much of that information is actually stored in your brain?

Back in 1975, [Malcolm Knowles](#) wrote that self-directed learners have the following characteristics:

- They set clear goals for themselves.
- They shape their learning process in line with goals and plans.
- They monitor their own learning process.
- They evaluate the outcomes of their own learning.
- They are autonomous.
- They have self-motivation.
- They are open to learning.
- They are curious.
- They are willing to learn.
- They value learning.
- They have self-control.
- They take initiative to learn



The thing that might not be clear from the way this is phrased, is that building the skill of directing our own learning actually *reinforces* all of these things. We are not born as self-directed learners, but we can become one.

What we are all born with is a natural proclivity to be curious, to play and experiment, and to creatively explore the things that interest us. That is the core of it all, and it is our birthright as human beings.

The rest of Knowles' list can be developed from that core. As we iterate through our learning journeys, and explore our passions, we can build intrinsic motivation to learn, and the skills to plan and reflect on the process.

Unless you contract that personal 24/7 teacher, these are skills you are going to need out there. We cannot even work out which jobs will exist in 10 years, how much will be done by AI and automation, how climate change will affect specific social and economic outcomes, and a host of other challenges.

In such a world, being armed with "facts" is now a job that is best outsourced to Google. But knowing how to learn, adapt, research, evaluate, reflect and move on from setbacks in learning; that will be of critical importance now and in the future. Self-directed learners are truly empowered, resilient, self-motivated individuals, and there can never be an excess of such citizens in the communities of tomorrow.

How to foster self-directed learning

In his much viewed [Ted Talk](#), Tanmay Vora outlined his 3 L's of building the skill of self-directed learning. These are:

Labour of love

When we learn, through play, of our deep internal desire to know, do and change something, that is when we are driven by passion, curiosity and purpose. When we are told that we need to "be serious" and "learn something useful", these are moments that can, sadly, narrow our chances at finding [ikigai](#).

The labour of love is the thing that lights a fire in you, that puts you in a [flow state](#) in which time itself loses its hold on us. To find that, you have to make space for it, learn to value it, and challenge the right of others to define what we are doing as being of value. Sometimes, we have to fight for the right to learn our way.

Lifelong learning

Vora [defines this](#) beautifully as the process of keeping the fire alive. Too often we discover something we love doing, and yet cannot hold onto it for long. The weight



of expectation, value judgements from others, overly-structured learning environments alongside the biological burden of growth and development... Is it any wonder that, without support, we can forget what we love?

Traditional schooling is passive learning (then promptly forgetting it all), but lifelong learning is actively opening ourselves to new experiences, opportunities to learn, and the desire to connect, reveal, engage and unearth learning in any place at any time.

So how do we do that? Say yes, then figure out how. Say "why not". Meet new people, create diverse networks, ask questions, break patterns and routines, and generally get comfortable with being a little uncomfortable. The more we can see our learning in the contexts of different relationships, disciplines, cultures and scenarios, the more rounded and grounded we become.

Leverage

What use is knowledge and learning if we simply hold onto it? The world has no shortage of challenges, from a global scale to those on our very doorstep. James Gregory, a figure of the Scottish Enlightenment held that "[facts alone are useless lumber](#)", but by assembling them into action, we can forge from them a purpose.

Service

The new circular economy and a society built upon compassion and collaboration is where we can put our knowledge into action. From a young age, we can find (or be supported to find) opportunities to be of service to others. This can be in providing a product or service that others need, by helping others learn, or simply being of service to our community in any number of ways.

Using what we have learned to add value to our lives and the lives of others is as critical to self-directed learning as anything else. We see the outcome, we see the value, we see the learning transfer to reality and reflect it back on ourselves.

Vora tells us that "real learning is in the act", because when we are doing something that applies our knowledge, we are completing the cycle. From there, we can reflect on how we did, and revisit that learning all over again. Self-directed learning is not linear, because life is not a line with fixed points. It is messy, it spirals upwards and shoots off into different directions, because life itself is fluid.

How does self-directed learning happen at Learnlife?

At Learnlife, learners can engage with learning at any time, in any place. Our learners have often come from a background of more traditional education settings



and so we do not expect them to suddenly take charge of their own learning. That takes time, but it does provide an aspirational north star.

We meet learners where they are. They explore and tinker as curiosity coalesces into interest, and forms further into goals.

Our Learning Guides are ready to respond to self-directed learning. When all is said and done, support is still very important; especially when the learner has never before been asked what *they* want to do and how *they* want to get there. It can take some time to understand how to respond to such an opportunity.

Learning is sculpted around the person, rather than the person being pushed into a pre-moulded structure. Literacy, numeracy, problem solving, critical thinking, evaluative judgement and cross cultural collaboration. All these and more can be built into the learner's own pathway.

Fundamentally, self-directed learning happens at Learnlife because we wholeheartedly embrace it. Though it is administratively more convenient for cohorts of learners to move in lockstep, we believe in the right of an individual to be the captain of their ship, the master of their fate. As educators, it is our responsibility to support learners to be ready for the world ahead, and so we are there, at the side, as they lead the way. It is their future, after all.

In Summary...

Instead of having our natural curiosity dampened, and our love of play limited to our early years in education, some of us believe in a better way to do things. Self-directed learning is about the self-actualisation of an individual, or being all they can be. The setbacks, the knocks, the changes in direction, the realisations and the joys of new experiences. All of these are brighter and more vivid when we are in the driving seat, taking ownership of our own learning, and ready to let it flourish and bring value, our whole life long.

Our Blogs on Self-directed Learning

- [Skateboarding and Self Directed Learning at Learnlife - what's the connection?](#)
- [A New Learning Paradigm](#)
- [Time to Think Differently](#)

Our Programmes

- [Primary Programmes](#)
- [Secondary Programmes](#)
- [Home Hub](#)
- [Community Programmes](#)



Elements of the Learning Paradigm

- [Personal Learning](#)
- [Learning Culture](#)
- [5 Life Dimensions](#)

Sources

- [Frontiers | An Investigation of Self-Directed Learning Skills of Undergraduate Students | Psychology](#)
- [SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING: A GUIDE FOR LEARNERS AND TEACHERS Malcolm Knowles New York: Association Press, 1975. 135 pp., paperbound, 1977](#)
- [Self-directed learning characteristics: making learning personal, empowering and successful](#)