Self-direction

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Abstract

Self-direction refers to an individual's responsibility and active role in relation to their own activities. It has largely been considered from the perspective of the individual, with self-direction being seen as a characteristic of the person, a linear process, or a feature influenced by the factors surrounding the individual. It is understood as a positive activity that promotes *creativity and learning* (See Anderson, 2020: "creative learning" in this book). However, the possibilities for self-direction have been less explored. The theme of self-direction and its possibilities comprise a topical and important perspective in the research on self-direction.

Keywords: *Self-direction, self-directed learning, adult education, possibilities*

Introduction and definition

Self-direction has attracted the attention of researchers and those working in the field of education and working life in recent decades. Self-direction means "making [one's] own decisions" and managing one's own work (Cambridge Dictionary, 2020). It can be described as an activity that is free of external control. Self-direction has also been described as the activity of directing oneself or the capability of directing oneself (Merriam-Webster's Dictionary, 2020). In the context of education, the empowerment of students to become self-directed learners has been an important starting point. The concept of self-direction has developed especially in the field of adult education and is strongly linked to learning in the form of "self-directed learning" (SDL) (Knowles 1975). Self-direction or SDL has been seen as a characteristic of the individual (e.g., Guglielmino 1977; see also Merriam 2001) and as a linear process (Knowles 1975; Tough 1971), but also as a strategy guiding whole communities or organizations (Lee and Edmondson 2017). Self-direction has also been linked to intrinsic motivation, the idea that an individual is motivated when they are allowed to carry out their own intentions, develop things that are important to them, and act on their own interests (Deci and Ryan, 2008).

Discussions on self-direction can be found in many fields relating to adult life, such as education and work, but also in relation to society in general. Modern Western society and its associated individualism are closely related to the theme of self-direction in their emphasis on the freedom and autonomy of adults in making decisions about their own lives. In such a society, adults are seen as capable of creating and controlling a good life for themselves. At the heart of this idea is a neoliberal view that individuals are responsible for their own well-being and life (Skeggs 2004). The activities of adults should therefore not be restricted or directed; rather, they should be given freedom and autonomy for self-directed activities. The emphasis on self-

direction seems justified in this light, but it has also received much criticism. Problems of inequality are considered to be the most significant in terms of individualism and self-direction (Skeggs 2004). There is also a need to examine critically the extent to which society actually offers individuals opportunities to influence to their own lives.

When looking at self-direction from the perspective of individual situations or processes, such as in working life, it has been shown to include many positive aspects. Self-direction would appear to promote individual well-being, motivation, and learning (Edmondson et al. 2012). In addition to autonomy and freedom, self-direction has been described as an important factor in the emergence of human *creativity* (see also Lebuda: "creativity" in this book) and thus the emergence of new innovations. Recently, especially in the context of educational research, self-direction and creativity have been seen as being strongly related to each other (Gijbels 2012; Lemmetty and Collin, 2020). In everyday problem-solving situations in particular, the processes of SDL and creative activity seem to be intertwined (Lemmetty and Collin 2020). Self-direction thus provides an opportunity for creativity, but what factors produce opportunities for self-direction?

Self-direction: concept definition and critical debate

It is easy to think of adults as self-directed actors because adults take responsibility for their lives. An adult seem to be able to choose the direction of their life, education, job, spouse, financial status, and number of family members. We often see that in a learning situation, the adult learner is able to search for the necessary information in a textbook, choose the right channels for their learning, set learning goals, and evaluate their own realization. In adult education, the concept of self-direction has from the outset referred to the natural need for adults to act self-directedly (Lindeman 1926). Such a view is based on the psychological definition of adulthood, according to which the individual is able to take responsibility for their own life (Knowles et al. 2012). In practice, the concept of self-direction has emerged in the field of educational sciences as it has become clear that even adults continue to learn in different areas of life, and mental growth does not end with the cessation of physical growth.

An important framework concept for adult education and learning is andragogy, which distinguishes adult education from child education, or pedagogy. According to Lindeman (1926), the learning of adults and children has to be separated because 1) adults are motivated to learn through experience, needs, and personal interests; 2) adults' orientation to learning is broadly based on aspects of life; 3) experience is the richest resource for adults in learning; 4) adults have a deep need for self-direction; and 5) individual differences between people increase with age. From the beginning, then, adults were seen as self-directed by nature, as individuals able to direct their own learning (Knowles 1984). Self-direction was understood as a very individual-driven phenomenon and activity.

In recent years, the concept of heutagogy has been developed alongside andragogy. Heutagogy is based on the concept of self-determination, which refers to the strong self-control of learners (Agonács and Matos 2019). Heutagogy has been described as a more radical version of andragogy, specifically from the perspective of learner autonomy and individual orientation. According to the heutagogical view, autonomy in learning requires the learner to have the ability and extensive competence to act in various problem situations or in new and foreign situations.

The learner must understand how to learn and evaluate the learning process continuously in different situations. To date, there has been no discussion of the factors outside the individual in voluntary learning; rather, attention has been paid to the skills and competences of individuals. Heutagogy has shown that SDL is only possible for highly experienced experts; studies of SDL have found that even experienced individuals need guidance and support when encountering a completely new situation (Candy 1991).

The concept of self-direction has received a lot of criticism in adult education. This criticism has largely focused on the fact that, in SDL, the individual has been seen as an actor, regardless of context (Merriam 2001). In addition, it has been asked why self-direction is regarded as a feature of adults when some adults are highly dependent on structures and guidance (Merriam 2001). Moreover, it has been found that some adults are motivated by external factors such as rewards, whereas children may be excited to learn and act self-directedly out of sheer curiosity. Because of such criticism, the theory has been developed so that there is no longer a dichotomy between adults and children, but rather a continuum: an adult who knows little or nothing about a subject to be learned is more dependent on external factors, such as teacher guidance. Thus, self-direction came to be regarded as something to be pursued in the future, in relation to the learning situation rather than the learner (Knowles 1984). Thus, the examination of self-directedness has increasingly begun to take into account the abilities and competences of adults in relation to the subject being learned, as well as the various situation- and environment-specific factors that frame self-direction.

Self-direction as processes and projects: toward possibility

In adult education research, self-direction has been defined from the perspectives of processes and practices. Several process models describing SDL have been produced (e.g., Knowles 1975; Merriam and Caffarella 2001; Tough 1971). The first models were very linear and did not take into account the effects of context, whereas the models developed later took into account not only the actor but also the context, the nature of learning, and the aspects and contents of the strategy process. What the models have in common, however, is that they describe in one way or another the progress of the SDL process and the factors influencing it. The starting point for process descriptions is that the aim of a self-directed process is to achieve the set goals through different stages (Zimmerman 2008). These stages may include, for example, planning, monitoring, managing, and reflecting on learning (Pintrich 2004). The best known of the first descriptions of SDL processes is Knowles's (1975) description, according to which the learner takes responsibility for identifying their learning needs, defining the learning objectives, acquiring the human and material learning resources, and evaluating the learning outcomes. Self-direction therefore extends to all stages of the learning process, from setting the learning objectives to implementing learning and ultimately assessing what has been learned (Brockett and Hiemstra 1991).

Such SDL processes have been regarded as closely linked to creativity and its empowerment. Process theories describing SDL and creative thinking or acting appear to be very similar in terms of their stages and the role of the actor. In a manner akin to the process of SDL, the process of creativity is often described as an individual's process that progresses through the formation of an idea or the perception of a problem to find the necessary information, create a new idea, and ultimately evaluate it (Amabile 1996). Lemmetty and Collin (2020) found that

the steps of SDL may be included in the steps of the creative process, forming a process intertwined with creativity and SDL. When we consider those studies in which self-direction has been described as a factor promoting creativity and *problem solving* (e.g., Gijbels et al. 2012; see also Agnoli: "problem solving" in this book), we can regard self-direction as offering significant possibilities for creativity, but the question remains: What enables self-direction?

In terms of the process, a broader starting point for examining self-direction in learning has been the project perspective. From this perspective, learning is regarded as taking place within the environment, the community, and the individual (Clardy 2000; Lemmetty 2020). Thus, from the project perspective, the activities of the individual are taken into account but so also are the opportunities for self-direction produced by the environment. Studies (e.g., Artis and Harris 2007; Clardy 2000; Lemmetty 2020) have distinguished between different learning projects depending on the extent of their self-direction. These studies have been carried out in the context of working life. They found that there are a wide range of SDL projects in working life, with learning being strongly driven by external (organizational) factors in some, while in others the individual's opportunities for decision making are wider (e.g., Artis and Harris 2007; Lemmetty 2020). Thus, self-direction occurs in a wide variety of situations, but its scope and level vary.

In addition, studies have identified the factors that influence the possibility of SDL. Lemmetty's (2020) study found that the goals of different learning situations strongly influence how self-directedness emerges. If we imagine a working-life situation in which an employer wants to initiate extensive austerity measures, it is quite typical for them to inform subordinates about the ways in which the savings are to be achieved. In this case, the employees are not left with the opportunity to consider or reflect on appropriate means themselves; the information and proposed changes come from the organization. At the other extreme is the working-life situation in which the employee perceives a problem during their job and starts to find out on their own initiative its causes, consequences, and possible solutions, setting goals for learning something new and evaluating the end result. In this case, the individual's self-direction can be seen as broad. The two different working-life situations described above may also be seen as SDL projects that differ greatly according to the opportunities the individual has to make decisions and manage the situation. Thus, it is not always the individual's choice as to whether they are self-directed or willing and able to act; the possibility of self-direction depends on the situation.

However, the goal alone is not the only factor that frames self-direction in a learning situation (Lemmetty 2020). Studies (e.g., Baskett 1993; Bell 2017) have also found that while a situation is ongoing, many factors outside the individual affect the way in which the processes of SDL and the creativity it may involve proceed. In the working-life context, the atmosphere of the workplace, the nature of the supervisor's work, collegiality, and cooperation, as well as the work environment and tools available, have been found to be important (see, e.g., Foucher 1995; Lemmetty 2020), thus also affecting creativity.

Self-direction and external opportunities

Enabling self-direction is influenced by individual factors, desire and motive requirements, and individual skills and competences (Guglielmino 1977; Merriam 2001; Raemondoc et al. 2017), but also by external factors, such as the environment, autonomy, and control (Bell 2017; Lemmetty 2020; Lemmetty and Collin 2019). Self-direction is both a value-generating factor that

promotes creativity and learning, and a requirement and obligation for adults in society and working life. For this reason, it is important to look at the relationship between self-direction and possibility; that is, the kinds of possibility that self-direction requires to manifest.

One significant and interesting concept in the phenomenon of self-direction has been autonomy. Researchers have disagreed somewhat about the role of autonomy in self-direction. According to Deci and Ryan (2008), external events, such as deadlines, imposed goals, pressure on performance, competition, and evaluations, restrict learners' intrinsic motivation and thus also self-direction, because they displace autonomy. Candy (1991) has argued that as long as a learner's autonomy varies from situation to situation, one should not think that if an individual is self-directed in one situation, they will be in another area. Thus, self-direction does not move as a characteristic with a person from one situation to another; rather, the framework provided for the action affects whether self-direction is possible. The autonomy and freedom described above have been seen in several contexts as a precondition for self-direction, but such a view is very narrow since self-direction is not unequivocally achieved through autonomy alone, and some studies have questioned the importance of autonomy for self-direction, finding that self-direction needs strong support (e.g., Bell 2017; Lemmetty 2020) and that no one can operate fully autonomously all the time in, for example, a work environment. Self-direction is thus a much more complex entity, research into which requires more appreciation of the environment and interactions. As Bouchard (2012) has stated, "In the end, any tangible occurrence of self-directed learning undoubtedly involves the interaction of all three aspects, in that it will entail (1) the application of some actions or procedures, (2) by a person who is not psychologically averse to the experience, (3) in an environment, which at the very least does not preclude the emergence of self-directed learning."

Studies have identified, for example, a climate of trust and appreciation as a factor in enabling self-direction (Baskett 1993), as well as a culture that supports experimentation and allows for errors (Foucher 1995). In any new situation, the process of self-direction also requires support and guidance (Bell 2017). Thus, mentoring is part of the SDL process. Whereas, in pedagogy, teaching has been seen as teacher-centered, in andragogy the teacher has been seen as a facilitator, whose job is to coach the learner to reach better outcomes. Supervisors, managers, and colleagues can be seen as playing a similar role in the context of working life, which is why their role in supporting self-direction is not to tell anyone how to do something but to involve the employee in the work process by discussing the needs of the situation together (Foucher 1995; Knowles et al. 2012).

Self-direction needs commonly stated and understood goals in the community (Kops 1997). However, in the workplace, for example, the different interests and goals of the actors can often create confusing situations. If everyone works in a self-directed way toward their own goals, there will be no certainty that a common goal will be achieved. For this reason, as an individual phenomenon, self-directedness works poorly in communities or societies, where everyone should act according to the particular rules of the game, guidelines, or laws so that bigger goals can be achieved. For this reason, self-direction should be seen as limited: It does not necessarily extend to individual-oriented goal setting or even evaluation of activities, but to individual decision-making moments that emerge during the process (see Lemmetty and Collin 2019). Thus, self-direction should be seen as a framed and situational phenomenon that alternates and interacts with external factors.

Concluding thoughts

If we recognize that self-directedness stems from everyday problem-solving situations that individuals focus on, for example, in their work, one must consider whence the problem derives: Is it, for example, a customer's need or perhaps a business-related challenge? If the problem arises from something other than the individual's personal need, it is worth noting that its solution—through self-directed action—is always realized in relation to the situation. In such cases, the meaning of autonomy will be blurred, and the importance of other situational frames will increase.

In many fields of life, human activity is guided by some "external" factor, in which case self-directedness is not always an activity aimed at achieving one's own goals. However, one of the assessments is that in an individualistic society and in working life, where individuals are expected to take on an ever-greater responsibility for their own work, learning, and life, it is often the responsibility of the actors themselves to decide how different goals can be achieved. Thus, self-direction occurs, if not in the setting of goals, then at least in moving toward them. Along the way, however, there are several factors, ranging from interaction, tools, fellow human beings, and *affordances* (see also Bourgeois-Bougrine: "Affordance" in this book), that interact with and affect individual self-direction. Moreover, the relationship between autonomy and support in enabling self-direction in each situation remains partly unconscious (Bell 2017; Lemmetty 2020)

In the future, self-direction should be seen as a broader socio-cultural entity, arising in different situations and contexts. Self-directed research has focused on educational and working-life situations, but the applicability of prevailing theories and perspectives to different age groups (e.g., children, adults, and the elderly) and contexts (such as hobbies and organizational work) is unclear. For this reason, we still need a better understanding of the relationship between self-direction and possibilities.

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