



A STUDY DEVELOPING SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING SKILLS AND LEARNER AUTONOMY THROUGH WEBLOG

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ABSTRACT

Self-directed learning (SDL) is a method of instruction used increasingly in adult education within tertiary instructions. Self-directed learning can be defined in terms of the amount of responsibility the learner accepts for his or her own learning. The self-directed learning takes control and accepts the freedom to learn what they view as important for themselves. The degree of control the learner is willing to take over their own learning will depend on their attitude, abilities and personality characteristics.

INTRODUCTION:

This study employed quantitative and qualitative methods for the purpose of my study. By employing this mixed-method design, I expected that data from quantitative methods and qualitative methods would be complementary and would therefore generate a more comprehensive picture of the SDL strategy profiles of the learners. In the first the self-directed learning skill inventory was adapted and the content and construct validity of a number of items included were assessed. This inventory of SDL Skills has been adapted from Knowles. It is a 25 item version which is involved in the present study. However, this instrument is a bit altered in order to meet the purposes of the present study. This inventory was administered to a convenience sample of 40 undergraduate Second Year BCA students. The inventory was analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) to measure Chronbach's coefficient alpha, and item correlations to measure the inventory's construct validity, and internal consistency (reliability) respectively. It was followed by a blog programme. The data gathered through the instruments used in blog programme was later

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collated, coded and analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS IIV). This study aimed to foster Self-directed learning skills and learner autonomy through weblog.

Research Questions

1. What sort of abilities/skills does a self director learner make use of?
2. How does blogging help develop Self-Directed Learning skills?
3. Can blogging develop sense of collaboration among learners?
4. Can blogging help foster Self-Directed Learning?
5. Is blogging conducive to develop a capacity for independence in language use as well in language learning?
6. Can blogging be used to develop group interaction and promote independence?

Objectives

1. To identify range of SDL skills used by BCA students.
2. To investigate the effect of blogging on SDL skills.
3. To arrive at set of language learning strategies being used by good Self Directed Learner.

Method

The basic instruments of the study were the Self-Directed Learning Skill Inventory which was adapted from Knowles. The inventory has been altered to meet the present need of the study undertaken. In addition to this, self-reflective reports, language proficiency tests and interviews were also used for the purpose of data collection and broad generalization. The idea was to increase the reliability and validity of the study results. The research tools were used to elicit responses from the second year BCA students of Shree P M Patel College of Computer Science and Technology, Anand, Gujarat, India. A self report questionnaire was selected as the basic instrument since it is possible to use such kind of questionnaire to survey a large number of participants in a manner which would be practically almost impossible using any other method, thereby providing a relatively wide overview of Self-Directed Learning Strategies. A weblog questionnaire then was chosen as the instrument for the current study after the completion of blog programme since it could be used in its own right as a mean of gathering interesting insight. Furthermore, the questionnaire provided a base for launching further probes in the form of interviews.

Instruments development



Self-Directed Learning Skills Inventory

The basic instrument for measuring frequency of SDL Skills used in the current study was the Self-Directed Learning Skills Inventory (Appendix I). This inventory of SDL Skills has been adapted from Knowles. It is a 25 item version which is involved in the present study. However, this instrument is a bit altered in order to meet the purposes of the present study. For instance “the ability to develop and be in touch with curiosities; Perhaps another way of describing this skill would be the ability to engage in divergent thinking.” was removed from the inventory as it seemed to be difficult for the students to understand. Same with “the ability to diagnose your own learning needs in light of models of competence required for performing life roles”. This too was removed from the list as it seemed to be difficult to comprehend. This inventory is a self scoring, paper-pencil survey which consists of abilities such as “I have the ability to observe and model others’ performance to improve.” or “I am able to work on my own personal learning beliefs.” to which students are asked to respond on a four-point scale ranging from DK (don’t know), LO (low), MD (middle), and HI (high). Because of ambiguities, such scales can produce results which are unreliable and inadequate. Because of such difficulties, I used the questionnaire and then followed them by interviews. On the basis of analysis the items were divided into subcategories (active planning strategy, academic learning strategy, social learning strategy and affective strategy)

The Weblog Questionnaire

The weblog questionnaire was adapted with the aim of finding out various SDL skills employed by the students while working on blogs either consciously or unconsciously. Following table provides a summary of the SDL strategies which are exhibited by good language learners (Stern 1983).

Reflective Reports and Journal

Before the actual implementation of the Blog Programme the students were provided a step wise summary directing them how to work on the project. Along with guidelines they were also informed to write reflective reports and maintain reflective journal keeping an account of all the requisite details. In order to facilitate the task, a list of questions was given as clues,

- How did you plan out your project (what did you do first, what next etc)?
- What were the things that you learned during the project? (Give examples of how you learnt it. You can quote a particular incident)
- What were the problems that you faced? (Coordination problems? Lack of Direction? Correction problems? Language problems? Etc)



- How did you overcome those problems? (What did you do or what steps did you take to solve them?)
- If given a chance, what would you do better the next time?

The students had no compulsion in word limit in the strict sense which means they were informed that their main concern was with the expression of their experience and not with the length of reflective report.

Interviews

After fulfilling the relevant procedure of taking consent from the participants, all the participants were interviewed individually after the completion of Blog Programme. To overcome the threat of communication breakage and misconception the better option was to record the interviews. For that I had used digital tape recorder to record the interviews to arrive at exact interpretation and analysis of data gathered through interview. Before the actual process of interview, a structure of the major questions was formed and was given to the students. Some additional important questions were asked to the students at the time of interview.

Procedure

The basic instrument for measuring frequency of SDL Skills used in the current study was the Self-Directed Learning Skills Inventory. This inventory of SDL Skills has been adapted from Knowles, still some of the items were adopted from Student Self-evaluation Checklist given in Routledge Study Guide, Learning Online by Maggie Mcvay Lynch. The items were transformed into statements to make it more comprehensible for the students. For example, 'Ability to set goals to improve present performance' has been transformed to 'I am able to set goals to improve present performance'. Similarly 'Ability to keep an open mind to other points of view' seemed to be less comprehensible so it was omitted in current SDL inventory. This SDL inventory was administered to the students in advance, prior to the blog programme. This was done intentionally to collect concrete data regarding SDL Skills used by the students. The students were given sufficient time to read the guiding information printed on inventory and to fill up the required information. In total 27 questionnaires were received on the first day rest of which were filled up later on.

The inventory contained only 25 items to which students are asked to respond on four-point scale ranging from DK(don't know), LO (low), MD (middle), and HI (high). All the necessary information regarding each rating scale was given to the students in advance like



- **DK** If you believe you currently do not have or are not able to use the skill listed. This may mean that you will need or will want to develop the skill through future discussion, reading, practice, etc.
- **LO** If you currently have a low ability to use the listed skill, but could raise that ability to a desired level through specific learning experiences.
- **MD** If you currently have a medium ability to use the listed skills some specific learning experiences or activities would develop your abilities more.
- **HI** If your past experiences and activities have substantially developed the listed skill area.

The weblog questionnaire was adopted from one of the research works carried out by Mr Kiran Chauhan from H.M. Patel Institute of English Training & Research, S. P. University. Still most of the items were omitted as they were not seemed to be relevant to the present study undertaken. The questionnaire contained a brief overview of the purpose of the study and contained requisite instructions for the students. The students were advised in the questionnaire to work at their own pace and that there were not 'right' or 'wrong' answers in their responses. The blog questionnaire was administered at the end of the Blog Programme.

The Blog Programme

The Blog Programme was carried out with a group of 40 learners in the second year of BCA course. At the outset, it was decided that the learners would work in groups, though at the end of the project they would produce their individual blogs. This decision was taken keeping in mind their level of language, computer skill, internet, time and resources.

A questionnaire was administered to the learners in the beginning of this project to elicit information about their self confidence, coordination skills, relational skills and computer skills. I was advised to give an English Language Proficiency Test to the students to know their language level and grouped them accordingly. The idea was to increase reliability and validity on the results. Based on the responses group coordinators were selected who were responsible for the activities of their respective group. Six project coordinators were selected based on advanced levels of language and computer skills they had. The project coordinators were instructed to maintain a reflective journal. They were also asked to remain in constant touch with the group coordinators.

Each student was asked to create a blog and publish at least two articles. For the topics of their blog assignment they were restricted to certain choices like 'Technological advances' and 'Terrorism'. For the second article they were free to choose their topic from any area. The participants were constantly encouraged by project coordinators and me. Project



coordinators gave them a classroom demo of how to post an article on blog, how to visit others' and how to comment on them. They were also given additional information on blog and earning possibilities through internet.

The creation of blogs followed a series of steps since the objective of the project were to make the learner more self dependence.

Step I The learners were given a demonstration on how to create a blog as well as how to popularize it.

Step II The learners were asked to submit their typed articles to the group coordinators, who after initial screening passed them to the project coordinators; the group coordinators and project coordinators were asked to assess the language of the articles and not the content since that was assessed by me.

Step III: The project coordinators returned the assignments back to the group coordinators with extensive feedback and the learners were requested to incorporate the necessary changes.

Step IV: A similar arrangement was made for the topic of their own choice.

Step V: The project coordinators were asked to create their blogs first so that they could be used as examples for other participants.

Step VI: I then monitored the blogs of the project coordinators and asked the group coordinators to help create their group members their individual blogs.

Step VII: The participants were encouraged to advertise their own blogs and to visit each other's blogs to comment and share information. Here the participants were asked to comment on the content of the article.

Step VIII: The participants were asked to submit reflective reports on their experience of blogging.

The purpose of this research was to identify level of SDL skills of the participants. For that SDL inventory was employed by me. The idea was to determine which of the skills students need to improve for their actual study. In the same way, the blog questionnaire was designed to gather information of the learners' experience of using blog as well as measure the effectiveness of using blogs to foster learner autonomy.

Outcome of the study

The preceding analysis of the SDL inventory, blog questionnaire, reflective reports and the respondents' interview lead to the following major findings:



- a) Blog assisted language learning can foster learner autonomy by developing their Self-Directed Learning Skills and making them more self reliant by giving them power of making choices about their decisions.
- b) Blogging can develop independent decision making skills and the ability to take independent action.
- c) Blogging can be creatively used to advance independence in group learning.
- d) Blog can provide new learning environment to the learners rather than traditional model of learning in class.
- e) Blogging can develop skills like reasoning; organizing, analyzing and evaluating that can lead to language learning.
- f) Blogging can foster continuous self motivation.
- g) Blogging can help a learner assume personal responsibility for learning and carry out learning plan sequentially and systematically.
- h) Blogs can be effectively used in language learning in general and English in particular.
- i) Blog assisted language learning promotes collaboration by supporting students to overcome the symmetry of ignorance and allow them to learn from each other and creates mutual understanding.
- j) Conscious use of blog assisted language learning helps learners in application of their learning skills in context beyond the classroom.

Limitation of the Study

Since the present study aimed at determining Self-Directed Learning Skills employed by the ESL learners and the role of blog in the development of these skills of few students second year BCA students (n=40) of Shree P. M. Patel College of Computer Science and Technology, the outcome of the study cannot be generalized to all students and settings.

Another practical limitation for the study is the time period of the Blog Programme. Although it ran for a period of one month, it was felt that students couldn't concentrate much on their blogging task because of their regular BCA internal and external examination. So some portion of the programme had to be postponed for 3 months. Thus the relationship between students' performance in Blog Programme, time duration and their personal study could not be identified.

Implications and suggestions

In the light of the findings, it would seem sensible that teachers should, with some caution, encourage students to expand their Self-Directed Learning Skills, since the students need to

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cover large number of papers and syllabus in one academic year which seems to be highly impossible for both learners and teachers. Self-Directed Learning Skills can help learners become more self reliant and independent language learner. Perhaps teachers should also design such technology aided language material which can foster learner autonomy by letting learners learn at their own pace and time even without the direct help of teachers' support. The challenge for environment supporting Self-Directed Learning is to allow learners to work on authentic problems and tasks of their own choosing, and yet provide them with learning support contextualized to their problem. So a course designer should design such syllabus that allows a learner think creatively with some authentic problems. The choice of tasks and goals (including learning opportunities offered) must be under the control of the learner, and the support provided by the system must be contextualized to the learner's task.

Future Research Issues

Even though several research trends are observable, there still remains much needed research

- a) Additional research is required to test conceptual ideas like blogging and other emerging ideas to ensure the evolvment of a theory of Self-Directed Learning.
- b) Ways need to be found whereby organizations and educators can facilitate Self-Directed Learning and enhance critical thinking skills without impinging on the value of self directed or spontaneous learning.
- c) It is important that better ways of incorporating computer technology and electronic communication into Self-Directed Learning be determined as more distance education programs are created.
- d) Future research is needed on such issues as expanding the repertoire of design and methodology for studying Self-Directed Learning, how competencies necessary for effective Self-Directed Learning are developed, and how the quality of Self-Directed Learning resources can be measured.
- e) Ways of measuring and maintaining quality in Self-Directed Learning need to be determined.
- f) The most appropriate roles for educators and educational organizations in relation to Self-Directed Learning need to be found.
- g) A study is needed to measure psycho-social challenges faced by a self directed learner in study with or without technology.
- h) Finally, ways for learners and other to evaluate the value and effectiveness of Self-Directed Learning need to be developed.

CONCLUSION

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In conclusion, I am confident that students can use their blogs as their self-learning or self-study center. Since students can choose websites that they need and want, they can study effectively than in the classroom settings. Teachers can play a critical role to help the students to analyze their needs or weak skills that the students need to study so that the students can choose optimal websites for their learning progress. Moreover, since it is a self-access center which needs a lot of self-effort to keep studying, it would be helpful if the teachers regularly check the students' participation and give feedback for better learning, especially when the students are young.

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