

Self-Directed Learning and Learner Autonomy: A Response to Michael Moore

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Abstract

In this position statement Dr. Moore's article, "Self-Directed Learning and Distance Education" (*JDE*, I(1), 7-24) is criticized as lacking an appreciation of true autonomy in adult learning. Most "self-directed learning" in Dr. Moore's sense is a matter of ordinary, everyday problem solving. If self-directed learning is institutionalized, then learner freedom, individualism, and self-direction are lost, as is the satisfaction of independent discovery. Students enrolled in formal distance education programs usually prefer clear instructions and overt objectives to flexibility or autonomy. Although distance educators perform a valuable task they should not take upon themselves the roles of authors, publishers, television producers, hobby experts, and so on, as these roles are usually well filled already.

Résumé

Cet exposé critique l'article du docteur Moore "Self-Directed Learning and Distance Education" (*RED*, I(1), 7-24), parce que ce dernier omet d'évaluer la réalité de l'autonomie des adultes dans leur apprentissage. La plus grande partie des "études auto-dirigées" est, selon le docteur Moore, une simple question de solution de problèmes. L'institutionnalisation des études auto-dirigées prive les apprenant de leur liberté, de leur individualisme et de leur auto-direction, comme de la satisfaction procurée par une découverte indépendante. Les étudiants inscrits dans des programmes formels d'enseignement à distance préfèrent généralement des instructions claires et des objectifs bien définis à la flexibilité et à l'autonomie. Bien que leur tâche soit appréciable, les enseignants à distance devraient s'abstenir d'assumer les rôles d'auteurs, d'éditeurs, de réalisateurs de télévision, d'experts en passe-temps, etc., car ces rôles sont déjà remplis efficacement.

Michael Moore's article, "Self-Directed Learning and Distance Education," makes me fear that distance educators are going to arrogate to themselves everything that doesn't take place in a classroom. If it happens in the home, with a book, at a computer, in front of the television, without a teacher—then it is considered to be distance learning, and distance educators want a piece of the action. If Mr. Moore thinks that distance educators should "think, write, and argue for greater autonomy," then perhaps he should stop invading the territory of the private or individual learner.

When one examines specific examples of the "self-directed learning episodes" that researchers love to cite, it becomes apparent that most of these activities are the everyday undertakings of ordinary folks like you and me—figuring out how to make cheese soufflé, taking ski lessons, tackling a car maintenance problem, reading up on the feeding and care of small children or domestic animals. Why should distance educators try to find a role for themselves in such activities? If Mr. Moore really believes that the defence of individual freedom rests in part on the promotion of "learner autonomy," then the last thing he should be advocating is institutionalization of these activities—with counsellors and tutors and courses and learning packs and information networks and so on and so forth.

Instead, he should be encouraging better libraries; he should be championing such existing institutions as the CBC, the BBC, and PBS.¹ He should be applauding the downward trend of videocassette recorder and microcomputer prices. And he and the rest of the professional distance educators should keep their hands off the self-directed learning of adults.

Why do I feel so strongly about this? First, I think this celebration of self-directed learning is the trumpeting of the obvious. With or without academic recognition, human beings must learn in order to survive. This is as true for a city-dwelling office worker like me—learning for example, how to make draperies and tutor a teenage child—as it was for my paleolithic forebears, puzzling over the sequence of the seasons or the migration of the birds. To talk about self-directed learning in breathless tones of discovery is to betray a lack of perspective—historical, biological, and anthropological.

Second, if self-directed learning is institutionalized in the ways Dr. Moore suggests, it will lose the very qualities he celebrates—learner freedom, individualism, and self-direction. I believe that adults muddle their way toward important answers. Professional intervention cannot do too much to reduce the muddling, nor should it. Part of learning what one wants to know is making one's way through the thicket of books, articles, friendly advice, and personal experience toward some kind of individual answer or solution. Finding the right resources, asking the right questions, acquiring the necessary skills in one's own time and way, coming up with satisfactory answers—this is what puts an individual stamp on what one learns. I don't think that mix-and-match learner packs are a very good substitute for the highly individualized learning that goes on when people pursue their own learning for their own ends. The involvement of professionals in this process will impair the individual quality and the value of what adults learn.

Furthermore, part of the satisfaction of self-directed learning comes from the knowledge that one is doing it by oneself—without professional planning, mediation, direction, or approval. It may not be perfect; one may not find all the best sources of information; one may overlook some important points. But the learner remains in charge.

More planning and programming and materials development will rob people of the ability and need to develop their own course of studies. Part of becoming a self-directed learner is figuring out how to study for oneself—learning who to ask, where to ask, how to scan a card catalogue, how to wander through library stacks, use the yellow pages, skim a knitting pattern. These are lessons in resourcefulness. Do they need to be pre-packaged by professional educators?

As for the implications of Dr. Moore's argument for materials development, I cannot reconcile my practical experience in developing, delivering, and taking distance education courses with Dr. Moore's emphasis on the need for greater autonomy in distance learning materials. Students who enroll in formal programs of distance education, that is established courses, do not want flexibility or "learner choice" in materials. They want unambiguous instructions and step-by-step directions; they want clear objectives and direct routes to achieving them. If they wanted "learner autonomy," they would go to the library, telephone a friend, rent a tape, or buy some new software. As for optional activities, recommended readings, questions for thought, self-tests, practice questions—my impression is that many students ignore these and focus on the required assignments.

Dr. Moore suggests that we who work in distance education should view "virtually the whole adult population" as a market for our skills and services. Certainly distance educators have a valuable role to perform in making educational opportunities more widely available. But we ought not to think that our efforts are superior in every field and domain to what adult learners can do for themselves. And we should recognize that authors, book publishers, magazine editors, film makers, television producers, hobby shops, and pattern companies know quite a bit about adult learning and are already serving the needs of adult learners quite well.

Reference Note

1. CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation), BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation), and PBS (Public Broadcasting Service) in the U.S. are examples of excellent television and radio network services.

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