Self Directed Learning by Using Internet Source

Self directed learning (SDL) is defined as a representation of the ultimate state of learner autonomy. It means that the learner have a control over activities and responsibility for choosing both the objects and the means of the learning (Mocker & Spear, 1982). Although the idea is not new, SDL is accepted as an important feature for people. Because we live now in an era of digital technologies which are widespread and changing quite fast. It is not wrong to say that SDL is an obligatory skill for people who intend to develop themselves.

Eight major factors which contribute to an individual's readiness for self directed learning have been suggested (Mocker & Spear, 1982);

1. Openness to learning opportunities
2. Self-concept as an effective learner
3. Initiative and independence in learning
4. Informed acceptance of responsibility
5. Love of learning
6. Creativity
7. Future orientation
8. Ability to use basic study and problem solving skills

Digital environments make us rethink the concept of the openness to learning opportunities. At least, certain basic competences such as technology literacy should be considered within the realm of this factor. For example; "Openness to learning opportunities" involves active participation of individuals in the learning process. An increase in the SDL depends on the easeness of access to the learning sources. In this respect, internet plays an important role as learning and information sources. These sources vary, ranging from hobby basis to upper academical issues. For example, Google shows 153.000 web pages for searching about "growing flowers".

The printed sources have several check-points such as editors, referees and publishers. Yet being a virtual world, the internet data do not have such check points. As internet provides a forum in which ideas are fast spread and there is no control mechanism over the validity and reliability of those ideas, people need to carefully check the accuracy of the information presented in different sources. Therefore, individuals in today's world need to be more critical than ever before of the information given in a vast number of sources on the net. There are many university libraries all around the world, suggesting ways for their users to check the validity and reliability of the information found on the web.

As the new internet applications and the fast-developing technological innovations, digital tools provide individuals with opportunities to become an active participant in the process. For example, with the introduction of web 2.0 and 3.0 technologies, individuals have become able to edit the information and in fact had a chance to co-produce information available in many different sites.

In the digital age, learner should be active participant and co-producer (McLoughlin & Lee, 2007, Klamma, et al., 2007).

Although there are multiple interpretations of the term “Web 2.0”, it can be defined as a second generation, communicative form of the World Wide Web that emphasizes active participation, connectivity, collaboration and sharing of knowledge and ideas among users (McLoughlin and Lee, 2007). Web 2.0 applications support self directed learning opportunities. Besides internet has various information sources for learning, it has applications to reproduce and enrich the content.

Two examples of internet sources for self directed learning have been given in this paper.

Open course material

In the world, there are many universities that offer free course materials for the learners who are not their students. These course materials are prepared on the basis of self directed learning principles and also there are services that encourage participants to communicate with one another. Two examples are OpenCourseWare of Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and OpenLearn project of Open University. These two are quite popular with their free learning materials.

OpenSpace, name of the project of Open University, offers hundreds of free study units for a learner. The length of the units varies from 1-2 hours to 24 hours. According to OpenLearn Newsletter, OpenLearn has been seen over 6.5 million people who take the advantage of free education since it was launched in October 2006. The course materials such as those of OpenLearn have been developed based on the principles of distance education approach and interested readers can have access to free course materials at http://openlearn.open.ac.uk.

The benefit of the distant learning approach becomes evident when the views of participants are considered. For instance, a participant of an OpenLearn course states that;

“..I cannot actually believe I can learn like a college student here. I have twins in college....that’s why I can’t afford to go LOL. I want to learn all I can, about math, and also psychology, because I take care of two family members whom have had strokes, and have suffered with different ailments that come with it. I truly love my job, and want to learn as much as I can about the brain itself also....wish me luck in my endeavors. Thanks .” (The Open University)

Surely, this participant’s view is subjective; yet it is not wrong to say that such projects sustain and enable to develop SDL, encouraging individuals to learn new topics and subjects.

MIT’s original goals for the OpenCourseWare project were to provide free, searchable access to MIT’s course materials for relevant people. Although it has been thought that free course would decrease the demand to the University at the beginning, the reality was the reverse: the number of demands has increased and many people have had an opportunity to see academic quality in the campus (Johnstone, 2005). MIT OpenCourseWare has one million visitors on an average in a month. 43% of the visitors declared themselves as self learners (see http://ocw.mit.edu/about/site-statistics).

One participant of the MIT course expressed the view that

“I didn't find any videos, but I found lecture notes, handouts and slides from presentations, and some problem sets. It helped me a lot; I learned many, many things. I especially liked the fact that I saw many diagrams there. I was able to find almost the same information at my own university, but it was more theoretical. Sometimes I have a hard time with the theoretical style, and having all the information in mathematical style was very informative, and very helpful. (www.mit.edu)”

As was the case for this participant, individuals need to be provided with multi-media enriched with appropriate arrangement for those with different learning profiles and styles.

The views presented so far show that open course materials offer opportunities for important learning areas and increase willing to re-learn.

Secondlife

Secondlife is defined as a 3D virtual world community. For some researchers, secondlife is a game, however creators of secondlife and some users do not consider it so. What are, then, the possibilities in secondlife for learning? Firstly, one can do everything what he/she does in normal life and even more: one can fly and teleport to other places. One can go to school, university or attend any courses. Two scenes are represented below for secondlife.

Secondlife and other similar softwares provide educators with opportunities to develop learning activities, which closely replicate real-world learning experiences previously available only through face-to-face interaction (Childress & Braswell, 2006). Antonacci and Modaress (2005) provided an interesting application of Secondlife at the University of Kansas Medical Center. They have created a Secondlife medical clinic in which medical students can practice patient encounter strategies. During their role-playing, each student assumes the role of a doctor, nurse, patient, or patient’s spouse. Students experience patient encounters from their different roles, discuss, and reflect upon their experiences.

It was the instructor's belief that Secondlife would foster an increased sense of community among the students, as well as provide better communication between the instructor and the students (Childress & Braswell, 2006). SDL's emphasis on user creation and ownership is integral to that learning (Hayes, 2006).

Final remarks

SDL depicts a learner-centered approach in which the learner has a control over the select and conduct of the activities. The technological innovations and daily-based technological developments provide opportunities for the realization of SDL. Internet sources play particularly important roles for the effect of SDL. However, as the number of information sources on the net is limitless and as there is not a way to check the accuracy of the information presented on the web, individual skills in deciding upon the validity and reliability of information become rather essential. Despite these potential problems, there are valuable attempts on the web which supports and sustain SDL. There are different reliable sources on the net, especially the ones provided by the universities. Two such examples succinctly attended were OpenSpace and OpenCourseWare, which exemplify effect of distant learning and provide free learning materials for the self learners. There are also some other opportunities that free software programs present to the individuals. Secondlife as an example of such programs can be used in such a way that enables learners to adopt different roles and discuss and reflect upon their experiences as learners.

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