

Refereed Article

Gender Differences in Self-Directed Learning Practices Among Community Members

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Abstract

How individuals engage in self-directed learning plays an important part in the fabric of community organization and development. This study was designed to explore the self-directed learning practices of members of community organizations, and to identify possible differences between how men and women go about selecting learning strategies. Findings from over 150 surveyed community organization members identified that women select different self-directed learning tools than men, and that these differences might reveal important sociological gender trends about self-directedness and the desire to learn.

Introduction

Adults learn for many reasons, ranging from job training to self-interest, and the strategies they use to go about learning are similarly varied. Much has been documented on adult training programs and philosophical discussions of andragogy. One of the most common forms of adult education is described as “self-directed learning.” Self-directed learning (SDL) was once considered the “chief growth area in the field of adult education” (Brookfield, 1984) and has been tied to the work of Houle in that it is situational and driven by the individual for outcomes, methods, and intentions (Clinton & Rieber, 2010).

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Although SDL has been viewed as a process where individuals “assume primary responsibility for planning, implementing, and evaluating the learning process” (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991, p. 24), there can also be a social component to this self-directedness, as individuals tie their own interests to the activities and interactions of others. For example, self-directedness is largely seen as a personal characteristic and behavior, and as such, is a reflection of an individual’s willingness to interact with and rely on others (Stockdale & Brockett, 2011). Similarly, SDL reliance can be viewed as a significant cultural component, where some societies or communities will view self-directedness as a solitary endeavor, and others see it as an element of naturally occurring coalitions of individuals (Ahmad & Majid, 2010).

Self-directedness can be tied to an individual’s personal motivation or it can be linked to how an individual learns to value learning and self-growth (Brookfield, 1984). As such, it has been argued that a community can create expectations for the engagement of further learning, either formal or informal, and that the emergent culture can place value on an individual’s commitment to self-development (Miller & Deggs, 2012). The result is that the social elements of self-directed learning practices can encourage or discourage SDL, and may even impact the choice of SDL strategies. This can be particularly true for sub-groups and sub-populations of society, where social support networks can be vitally important to feelings of self-worth.

The current study was designed to explore SDL learning in a community, with particular attention focused on differences between community members based on gender. The variable of gender was specifically chosen as it can influence both socialization and the decision or motivation to pursue lifelong learning (Malcolm, 2012; Morgan & Robinson, 2012). The intention of the study was to begin to understand how subpopulations within a community might rely on each other or themselves differently, and, how elements such as technology availability and resource distribution agencies (such as libraries) might influence SDL behaviors.

Background of the Study

There has been a significant body of research that has defined and explored self-directed learning in multiple environments. SDL is strongly correlated with individual effort, and subsequently has been correlated to strong academic achievement in college, professional growth and op-

portunity, and individual motivation (Chu & Tsai, 2009; Clark, 2003; Hughes & Berry, 2011; Murad, Coto-Yglesias, Varkey, Prokop, & Murad, 2010; and Kim, 2009). Much of the exploratory literature, however, is non-applied, and has presented arguments and definitions to frame what SDL is and is not. For example, Clinton and Rieber (2010) differentiate between the learner's activity and learner self-direction, noting that the learner's activity is framed around autodidaxy being either "true" (self-education with no instructor) or "assisted" (instructor controlled). They also categorized learner self-directedness by capacity for self-management and personal autonomy. Whether defined by Knowles (1975), Brookfield (1984), or one of many others (such as Kobsiripat, Kidrakan, & Ruangsuan, 2011), a central theme is that an individual who elects to engage in self-directed learning has a pronounced level of self-motivation. Subsequently, these are the individuals who have the capacity to self-diagnose personal needs and wants, and can influence their own levels of personal well-being or happiness.

Participation in an SDL activity does not automatically reflect personal happiness, but it does frame an individual's ability to make sense of and understand the immediate world (Butcher & Summer, 2011). There is the possibility, then, that individuals who can structure their worlds and cognitively regulate the information and knowledge they need are in a better position to adjust to societal changes and integrate themselves into emerging cultures, societies, and communities. Subsequently, if certain strands of a community's population engage more readily in SDL activities, they may be more likely to provide leadership and direction to their community and they may be more likely to prosper and have a higher self-perceived quality of life.

Self-directed learning is a tool by which individuals can increase their knowledge, abilities, and satisfaction with their understanding of some element, practice, hobby, or interest. A guiding element of SDL, though, is personal motivation, and through the current study, a profile of a community's membership can be offered that describes who is self-engaging in SDL, and how involved they are with other elements of their communities.

SDL can be driven by an individual's curiosity, or can be motivated by problem-based encounters, especially those related to health status. Examples include health-related illnesses that jeopardize life or at the very least the quality of life. Such is the example Rager (2003) noted in profiling the SDL practices of women with breast cancer. Similarly, Andruske (2000) reported that women use SDL in unique ways, providing

a critically important mindset in challenging perceptions of social roles. Studies such as these reinforce the need to explore differences among individual subpopulations as they rely upon and use SDL.

The reference to community and individual involvement is particularly important to larger discussions of the evolution and state of American society. There is strong consensus that community cohesion, at least to the extent of establishing and creating norms and values, is an important element of maintaining a civil society (Murray, 2012). Yet, there are multiple arguments that due to technology and changing perspectives on group interaction there is an increased level of individualism among society members (Putnam, 2001). Some, (Murray, 2012), contend that individualism and the loss of a central belief system are causing major fragmentation in communities around the country. This fragmentation, in turn, leads to greater classism and a growing divide between those with a high quality of life and adequate, sustainable resources and those who are poverty stricken, plagued with health-related problems and a lack of personal motivation to improve their lives.

The question of gender also plays a role in understanding community cohesion and personal motivation. For example, gender is related to career progression and success (Whitmarsh & Wentworth, 2012), which in turn impacts the need for community engagement at different levels, such as in civic organizations designed for corporate networking and the subsequent long-term experience of civic involvement. If individuals have a professional habit of engaging in the community, their likelihood to continue being involved may increase.

Women adult learners, however, also approach their learning differently, relying on different perspectives about emotions, internalization, learned behaviors, expected community or self-identified roles, and even their expectations for what kinds of further learning or engagement is appropriate for them (Hayes & Flannery, 2000). While adult learning strategies for men and women may be different for community normed behavior (Menedez, Wagner, Yales, & Walcott, 2012), their approach to seeking out learning opportunities can also differ, strengthening the need for the current study to see how they approach SDL differently.

The current study provides a practical application of SDL as a tool for individual growth and as a tool for individuals to demonstrate behaviors that can impact others, both through personal demonstration and through building community expectations for personal responsibility. This notion of community expectation is an emerging social science theory (Derden, 2011; Deggs & Miller, 2012) that contends that indi-

vidual actions have an impact on surrounding individuals. By displaying individual activities and behaviors and values, such as an interest in self-promotion or individual learning, others may see, judge, and react to this observation and, over time, individuals can learn to accept and challenge themselves based on others actions and values. This observation is particularly relevant to adolescents as their identity is formed (Miller & Deggs, 2012), and through seeing others value education or healthy behaviors, individuals can subconsciously challenge themselves or demonstrate changed identity based on what they observe around them. Self-directed learning activities that take place in more public forums subsequently have the ability to provide a powerful impact on the expectations conveyed to individuals in a given community.

Research Methods

Based on characteristics presented by Deggs and Miller (2012) and Miller and Deggs (2012) , and the literature on self-directed learning (including the International Society for Self-Directed Learning, 2012) a 36-item, researcher-developed survey was constructed and field tested. The instrument was modified for clarity and reliability, and administered during the late summer of 2012 to six different community organizations in a mid-southern community of approximately 75,000 people.

The combined membership of the six community organizations was approximately 400; although the leaders of the various organizations suggested that to some extent membership was considered “fluid;” meaning that some of the organizations had a membership of people who attended meetings while at least three organizations maintained specific membership rosters. The population estimation of 400, however, was used to help determine a target response rate. Surveys were distributed in-person and completed in a pencil-and-paper format, and 165 usable responses were returned (a 41.25% response rate; although an additional 14 surveys were returned but were determined to be non-usable because of substantial missing data).

The first section of the survey included seven questions about the individual’s organization, the second section included 24 self-directed learning activities, and the final section included self-reported demographic data. The first and third sections requested categorical data responses, and the second section asked participants “to what extent do you use the following to learn the skills or knowledge necessary for you in your area of interest/hobby?” The focus, thus, was not on how a par-

ticipant learned about the organization, but on how they chose to learn about the topic (field of interest). Respondents were asked to use a 1-to-5 Likert-type scale, with 1= I did not do this, progressing to 5=I did this a great deal.

The community organizations that participated in the survey were selected primarily based on availability, resulting in a convenience sample. This type of sampling is typical for exploratory research.

Findings

Of the survey respondents, approximately half were female, and half were between the ages of 50 and 70 (both $n=87$; 52.7%; see Table 1). Consistent with the community's profile, the majority of respondents were Caucasian/White ($n=136$; 82.4%), and few of the respondents indicated that they were very involved in the community ($n=15$; 9.1%). The majority of respondents reported that they were somewhat involved in community activities ($n=101$; 61.3%). Just over one-quarter of the respondents also indicated that they had held a leadership position in a community organization ($n=46$; 27.9%).

As a group, respondents indicated moderate levels of agreement that they used four different self-directed learning strategies: purchasing specialized equipment (mean 3.92), visiting or studying websites (mean 3.82), subscribing to a magazine (mean 3.59), and purchasing books to read (mean 3.55). Conversely, as a group, respondents had low levels of agreement about their use of three different strategies: subscribing to a list-serv (mean 2.0), participating in national conferences (mean 1.97), and taking a class for credit (mean 1.55).

When data were separated for males and females, the order of items differed but there were few differences in how the mean ratings compared. While most used self-directed learning strategies, females rated the purchase of specialized equipment (mean 4.11), purchasing books to read (mean 3.80), and visiting websites (mean 3.87) as their most commonly used strategies. As shown in Table 2, men had the same order of mean scores with the exception of watching online videos (mean 3.38) as their fourth most agreed upon strategy. Similarly, the least agreed upon strategies were identified as participating in national conferences (men mean 1.88; female mean 2.05) and taking a class for credit (men mean 1.88; female mean 2.05), but the women's mean for purchasing an educational video (mean 2.17) was lower than the men's third lowest rated strategy of subscribing to a list-serv (mean 1.88).

Table 1.
 Characteristics of Survey Respondents

	N	Percentage
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	78.0	47.3
Female	87.0	52.7
<i>Age Range</i>		
Under 40	7.0	4.2
40-55	38.0	23.0
56-70	87.0	52.7
Over 70	33.02	20.0
<i>Racial Self-Described Identity</i>		
African American/Black	19.0	11.5
Asian/Pacific Islander	0.0	0.0
Caucasian/White	136.0	82.4
Multi-Ethnic/Other	2.0	1.2
Did not answer	8.0	4.8
<i>Community Involvement Level</i>		
Very involved	15.0	9.1
Somewhat involved	101.0	61.3
Not involved	49.0	29.7
<i>Held Leadership Position in Community Organization</i>		
Yes	46.0	27.9
No	119.0	72.1

Using an ANOVA to test for differences between the two sets of mean scores, three significant differences were identified. First, women were significantly more likely to purchase specialized equipment than men as a self-directed learning practice (sig. .024); and similarly, women were significantly more likely to participate in a formal workshop or seminar (sig. .006), and women were significantly more likely to subscribe to a list serv elsewhere to learn about their interest (sig. .002).

Table 2.
Self-Directed Learning Practices Among Community Member Respondents

	Gender Mean			Overall Sig.
	M	F	Mean	
Purchased specialized equipment	3.69	4.11	3.92	.024*
Visited/studied websites	3.76	3.87	3.82	.593
Subscribed to a magazine	3.44	3.72	3.59	.237
Purchased books to read	3.27	3.80	3.55	.007
Watched online videos	3.38	3.59	3.49	.348
Attended public lectures	3.15	3.49	3.33	.109
Interviewed others in interest area	3.12	3.29	3.21	.423
Participated in a formal seminar	2.90	3.48	3.21	.006*
Read online blog posts	3.18	3.09	3.13	.699
Watched related television program	3.05	3.20	3.13	.530
Subscribed to a newsletter	2.90	3.18	3.05	.255
Participated- informal group meetings	2.79	3.16	2.99	.064
Read books from the library	2.40	3.29	2.87	.000
Participated- formal group meetings	2.76	2.80	2.78	.839
Participated in a local conference	2.49	2.83	2.67	.139
Read newspaper articles	2.44	2.78	2.62	.113
Use social media	2.33	2.76	2.56	.063
Read online newspapers	2.13	2.21	2.17	.718
Purchased educational video	2.09	2.17	2.13	.677
Subscribed to a listserv	1.63	2.33	2.00	.002*
Participated- national conference	1.88	2.05	1.97	.419
Took a class for credit	1.53	1.57	0.55	.782

Conclusions and Discussion

How individuals perceive themselves, their strengths, and their personal needs can greatly determine not only how they interact with others, but how they go about caring for and valuing their own identity. The current study worked from the assumption that men and women have different perspectives of themselves and how they go about learning. Study findings moderately reinforced the idea that there are gender differences in engaging in self-directed learning. In all but one SDL

practice, women reported a higher level of use with the SDL practices identified in the study. This could mean that women are more likely to be engaged in a wider variety of SDL practices or it could mean that women are more conscious of how they go about directing their own learning.

Findings from the study suggest that women use selected resources and practices more often than men to augment their learning, but that men and women were similar in the types of resources they chose. Both indicated that they have purchased specialized equipment to further their learning, an example of which might be computer software to learn about money management or how-to guides about any number of topics (sewing, knitting, bee-hive keeping, etc.). Both genders also reported reading books and both reported searching the Internet for current information specific to their hobby or interest, suggesting that both men and women have similar kinds of reliance on technology and written information. This also suggests that some conventional thinking that women are more apprehensive of technology may not be accurate.

Findings also reveal something about understanding adult women beliefs regarding what it takes to learn a skill or further their understanding of some element of interest. The study hints at women being more exhaustive and comprehensive in their use of data sources, and this may suggest that women learners want to consult as many options as possible, reviewing multiple approaches before making a decision. Or findings could be a reflection of the historical context of the women in the study, drawing on perhaps fewer professional experiences and subsequently making an effort to explore multiple options prior to committing to a particular strategy.

Also interesting is that women, thought by many to favor association and connectedness with others as part of their learning, reported only moderate use of online blog posts, participation in informal or formal group discussions, use of social media, and subscription to a listserv. Perhaps this is due to the nature of the activity in which they are involved, and the assumed need for interaction with others in their learning accomplished simply by being part of the community organization. This may be true of men as well, who have similar ratings for the use of some of these same resources. If individuals become a member of an organization to learn more about their interest or hobby, or their involvement becomes a strategy for learning, then men could be more collaborative in their learning than previously thought. In actuality, it seems probable that joining a group is motivated by a need for interaction with like-minded others, and that learning is a byproduct of involvement.

From the perspective of education providers, these findings help narrow the target population for community education programs. Women were more likely to participate in informal group discussions and meetings, and these types of programs offered through community education offices and other education providers may well find that they can both profit and serve their communities more effectively by targeting women.

From a sociological perspective, the findings suggest that more attention needs to be focused on how men are learning. One viewpoint may be that men are more engaged in formal learning programs and that when they want to learn about their hobbies or personal interests, be it wine or bicycling, they may be more likely to participate in formal classes that result in certificates or other forms of credentialing. Conversely, men may be less inquisitive, an argument advanced by Sax (2009) for younger generations of men.

For the study of self-directed learning, this research begins a conversation about documenting the practices in which individuals engage. By utilizing the literature to create an inventory of SDL practices, an initial effort was launched to understand how individuals construct their own knowledge.

This study focused on learning that occurs as an element of participation in a community organization, and as such, in a natural or informal environment. The findings from the study serve to advise educators about adult learning taking place in formal settings as well. For example, practitioners who use self-directed learning as a tool in formal and non-formal environments, such as higher education or training programs in the workplace, should pay close attention to how individuals approach learning, be they women or men, and suggest strategies that enhance SDL such as how to identify and consult numerous resources to help students conduct a thorough search for information.

In any learning situation, facilitators need to examine their own assumptions about the generalizations made regarding gender and learning, and experiment with the use of a variety of instructional strategies that speak to the strengths they observe in their learners. When using SDL as a tool, instructors should also engage the learner in a conversation about the way they believe they learn best, and then assist learners by exposing them to various ways they can approach a learning project. During this process, generalizations about the differences between men and women and their learning can be explored and addressed.

Overall, the study of self-directed learning has evolved from highly technical descriptions to application in a wide variety of settings. As the

understanding of SDL has grown, its application to larger societal issues becomes critical. The broad use of self-directedness in everyday life as a reflection of ownership or responsibility is a significant topic in need of further practical and conceptual understanding.

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