

Self-Directed Learning and Self-Regulated Learning: What's the Difference? A Literature Analysis

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Abstract: Self-directed learning (SDL) is widely associated with adult learning but is occasionally misunderstood. As a result, the term self-regulated learning (SRL) has been used interchangeably with SDL in literature. Based on a content analysis, this paper explores the difference between techniques of SDL and SRL and provides a basic interpretation of the results found in foundational literature in both areas. This paper outlines the definitions used for understanding the theories, a discussion of the connections between SDL and SRL, and implications for practice and future research.

Keywords: self-directed learning, self-regulated learning, learning strategies

Self-directed learning (SDL) and self-regulated learning (SRL) are similar in numerous ways, but it is imperative to acknowledge the divide between the two learning concepts. Some scholars argue that the difference lies in influential strength; as SRL exhibits strengths in “cognitive and motivational features of learning, while the strength of SDL is its external control features” (Pilling-Cormick & Garrison, 2007, p. 29). Other scholars argue that the link between the two is less clearly defined and cite usage of the terms interchangeably (Saks & Leijen, 2014). This ambiguity leads to confusion among scholars and practitioners, which in turn leads to improper instruction and transmission to students (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991).

Educating adults in a way that promotes autonomous learning is a growing need in a fast-paced world. By establishing clear differences between adult learning techniques, educators and learners alike are better equipped to manage learning challenges at any level. There is a lack of understanding in the difference between self-directed learning (SDL) and self-regulated learning (SRL). Though both theories have been found as important learning processes for achieving learning goals, there is little evidence to identify how the two directly compare. This paper will have three sections. First, I will offer a brief introduction on self-directed learning and self-regulated learning. Second, I will discuss how the components are different, while also highlighting some similarities. Finally, I will conclude with implications for practice and future research.

Literature Review

This argument is largely situated on a direct understanding of the terms. Therefore, it is important to clarify the definitions I will be using for discussion. The following definitions guided my analysis of the literature. This section also provides some of the foundational literature that guided my understanding of the concepts, giving context to the definitions. By considering how the terms were used, and to what learning instances the terms referred, I was able to focus the terms into a story that provided substantial information on the similarities and differences.

Foundational Text of SDL

The following two definitions from Brockett and Hiemstra (1991) provided the guide for analysis of literature regarding SDL. I believed it was important to understand self-directedness first, to best understand SDL.

Self-directedness. Self-directedness, or learner self-direction, refers to an individual's internal learning and growth process as well as the external influences experienced through instruction (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991).

Self-directed learning. Self-directed learning is defined as both a process of learning in which the individual establishes elements of control over their own learning, and characteristics of learners including self-efficacy and motivation (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991; Hiemstra & Brockett, 2012; Ruttencutter, 2018; Stockdale, 2003).

SDL “refers to both the external characteristics of an instructional process and the internal characteristics of a learner, where the individual assumes primary responsibility for a learning experience” (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991, p. 24). It is a process in which the learner plans, implements, and evaluates personal learning (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991). Internal characteristics may include self-discipline, love of reading, and curiosity (Guglielmino, 2013; Tredoux, 2012). The successful ability to set learning objectives, create a learning plan, and develop motivational techniques as needed for individuals high in SDL capacity (du Toit-Brits & van Zyl, 2017)

Foundational Text on SRL

The definitions I used from Baumeister and Vohs (2007) allowed a clarity of self-regulation and SRL. As was the case with SDL, I believed understanding the theory of self-regulation needed to predicate the analysis of SRL as a learning approach.

Self-regulation. Self-regulation is a mental state and process in which individuals focus on goal attainment, including control over feelings and thoughts, and being proactive and reflective about self-monitoring (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007; Peterson, 2006; Zimmerman, 2000).

Self-regulated learning. SRL is a process of learning that is self-directed in nature, employing tenants of forethought, monitoring, control, and reaction in a learning transaction (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007; Panadero, 2017; Pintrich, 2000).

Self-regulation theory consists of four basic components: Determine a standard, monitoring, willpower, and motivation (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007). SRL indicates a presence of “personal initiative, perseverance, and adoptive skill” (Zimmerman, 2011, p. 70). It is a multi-dimensional consideration of where, why, and how some learners employ self-regulation in their learning experiences, while others do not (Zimmerman, 2011).

Discussion

Following the delineation of each approach to learning, the comparison began. Through somewhat murky investigation, the definitions proved to be connected but not identical. This section provides an examination of the two concepts in relation to each other in learning contexts. Many of the texts specifically stated a connection between the two terms, ultimately leading to the conclusion that the constructs were, in fact, separate.

Perhaps one of the most concrete examples of distinction comes from a prominent scholar of social cognitive theory. According to Bandura (1986) “self-directedness is exercised by wielding influence over the external environment as well as enlisting self-regulatory functions” (p. 21). This statement illustrates the collaboration between SDL and SRL to function within a fluid learning environment. These are two different areas in which a learner exerts control and to create an effective learning arena to reach a singular goal for educational purposes. The predetermined standard requires the initiation of specific and individualistic plans based on topic, tools, and study environment, additionally influenced personal characteristics and tendencies of social context.

Self-direction in self-regulated learning is often inspired by a flexible view of intelligence, as this belief provides the learner a sense of self-efficacy when adapting learning processes (Dweck & Master, 2008; Hidi & Ainley, 2008; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2011). What is unique about this specific approach is the view of intelligence, suggesting that the learner can manipulate one’s perception of intelligence to meet the determined standard. Whether the individual knows what they need to know, still has more to learn, or somewhere in between, the experience can prove fruitful in accomplishment of the result. Self-efficacy exists in the learner’s personal approach to meeting the goal, from plan development, start to finish, and beyond.

Conclusion

In summation, the most substantial difference found from this literature analysis is that many scholars have found SDL to be a control over the external learning environment, with the focus of SRL to be internal. Drawing strongly from the roots of social cognitive theory, again the central distinction of SRL is the focus of behavioral control. Considering the difference has been outlined in texts for decades (see Bandura, 1986), the ambiguity in the field suggests that more clarity is needed in the definitions of the two terms. This leads to the implication of more research directly comparing SDL and SRL in various formal and non-formal learning situations. One such example would be the analysis of an individual’s learning experience in a home improvement project compared with an educational endeavor such as returning to school.

My intention of this piece is to encourage more deliberate use of the correct terms, and the utilization of techniques of both SDL and SRL in the realm of adult education. Incorporation of such techniques into adult education makes sense, as SRL can be indicative of academic performance. SRL exists differently among different levels of education (Panadero, 2017). Likewise, all learners have different levels of SDL (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991). As educational experience increases, the need for metacognitive strategies becomes more necessary. However, according to Moos and Ringdal (2012), higher education instructors tend to focus more on

course content than learning opportunity for SRL. As SRL skills and strategies improve over time with practice and reflection, adult educators can inspire learners to use such techniques to promote a more successful and positive learning experience (Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 2005).

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