



Transforming students into self-directed, independent adult learners by Angela Carbone

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Many tutors and lecturers admired the 'self-directed, independent learner', according to an investigation of programming education at Monash University, in 1995. The way to make a student self-directed, ie able to work alone without direction or supervision, was to remove support structures, make them 'sink or swim'. But creating self-directed, independent learners takes greater initial input rather than less. It must be well directed informed assistance. The following four strategies have been employed in the tertiary setting, to provide people with the capacity to make decisions, reflect, manage and extend their learning beyond the classroom, into everyday life

Social capital: a network of support structures

Social capital is recognised in adult and community education circles (see earlier commentaries). It requires building of trust between business, government and community. In the classroom, many educators including myself, have applied culture changing tools, such as the Reciprocal Feedback System (RFS), that follow adult learning principles, learning theory and group theory to create a collaborative learning culture.

The idea of RFS is to develop a culture that will minimise fear in students to communicate effectively with academics and build respect and trust amongst themselves. The role of trust is important in the first steps towards learning and building a collaborative learning culture. It focuses on what the lecturer can do to improve their own teaching and student learning. The RFS is applied at strategic points throughout the series of lectures to gather student feedback, which enables the lecturer to assess the students' needs, understanding and satisfaction. The lecturer reflects on how to make use of the information, so as to build social capital and foster the development of a collaborative learning culture. Key issues are communicated to the students during a "Backchat" session. The lecturer takes five minutes to create a 'moment of truth' for the group, and when skilfully delivered, the Backchat builds trust and respect and opens the whole group up to learning. Successively students adopt more collaborative behaviours towards each other and the lecturer. The students form and extend networks.

Access to resources and technology

An earlier commentary suggested that society's trend is towards informal learning. Students want flexibility of time, place, entry points and exit points. Access to resources and technology allows for this, yet requires greater initial input for setting up online interactive packages, threaded discussion groups, electronically

available notes, computer aided dynamic assessment. The Internet carries these learning opportunities straight into the home. The Federal Government also has a role to play in sponsoring the development of sophisticated software, and resourcing of municipal libraries, post offices, schools and other public buildings to create a national grid of Internet access points.

A conducive learning environment

Studies show that students have a stronger motivation to learn in environments where they feel at ease. They can turn positive attitudes to learning into practical results. It helps them to build the confidence to pursue further studies. This year, the School of Information Management and Systems, at Monash University piloted studio-based teaching and learning in its first year in the Bachelor of Information Management and Systems. It aspires to be an international benchmark for best practice. The studio required a radical re-thinking of elements of the teaching program, including: layout and design of the physical laboratory, tutorial rooms and facilities; content and method; and the Web-based and multimedia teaching tools employed to develop virtual communities. The studio aims to place the students in the centre of the learning process and to facilitate a collaborative/co-operative model of learning. It provides a holistic, integrating, practical counterpoint – simulating the workplace, and preparing students for practice as employees, team members, contractors, or self-employed professionals. The environment encourages learning by doing. By selecting items for their portfolios, students can demonstrate themselves as self-directed, independent learners.

Appropriate learning activities

Many tasks are designed with the best intentions, yet can cause above average students to adopt poor learning approaches. An investigation by Baird and Northfield, in 1995 into student processing habits began to develop guiding principles for designing programming tasks to enhance self-direction and independence. Baird identified a series of processing habits that he called Poor Learning Tendencies (PLTs), characterised by a passive, dependent, uniform approach to learning. Some processing habits act as barriers to achieving quality learning. The design of tasks can gear students in different learning directions. It is important to think of how to frame tasks to provide self-direction for students so they can focus on the right concept, and adopt good learning patterns.