Chapter 1

Introduction

A mind is not a vessel to be filled, but a lamp to be lighted........... Plutarch

Out of many answers to the question “what is a life?”, one will be, life is a journey, from cradle to grave. During this long journey, what is common in all the human beings is learning. From his/her birth only, a person starts learning and continues to do so until he lands in grave. In this way, learning has always been a life-long cognitive process of acquiring skill or knowledge. In the words of Cameron and Fincher

“In its broadest sense, learning can be defined as a process of progressive change from ignorance to knowledge, from inability to competence, and from indifference to understanding. In much the same manner, instruction or education can be defined as the means by which we systematize the situations, conditions, tasks materials and opportunities by which learners acquire new or different ways of thinking, feeling and doing.” ¹

Other definitions of learning are also available. According to which, learning is:

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1. one of the most important mental functions of humans, animals and artificial cognitive systems. It relies on the acquisition of different types of knowledge supported by perceived information.  

2. the process by which experience brings about a relatively permanent change in behaviour.  

3. the process of acquiring knowledge, attitudes, or skills from study, instruction, or experience.  

4. is an increase in the capability for effective action. Individual, team, and organizational learning can all be measured by the outcomes that result from effective action.  

5. is a process by which individuals can claim and gain credit towards qualifications based on their prior learning and, sometimes, experience.  

All the above definitions claim certain common things ie learning as a cognitive process through which capacity, knowledge or skills increase and the same brings about permanent change in the behaviour of a learner. The purpose of learning, as it is generally assumed, is to incorporate new information or skills into the learner's existing knowledge structure and to make that knowledge accessible. Learning, actually, begins with some motivation, and an intention to learn. The learner must then concentrate attention on the important aspects of what
is to be learned. While those important aspects are being identified, the learner accesses the prior knowledge that already exists in memory because a key to learning is connecting what is known to and what is being learned.

Unlike the past, when the situation sufficed the traditional system of education, we live and work today in a changing world. Newer ways of looking at various phenomenons are tested or adopted are leading to new areas being explored. New ideas and approaches emerge. New problems arise and new solutions are sought. The world is, therefore, a constantly moving and evolving one. What this means, then, is that, if we are not constantly learning as we go about our day-to-day business, then each day we are getting further and further out of touch with the demands of the modern world.

It can be dangerous to get into a stereotypical routine whereby we continue to carry out our duties and learn in much the same way as we have done in the past. Expectations change over time and, if we do not adapt to the new circumstances, then we would steadily be more out of tune with what is required of us.
There is hardly any doubt that learning has a history as long as human civilization. From the stage of being a primitive, mankind has today soared newer heights that were once even beyond their imagination just a few years ago. The process has neither stopped nor is it going to stop even at this point of time, as it has become a part of human nature.

Learning has many forms. Various experiences in one’s life lead one to learning. In short, whether one would like it or not, one cannot abstain oneself from learning new things until such time as one is alive. Only death can put a full stop to all this.

The learning that a person acquires in his/her routine life is different from that of academic learning. Learning in day-to-day life is usually informal and does not earn any certification in return, except words of praise for one’s actions by one’s elders. Contrary to this is the formal learning, on which depend a lot of things in a person’s life. Learning in an academic setting helps a person to get recognition in his/her life. He/She acquires a good job, can make money, obtain a status in the society consequently, and end up learning a lot about himself/herself. Formal learning of this kind today has come to be recognised as important in this fast moving global world.
21st century holds out the promise of being a century of knowledge, with the exploration of knowledge and information that is available to us today and that continues to be generated at a feverish pitch day in and day out. Advanced technology and fast growing world has opened up many new vistas of knowledge. Learning in an academic setting cannot give us knowledge of everything that is required and a person cannot afford to sit content only with learning a few things during his/her educational career. It is almost impossible for educationists to include everything that is necessary in the syllabi. Even the latest syllabus on any given topic in a given area of specialisation is insufficient to teach everything that is required of a person in that field.

Moreover, the construction of syllabus has many other constraints. Topics are included keeping in mind its relative importance, the time allotted for that topic and subject. The teacher, while dealing with the syllabus, is faced with practical problems like heterogeneous group and its strength; the time constraint within which s/he is expected to complete the syllabus; and the pressure to show good results. All these force him/her to take an exam oriented approach gifted to us by the British. In this way, it is almost impossible for a good learner to learn everything that he/she desires and deserves.
In spite of doing all this, no matter how hard a teacher tries, he/she can never teach a student everything that he/she is expected to learn. The situation seems to be getting fairly chaotic in view of the ever-increasing number of students seeking entry into institutions of higher learning in India. Self-learning or self-directed learning, as it is now called, offers a ray of hope out of this chaos, and so does self-assessment as its counterpart. However, it cannot be entirely left to the learner to self-assess but match it with peer assessment and teacher assessment to arrive at a final grading on that assessment.

**Self-Learning or Self-Directed Learning (SDL)**

Self-learning or self-directed learning has been a part of the history of teaching-learning process for centuries and was rediscovered in the end of third or beginning of the fourth quarter in the 20th century. If we examine the tradition of learning in ancient India, we would not fail to find that Eklavya learnt archery without help from anyone, except the symbolic presence of his Guru, as an Idol, that he kept in front of him because, as a person belonging to a *varna* that was not allowed the luxury of learning, he had not been taken by any Guru for tutelage. Even so, he mastered archery so well that he could even outclass his ‘gurubhai’ Arjuna in an archery competition. Eklavya belonged to the
age when there was no help from anyone or anything. What he had was his determination and self-confidence.

Contrary to this, if we just throw a cursory glance at world today, we would find that there are a plethora of new things available for self-learning including “Do-It-Yourself” manuals. Moreover, in the progressive world in which we live, the role of teacher has also changed. A teacher has more become a facilitator, a torchbearer, who is there to point the learners in a direction and empower them to take responsibility for their own learning, intervening but only to clear doubts. It is also not possible for a person to attend schools and colleges all the time to learn new things. Keeping this in mind, educationists have come forward with new techniques that can be help a person to enlighten himself/herself so as to move in pace with the fast-moving world. This new method is termed as Self-Directed Learning.

Though, about four decades old as a concept with its beginnings in the 1970s, it is now new as has been shown earlier in this chapter, the idea of self-direction has existed from classical antiquity to the present under the guise of numerous names. One of the main practitioner and firm believer in self-
directed learning Leslie Dickinson asserts that all language teachers should take on the responsibility of helping students to learn how to learn. The ideal outcome of the process of learning how to learn is greater learning autonomy, and self-access learning is an excellent way of developing one's autonomy. Having embarked on the idea of self-access learning in 1970s, he got the firm support for his theory on his visit to the language-learning centre at C.R.A.P.E.L. in the University of Nancy II set up by Phil Riley and colleagues. In fact, Brockett and Hiemstra in their book *Self-Direction in Adult Learning: Perspectives on Theory, Research, and Practice*\(^7\) includes the opinion of Kulich who pointed that prior to the widespread development of school; self-education was the primary way for individuals to deal with developments taking place around them. For example, self-study played an important part in the lives of such Greek philosophers such as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Socrates portrayed himself as a self-learner who capitalized on opportunities to learn from those around him. Plato believed that the ultimate goal of education for the young should be the development of an ability to function as a self-learner in adulthood. His disciple Aristotle too emphasized the importance of self-realization, a potential wisdom that can be developed either with or without the guidance of a teacher.
Other historical examples of self-directed learners included Alexander the Great, Caesar, Erasmus and Descartes. Recent history, too, is witness of many successful stories of learners who did not flourish in a traditional setting with standard measurements of success. These individuals blossomed on their own, carving a niche for themselves. Self-learners are equally honoured among our greatest leaders. Thomas Edison, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Abigail Adams, Benjamin Franklin, the Wright Brothers, Helen Keller, Albert Einstein and Margaret Mead are only a few of those who learnt without formal schooling. Newspapers are filled with stories of lesser-known successes.

As the term suggests, Self-Directed Learning views learners as responsible owners and managers of their own learning process. Self-Directed Learning integrates self-management (management of the context, including the social setting, resources and actions) with self-monitoring (the process whereby the learners monitor, evaluate and regulate their cognitive learning strategies). Self-Directed Learning controls gradually shifts from the teacher to the learner. Learners exercise a great deal of independence in setting learning goals and deciding what learning is worthwhile for them as well as how to approach the learning task within a given framework.
The term self-directed learning is an instructional process centring on such activities as assessing needs, securing learning resources, implementing learning activities, and evaluating learning. Hiemstra and Sisco, 1990\textsuperscript{8} refer to this as individualizing instruction, a process focusing on characteristics of the teaching-learning transaction itself.

In traditional education, teachers interact directly with their students. They prepare their own lecture notes, support materials and tests, and are autonomous within their classroom. In contrast, distance-learning teachers are not in direct classroom contact with their students.

The self-directed learning situation occurs when learners – not the institution – control both the learning objectives and the means of learning. Learning, according to Mocker and Spear (1982)\textsuperscript{9}, can be divided into three groups in main:

1. Formal learning, in which institutions, not learners, control objectives and the means of learning;
2. Non-formal learning, in which learners control the objectives and institutions control the means; and
3. Informal learning, in which there may be minimal institutional control of the objectives and the learners control the means of learning.

Thus, whether or not learning is self-directed depends not on the subject matter to be learnt or on the instructional methods used, but on who is in charge, who decides what should be learnt, who should learn it, what methods and resources should be used, and how the success of the effort should be measured. To the extent, the learner makes those decisions, the learning is generally considered to be self-directed. Herein comes the role of the learners in Self-directed learning.

Some self-directed learning takes place in comparative isolation in secluded libraries. Other self-directed learners engage in more interpersonal communication (with experts and peers, for instance) than is typically available in conventional classroom education.

The resources available to self-directed learners include printed and audio-visual materials; experts interviewed by letter, telephone, or in
In a way, every human being in one way or the other tries to master or at least to learn something new. It can be observed in the world that many self-directed learners are attempting to gain new skills, knowledge, and attitudes to improve their work performance. Others conduct their self-directed learning to improve family life and health, enjoy the arts and physical recreation, participate in a hobby, or simply increase their intellectual capital.

What we know about self-directed in learning to date:

(a) Individual learners can become empowered to take increasingly more responsibility for various decisions associated with the learning endeavour. Since they are responsible owners and managers of their own learning process, they not only need to self-manage the context, including the social setting, resources and actions but also to self-monitor, evaluate, and regular their cognitive learning strategies.
(b) Self-direction is best viewed as a continuum or characteristic that exists to some degree in every person and learning situation, and recognizes the significant role of motivation and volition in initiating and maintaining learners’ efforts. Motivation drives the decision to participate and volition sustains the will to see a task through to the end so that goals are achieved (Corno, 1992\textsuperscript{10}; Garrison, 1997\textsuperscript{11})

(c) Self-direction does not necessarily mean all learning will take place in isolation from others, but there is of control gradually from teachers to learners, with learners exercising a great deal of independence in setting learning goals and deciding what is worthwhile learning as well as how to approach the learning task within a given framework (Lyman, 1997\textsuperscript{12}; Morrow, Sharkey & Firestone, 1993\textsuperscript{13})

Many qualities characterise Self-directed learning and a learner using it with a clear understanding of its implications. It is a life style of learning. In fact, it is a lifelong or on-going process. It is not time bound. Unlike traditional education, it has nothing to do with memorisation of facts a la Bitzer or Sissy Jupe led by M Choakumchild in the Dickensian world portrayed in Hard Times. It originates out of
desire and passion. Self-directed learning connects itself with the previous experiences. A self directed learner takes the responsibility and manages things on his/her own. He/she needs to take time out to reflect upon and monitor his own learning. However, to have all these merits, a self directed leaner also need have the capacity to assess himself ie make a self assessment as it is a prerequisite to successful self-directed learning.

Awareness of one's strengths and weaknesses is the critical antecedent to human need fulfillment and therefore to adjustment. In the process of identification and implementation of learning activities, it becomes obviously imperative to identify the goal or purpose of a learning effort (based on a need or weakness) and the resources immediately available (strengths) to reach that end. While there are many obstacles that hamper completing this task, such as psychological defense mechanisms, an established self-concept, the level of motivation necessary to pursue such an exercise, etc, a sincere effort cannot be undertaken without first addressing the issue of assessment. Therefore, the need for self-assessment stands out as the first action to be taken, and perhaps the most crucial, insofar as it establishes not only the desired outcome, but also the nature of the means by which it will be realized.
Self-assessment

Self-assessment is a process by which a self-directed learner learns more about himself/herself. Knowing himself/herself would help him/her to decide which occupation and work could be a better fit for him/her.

There are various definitions of self-assessment found in the literature like, for instance,

"The stated differences between the "is" and the "should be."
Miller and Verduin's (1979, p. 42)\textsuperscript{14}

and/or

Educationally as "something people ought to learn for their own good, for the good of an organization, or for the good of society." Knowles (1980, p. 88)\textsuperscript{15}

The definition of assessment is a gap between present performance and expected performance in his/her own occupation. Self-assessment is a form of diagnostic assessment, which involves students assessing themselves. Self-assessment in an educational setting involves students making judgments about their own work. Assessment decisions are taken by students on their own with regard to their essays, reports, projects, presentations, performances, dissertations and even exam scripts. Self-assessment can be extremely valuable in helping students to evaluate their own work, and form judgments about their
strengths and weaknesses, provided they are trained to do it themselves in a scientific way.

Thus, self-assessment is the process of identification. It can be formal or informal, by the learner himself/herself or by other people. When a learner assesses his/her personal needs, it is done from within the self, and is known an internal assessment. Assessment by others is known an external assessment. An internal assessment needs privacy and self-honesty. The learner may use a variety of means for this assessment like talking with himself/herself, using a questionnaire, communicating with teammates, or analysing or discussing something learnt from another learning activity or another person.

Thus, self assessment helps to examine ourselves objectively in respect to our strengths and weaknesses as a means of gaining self acceptance, capitalizing on our assets, and setting personal goals.

The present work aims to study the scope of self-directed learning and self assessment in the present scenario, factors affecting its efficacy and possible solutions to overcome the same by providing certain strategic measures.
End Notes:


2. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Learning


4. www.mountainquestinstitute.com/definitions.htm

5. www.yorksj.ac.uk/administration/registry/local/ascs/qahandbook/qaf/qaf1.doc


14. ibid