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Self-Directed Learning

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Introduction

Although self-directed learning is one of the concepts that has captured the attention of researchers and authors in adult education for a long time, there is still considerable theoretical and methodological confusion about it. Viewed as one of the main concepts in adult learning and/or the most typical form of adult learning, it has been the subject of inquiries on its nature, processes and characteristics, with many attempts at theory building and considerations of similar concepts in adult education and learning. There are a number of terms that are used by writers and researchers. Tough (1971) quoted 17 authors who use 12 different terms, while Hiemstra (1994) compared six main competing terms. The most used terms include: self-directed learning, self-education (used mostly by scholars from Russia and other Slavic language areas), self-organized learning, self-planned learning, self-teaching, learning projects, autonomous learning, autodidaxy, independent study, open learning and so on.

In earlier periods it was recognized, but neglected as a phenomenon not relevant from a scientific point of view, until interest in it ‘exploded’ and it became almost a kind of ‘fashion’ in adult education research. Nowadays, a new interest in this phenomenon has emerged and new research issues have arisen, including the need for modern, adequate, fresh conceptualization, combined with continuous attempts at theory building.

Kulich in 1970 (Brockett and Hiemstra, 1991) and Brockett and Hiemstra (1991) showed that self-directed learning has a long history, and illustrated it with examples of famous personalities as self-directed learners, from classical Greece, Rome, renaissance Europe and colonial America. On the other hand, self-directed learning among ‘common people’ in different historical periods has not been explored so much. Tröhler described several such examples in the context of informal learning in the middle ages (Tröhler, 2005). Early studies of self-directed learning go back to the nineteenth century, with Craik’s description (1840) of several self-learners, and Smiles’s book Self-help in 1859. Modern research started in 1961 with O’Houle: who described three groups of adult learners, divided according to their motivation to participate, and it is the third group – those motivated by the learning process itself – that could be characterized as self-directed learners.

Systematic approaches to self-directed learning were developed by Knowles (1975) and Tough (1971). In his book, Self-directed Learning, Knowles (1975) compared attributes of teacher-directed and self-directed learning (such as: the role of the learner’s experience, a subject-centred orientation of the learner vs a
problem-centred one, external vs internal incentives, etc.), also offering a kind of working guide, i.e. a set of learning resource exercises with recommendations in the form of steps for self-guided enquiry. This book presents the concept of self-directed learning as an essential component of the maturing process, highlighting the capacity and need to be self-directed as almost typical for adult learners, even if they are not well prepared for this type of learning.

A ‘classical’ study, which also offered a conceptual framework for self-directed learning, was carried out by Tough. He proved that a great deal of adult learning happens independently, outside institutions of formal education and in the form of learning projects. Some of the learning projects are aimed at an increase in new knowledge, insight or understanding; others at changes in attitudes, habits and emotional reactions. Adults undertake several learning projects a year (around 700 hours a year – 100 per project), although they are not always aware of them. Tough further defined the learning project as a series of shorter, connected episodes lasting not less than seven hours, where more than half of a person’s motivation is to gain and retain knowledge and skills for a minimum of two days. These episodes can happen in a variety of settings, e.g. in the library, classroom, kitchen, hotel or train, and the person might learn with a teacher, in a group or completely alone. Tough explained the complete phenomenon of adult learning using the ‘iceberg’ metaphor – the visible, smaller part happens within the organized forms of learning and education (such as courses and seminars), but some 80% is not visible and consists of learning planned, organized and guided by the person him/herself.

For further development of research in the theory and practice of self-directed learning an annual International Symposium on self-directed learning was established in 1987 by Long, playing an important role for many years.

Different models for empirical research on self-directed learning were developed over that time. They have been driven by various perspectives, and they have all looked at how to capture such complex phenomena through the means and methods of research models (Guglielmino – Self-directed Readiness Scale in 1978; Spear’s model, 1988; Cavaliere, 1992; Garrison, 1997; Conceptual PRO – Personal Responsibility Orientation model developed in 1991 by Brockett and Hiemstra).

Brookfield’s criticism (1986) of earlier research was related to the approach whereby many phenomena in adult education and learning are over-identified with self-directed learning, without an adequate theoretical base, but he also criticized it for methodological shortcomings. Transformational learning theory gave modern impetus to new approaches to self-directed learning.

Defining the concept

Many research efforts were carried out with the purpose of defining self-directed learning and developing adequate conceptualization. Three main approaches have been developed and discussed with the intention of building a theoretical base: self-directed learning as the self-initiated process of learning, where individuals plan and manage their own activity; an attribute or characteristic of the learner, with personal autonomy as its hallmark; and a way of organizing instruction in formal settings with greater learner control over the process of learning (Caffarella, 1993). Scholars and researchers presented various perspectives and had different focuses including topics and areas of self-directed learning, learners’ motivation, learning components and characteristics of the process, abilities of the learners, activities that may be organized within the self-directed learning, etc.

Knowles (1975) defines self-directed learning as the process in which a person starts the initiative for learning, defines a need, conceives goals, localizes the resources, makes choices of strategies for learning and applies them, and evaluates the results. Mezirow (1985) leaves aside the details of the learning process and defines self-directed learning as the ability of the adult person to critically reflect and make life changes. Similar to Brookfield (1986): he highlights critical reflection in the context of the learner’s reality, providing him/her with the capacity not just to understand it, but also to shape the context in which the
learner lives. For some authors, self-directed learning involves instructional method, while others prefer to analyse the dichotomy between processes and goals. Brockett and Hiemstra (1991) view the term self-directed learning ‘as an instructional process centring on such activities as assessing needs, securing learning resources, implementing learning activities, and evaluating learning’. Hiemstra and Sisco (1990) refer to this as individualization, a process focusing on characteristics of the teaching–learning transaction (Hiemstra, 1994: 430). Brockett and Hiemstra emphasize external and internal factors of self-direction in learning, and Merriam (2001) focuses on the goals of self-directed learning.

This variety of approaches, accompanied by overlap and difficulties of definition, still poses a real challenge for philosophical discussions and empirical study of self-directed learning. Although it is necessary for adult education theory to try to define clear concepts and to operate within consistent theoretical and conceptual frameworks, it is exactly the complexity of the learning processes of the modern person that causes these differences, dichotomies and controversies, and inspires constant rethinking of existing models and the development of a multifaceted approach. In spite of this, and in spite of the lack of common definition and theory, there are several issues relating to self-directed learning where there is a common understanding, and where there are approaches accepted by the majority of scholars, and consensus views regarding some topics. Some of the most important are:

- The characteristics and qualities of self-directed learning are viewed as a continuum, not as clear divided categories without overlap (for example, Tough’s seven-hour episodes and half-motivation are less relevant for contemporary research).
- The definitions of self-directed learning are mostly created by listing and explaining a set of qualities or characteristics of this type of learning (for example, autonomous learning, strong ‘ownership’ of the learning process, critical reflection, high level of learners’ responsibility).
- There is an analysis distinction between self-directed learning and the self-directed learner. For example, even in learning situations that are directed from ‘outside’, a learner could behave in an autonomous and self-directed way.
- It is almost impossible to find ‘clear’ learning modes or one dominant mode in adult education – they are usually mixed and changeable. This is also the case with self-directed learning, which can range across instructional teaching and different types of learning and includes various activities, methods and resources.
- Contextual aspects of the learning process are more important than ever, becoming one of the main determinants of self-directed learning.

**Some characteristics of self-directed learning**

There are several important characteristics that were chosen by researchers as the main criteria to explore whether a learning process is self-directed or not. Locus of control is one of them. For example, Mocker and Spear (1982) developed the model where the level of control over the main elements of the learning process is a measure of the self-directed character of learning. This approach understands the character of learning as a continuum along a spectrum from where the adult learner is in complete control of the learning process to the opposite end of the spectrum, where the institution or instructor is completely in charge. This is very close to the model proposed by Knowles’s (1970: 26) dimensions of maturing – from dependence towards autonomy – although the opposite of dependence in our complicated world may not be independence, so much as self-directed interdependence. In earlier times self-directed learning was first presented as primarily solitary learning, ‘learning in isolation’ (especially when it was related to distance learning). Caffarella (1993: 28) explains the ‘scenario’ of how adults learn as it is described in the 1970s by Tough and Knowles: ‘adults use mostly linear, stepwise processes … . Their conception of the process of learning mirrors very closely how we depict the process of learning in formal settings’.
For analytical purposes, the connected dimensions: *dependency / instructiveness + control* can be seen as a continuum, with linear movement across the spectrum. While this applies to the concept of Tough’s learning projects, there are also many important learning processes initiated and carried out by adults that do not follow this scheme. These learning forms and phases may alter and change, being switched or combined. There is a kind of coexistence between these two opposite ends of the spectrum of learning (with different levels of control and instructiveness), whereby one or another type becomes dominant in different phases. Merriam finds that ‘models developed in the late 1980s and the 1990s are less linear and more interactive’ (2001: 9). The linear scheme is seldom applicable, because of the specific dynamic of the life and work situation of the adult learner, which interferes with learning phases or episodes, or because of the nature of the topic. For example, an adult could start to learn about macrobiotic nutrition suddenly and passionately, after being diagnosed with an illness, and devote a significant amount of time to studying the subject, or s/he could have developed a growing interest in this topic throughout the life course, neglecting it sometimes and returning to it again at different times. This scenario is closer to the one where ‘patterns vary from person to person and learning project to learning project’ (Caffarella, 1993: 28), with ‘many loops and curves’ (Caffarella and Merriam, 2000: 57). The dynamic and unpredictability of learning scenarios, and the complexity of all types of self-directed learning and its activities, give emphasis to new models and paradigms of adult learning, veering away from psychologically driven ones and closer to the andragogical ones.

One of the possible paradigms can be based on the adult learning cycles. Self-directed learning may provide a framework for a range of learning cycles guiding the learner through the various phases. The learning encompasses the following cycles:

- identifying a need or problem that requires a solution
- choosing a way of learning appropriate to solving the problem and deciding about the learning aim, content, resources, means and methods
- carrying out the learning
- observing and monitoring the process and progress
- evaluating the learning experience and results, and deciding what to do with them.

The first and the last two categories or parts of the cycle tend to be mostly in the hands of the adult learner, but the middle one – the pure learning part – may be willingly delegated to others (including a whole variety of learning behaviours following on from this decision), while the learner remains the owner of the whole process/cycle, constantly making choices about its continuation. This ‘delegated responsibility’ often happens in the form of a learning contract with outside assistance, as is described by several authors (Hiemstra and Sisco, 1990; Knowles, 1975). This approach recognizes the collaborative and interdependent character of adult learning and defines self-directed learning as typical for adults.

Even though children may act in a self-directed way, the main elements of defining their way of learning as self-directed are missing: they do not control the wholeness of the learning process and seldom can they make choices about its elements. Even in out-of-school and out-of-formal education, children are not fully in control of their own lives, a factor which largely determines adult learning. The fact that childhood learning is embedded in the process of socialization, which imposes social limits and constraints and many top-down and externally defined elements, means that children could be self-directed learners sometimes, but, taken on the whole, theirs is not self-directed learning. For the adult learner, the phenomenon of self-directed learning is happening in the context of maturity, and is probably the most genuine form of adult learning.

**The self-directed learner – characteristics and abilities**

While research on self study has generally been centred on the learner, the character of the modern information society, where learning needs are increasingly more complex thanks to the rapid growth in the
volume and variety of information sources and the sheer complexity of life, sheds a new light on this ‘rediscovered species’ of adult learner. New learning needs in different areas of life (professional or personal) pose new demands that adults can no longer meet in a traditional way. They are more and more motivated or even compelled to continuously undertake different learning initiatives in order to improve the quality of different aspects of their lives, or simply to keep on track. Willingly or not, adults became predominantly self-directed learners; for many authors it is still, or more than ever, the differentia specifica of adult learning.

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Although adults may sometimes prefer learning directed from outside, the idea of the self-directed learner is usually related to the concepts of responsibility, autonomy (moral, emotional, intellectual), independence, self-confidence, self-esteem and individualism. Some authors focus primarily on the main determinants of self-directed learning – age, class, gender, level of education, learning style and some personal characteristics and traits. There are also many efforts to find out what competencies and abilities are needed for self-directed learning, and the emphasis is usually on a strong sense of personal values and beliefs, on certain self-concepts of adult persons (including self-knowledge, need for self-actualization and the ability to be proactive), decision-making competencies and critical intelligence as the preconditions for self-directed learning.

Although this approach is based on humanistic psychology, on the idea of the adult as growth-oriented and motivated for self-improvement, an important distinction should be made here – between the self-directed learner and the successful self-directed learner. It is useful to explore what elements determine the learning behaviour of a person and what competencies are needed. A self-directed learner is not a person with a certain personality and a static combination of characteristics and abilities; rather, self-directed learning involves a learning behaviour, style and approach manifested or not manifested by the same person in different learning situations (different topics, different settings, different life phases …). As Candy points out, a learner’s autonomy is likely to vary from situation to situation (Candy, 1991). Thus, it must not be forgotten that every adult learner can be a self-directed learner – predominantly, or sometimes, depending on the concrete learning need and the context. No adult person, regardless of levels of education, self esteem or personal competencies should be denied the opportunity and the right to undertake learning projects and to individualize his/her own learning. To what extent the adult learner will be successful, is completely another question – it depends strongly on previously mentioned characteristics and abilities, but this is exactly the same issue in all other types of learning. In almost all forms or types of learning the question of ability, readiness and competencies of the learner could be raised. Thus, attributes such as self-concept and self-esteem can predict the quality of the results of self-directed learning of a person, but do not serve as the excluding criteria. Learning could be undertaken for various reasons, even for fear, pressure or necessity, but even in these cases a person could conduct the learning process in a self-directed manner, even without making good choices or having really good results. Unfortunately, there are still not enough studies about self-directed learning among groups of people who do not fit into these criteria.

Similar shifts in the research happen in the area of motivation for self-directed learning. Tough’s earlier suggestion that the main motive for self-directed learning is to acquire and retain knowledge and competencies, is less valid today – it is more and more driven by real life situations, by the need to solve the problems, achieve aims, fulfil tasks, etc. The pragmatic nature of this kind of learning was indicated in several studies (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999; Tough, 1971). Highly intentional character, which was always emphasized in earlier research, does not necessarily mean a high level of awareness and clearly defined goals; it is more likely to mean an instrumental, functional approach (even when pure theoretical and intellectual issues are the subject of the learning), meaning that deep motivation for self-directed learning is coming from the interaction of the needs of the person and their environment and context.

The context has always had an influence on learning needs (intrinsic or internalized) and gives an impetus, directly or indirectly, to adults, motivating them to start the learning initiative. A context may have a positive impact by supporting self-directed learning in different ways: through positive learning
culture and available resources …; in contrast, lack of support, facilities and resources that can satisfy learning needs can have the opposite effect; and, in the third case scenario, there may be resources and possibilities available in the learner’s environment, but the person may be dissatisfied with them, thus motivating them to start learning on their own. This constant everyday interaction with one’s own environment and critical reflection on it is often a starting point for self-directed initiatives.

Changing traditional approaches to self-directed learning

Two approaches were typical in the traditional understanding of self-directed learning – one suggesting that this kind of learning occurs mostly in the non-formal settings, and seldom within formal education, and the other, stressing the highly intentional character of self-directed learning. Recent research in sociology and psychology of adult learning, new theoretical approaches to adult education and, above all, new practices in adult learning brought about numerous changes in these traditional understandings.

One of the earlier ideas about self-directed learning was that it was something that happens because of the absence of institutions within the formal system. It is accepted today that self-directed learning may occur precisely in spite of such existing institutions, even if the learner is formally enrolled in them. Still, self-directed learning is often perceived as a form of learning that appears as non-formal learning, sometimes as informal learning, and in very limited cases as learning in the formal settings. Mocker and Spear’s scheme (1982) depicts this model, which sees self-directed learning as the opposite of formal learning (Table 23.1).

The model depicting formal, non-formal and informal learning as the overall framework for different types of learning, including self-directed learning, becomes less relevant today, and does not necessarily suit the dynamic and non-linear type of learning, as described earlier in this text. Conversely, it may be more relevant to take self-directed learning as the overarching concept, as the framework within which adults may choose formal or non-formal settings, learn independently or ask someone for assistance (friend or expert), enter the course or self-support group, go to the library, search the internet, listen to the lectures at the university … . They may combine completely independent and self-organized learning with less independent phases; they may also decide to leave some parts of his/her learning process completely to a tutor or guide. Even in this case, they may retain their own goal, keeping a critical approach to the given information or methods of teaching, continuously reflecting and restructuring the knowledge and attitudes.

After choosing formal education as an appropriate setting for one’s own learning process, an adult learner may decide to accept the content and values underpinning it, but may also reject them, even if a formal certificate confirms that s/he has reached the learning outcomes. Of course, this assumes that learning is not perceived in a traditional way, i.e. as obtaining and ‘collecting’ knowledge and information and developing the formal functions of thinking, but more as a transformative process of learning, i.e. changing one’s perspective, acquiring new ways of thinking, acting, getting inspired to initiate change in the environment.

Of all theoretical approaches to the nature of learning, the theory of transformative learning and critical

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 23.1 Mocker and Spear’s model of lifelong learning</th>
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<td><strong>Self-directed learning</strong></td>
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<td>learner controls the goals and means of learning</td>
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<td><strong>Informal learning</strong></td>
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<td>institution controls the goals, but the learner controls the means of learning</td>
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thinking seems to be the closest to self-directed learning, but does not necessarily explain all of it. Leading back to the tradition of radical philosophy, this approach hints at development of critical consciousness, a combination of thinking and action and social changes as a result of learning. But self-directed learning, also as critical reflection, may occur at all levels and in all areas – from coping with the challenges of raising children, to developing as a human being, to changing social structures. For that reason (not being limited by range and field), self-directed learning finds its place in formal as well as less formal settings.

Many scholars and authors urged that learner initiative and autonomy should be incorporated into formal instructional settings and organized learning. Therefore critical thinking and reflection became important for self-directed learning, whether it happens in formal or non-formal frameworks. A self-directed learner is thus a person who has the willpower to change the course of things, behaves autonomously, responsibly, critically, even in learning situations that are mainly organized or guided from outside by an institution or another person. Although critical thinking and reflection might be of crucial importance for the success of self-directed learning, and many scholars take them as the main criteria to define it (‘the most fully adult form of self-directed learning’ contains critical reflection as the main component – Brookfield, 1986: 58), they are generic components of adult learning generally, and not specifically confined to self-directed learning.

After the stage is set, i.e. an adult person has become aware of a learning need, or has formulated a problem and decided to address the problem through learning, and has decided how s/he wants to go about learning and what direction to choose, different types of learning activities can be undertaken:

- A person may opt for some formal education, e.g. courses, formal training, internships, or may even decide to enrol in university and acquire academic qualifications in order to achieve his/her goal.
- A person may engage in many activities of a non-formal nature, i.e. organized and systematic, but outside the formal framework, for example self-guided reading, visiting lectures and seminars, internet searches, joining self-support groups, or networking with others.
- If a person is highly motivated to learn and act to achieve his/her goal, informal learning related to the chosen topic may occur. A mind occupied by certain problems and issues will have a sharper perception of anything in the environment related to them and will be open to various types of spontaneous information transfer and even subliminal learning.
Keeping ownership of the totality of the learning process, making choices, ‘controlling the level of control’ over the single components, mixing instructional methods and combining resources and results from different settings are all elements that justify the hypothesis that self-directed learning should be taken as an overarching concept, encompassing the formal, non-formal and informal character of learning.

There is one more controversial issue associated with formal, non-formal and informal learning, that is, the intentional character of self-directed learning. Several researches have focused on the highly intentional character of self-directed learning as one of its differentia specifica, allowing a certain level of self-direction in the case of unintended, but developed learning, and ignoring incidental learning as not belonging to the realm of aware, motivated, planned, self-organized learning. An approach beyond pure cognitive processes and a psychological definition of learning may broaden our understanding of learning in the following ways:

- **Intended learning** happens mainly in situations where the whole process is predominantly guided, organized and evaluated in a self-directed manner. As mentioned earlier, adults may choose to delegate the middle part of learning cycles to someone outside, but this is also done intentionally. Intended learning is the type of learning that Allan Tough calls learning projects, emphasizing the importance of self-initiative, high motivation and choice of means. But he also states that people are sometimes not aware of their own learning projects or activities, which brings into consideration the second and third type – unintended and incidental learning.

- As was illustrated above, a learning process or even one learning project could include all types. A person who did not intend to start learning might be inspired by circumstances or compelled by certain events and start with a *not intended, but developed* learning process. Several aspects show that even this could be seen as part of self-directed learning:
  - the *not-intended learner* ‘allows’ him/herself to open their mind for new information, knowledge, approaches;
  - s/he is ready to ‘open up’ the existing structure of knowledge, attitudes and mind settings, to reflect and change them, and to change behaviour where required;
  - the lack of initial intention does not imply the lack of learning need and willingness; usually there are other factors that are behind this lack of intention or strong awareness;
  - unintended, but later developed, learning may easily become self-directed, completely or to a large extent.

- **Incidental**, unplanned, sometimes even not wanted, learning might be viewed as a part of self-directed learning to a very limited extent. This might be the case, for example, if it is a part of a learning episode that is conducted in a self-directed manner, where the adult integrates knowledge and information into the structures that s/he is creating through another, broader learning process, even if s/he is not aware of the fact that it is happening. Incidental learning may even happen against the will of a person, but s/he takes a position in relation to the content or outcomes and decides what to do with them. So, even with the lack of intention to learn in a self-directed manner, at the heart of the process is a self-directed, autonomous, reflecting learner whose dominant learning patterns are exchanging and switching.

Learning in everyday life, conceptualized as life-wide learning, has become a way of living in the modern world with all its challenges. The risk society as described by Ulrich Beck is vastly more dynamic than any previous societal forms, and an individual faces dramatically altered social structures, where they are exposed to unevenly distributed risks (Beck, 1992). This distribution has to do with wealth, but also with knowledge. Since possession of knowledge is still related to the power structures of modern societies, lifelong and life-wide learning have, on the one hand, the potential to liberate and, on the other hand, to help a person to cope with the complexity and uncertainty of everyday life.
The areas of self-directed learning

The increased demands and challenges of our modern, rapidly changing society have inspired self-directed initiatives on the part of more and more adults. They need to know more about health and nutrition, family life and child rearing; they need new competencies to cope with the different kinds of risk that the globalization process brings and to develop new strategies in times of crises, sometimes simply to understand the changes that are going on. Therefore, the complexity of the learning behaviour of a person in modern society means that traditional didactic categories are not always applicable. Learning takes different forms, combining and changing different styles, going through various ups and downs, and adapting the dynamic of learning both to personal needs and to societal circumstances.

The same applies to the content and topics – there is hardly any area that could not be a subject of self-directed learning. Traditional understanding saw self-directed learning as mainly related to personal growth and satisfaction of intellectual needs. In the current climate the range of issues and challenges faced by people has bigger implications for learning for the sake of learning, fulfilment and for intellectual pleasure and curiosity. ‘Adults’ orientation to learning is life-centred; therefore, the appropriate units for organizing adult learning are life situations …’ (Knowles, 1970: 31). A person could be moved by new demands or risks coming from the environment, by fear, or because of uncertainty and confusion, by life crises or simply because of a new stage in the life span development. The spectrum is all-encompassing. Some of the examples are:

- Constant creation of new knowledge and increased demands of the labour market make it difficult for adults in the professional sphere to keep a job and/or increase employability, achieve progression, or simply keep up with the constantly changing world of work without undertaking independent learning actions. For these purposes adults usually start self-directed learning in order to increase soft skills, social competencies, team or managerial competencies, etc. Many self-directed learning actions, which include a lot of formal learning, are motivated by the new demands of a rapidly changing labour market and economy. But it is not just about acquiring new job skills and competencies, it is also about understanding a world where the rules of the game are changing, and questioning all traditional models and values related to work and economy.

- The growing awareness of the potential of an individual to increase the quality of his/her personal life, especially family life and social relationships, together with the challenges and risks that the modern way of life brings for the individual and family, have inspired a series of new learning initiatives. Much of self-directed learning is devoted to areas such as family, marital and emotional relationships, partnership and parenthood, etc. An example is the expanding interest in popular psychology – learning about one’s own personality, character, traits, discovering oneself … This may range from reading popular books and learning about various typologies of personalities (horoscopes or more serious ones), to participating in some type of psycho-therapeutic events or courses.

The issue of health and nutrition has become a most popular and important topic, especially because modern industry (pharmaceutical, food production …) relies more and more on the ‘obedient’, non-reflective user/consumer. Critical awareness, courage to question widely accepted values, ways of behaviour, products, information and knowledge, which might be ‘served’ even by scientific authorities, are needed more than ever, not just for intellectual pleasure, but as a means of survival (Popović, 2010). Self-directed learning thus becomes a weapon in the battle against misuse, indoctrination and foolishness, which are unfortunately often supported by media, political authorities and, sometimes, even by official science and the education system. ‘This perspective focuses on bringing about change in the present social, political, and economic order through the questioning of assumptions held by learners about the world in which they live and work’ (Caffarella, 1993: 27). In particular, the areas mostly affected by growing commercialization and supported by media, the pharmaceutical industry (health...
education), food production (learning about nutrition), mass production of *everything* (consumer education) and so forth need to be a focus of the learning response in a self-directed form. In this context the development of critical thinking for and through self-directed learning is of utmost importance.

- The first decade of the twenty-first century has proved that drastic climate changes, environmental disasters and destruction of nature have become the reality of the modern world. Earlier enthusiastic attempts by small groups of activists to disseminate information and to initiate learning processes about environmental issues among different social groups are not enough any more. Self-directed learning about these matters needs to shape attitudes, styles of living, personal philosophies and ways of thinking, especially because other forms of education and educational authorities are not responding fast (and deep) enough to this growing need, or indeed may act exactly in the opposite way.

Self-directed learning in this area, as well as in the previous area, comes very close to the demand coming from transformational learning theory (Mezirow, Brookfield) – ‘promotion of emancipatory learning and social action’ (Merriam, 2001: 9) – and shifts the emphasis from individual learning to the social context of learning and social construction of knowledge.

- Traditional domains of self-directed learning like leisure, hobbies and tourism remain important, supported by demographic changes, mobility and globalization. The self-directed learner is nowadays more self-confident about this subject than in earlier times and is more willing and ready to combine different resources and methods. S/he is more aware of the dignity of this kind of learning. In the mentioned domains, self-directed learning has become the common learning form, supported by some educational providers, commercial enterprises and media. In this case more critical approaches to the enormity of information and quality of the options and possibilities for learning are needed.

### Trends and challenges

The developments related to self-directed learning tackle both theoretical and philosophical issues, as well as practical and operational questions.

Philosophies of constructivism, postmodernism, transformational learning theory and new approaches to emancipatory and empowerment theories raise new questions that are important for theory building in the area of self-directed learning. Hiemstra (1994) summarizes emerging trends and issues and points out the need for more research, including the need for testing conceptual ideas and models. Merriam (2001) lists the concrete areas for future investigation, facing the challenges of taking study and understanding of self-directed learning to a new level. Ways of measuring and maintaining quality in self-directed learning have growing importance, but they also prompt rethinking and reconceptualization of the nature, attributes and goals of self-directed learning. ‘It is clearly a multifaceted concept that should not be approached through one perspective’ (Song and Hill, 2007). Still, what approaches are universally valid, what perspectives are suitable, and how can the scientific-systematic clarity of thinking about it be achieved? How can the complex nature of self-directed learning within consistent theoretical frameworks (especially the andragogical one) be captured without reduction and loss of its important elements? These remain the main challenges in attempting to develop a coherent theory of self-directed learning.

More importantly, new approaches to self-directed learning may change our whole idea of adult education and learning. An interesting shift has happened in its history. Formerly, adult learning was the dominant individual and social phenomenon, while adult education appeared just a few centuries ago, in the form of several social movements. The last two centuries were marked by the fight for the recognition of adult education, by its promotion and conceptualization. Adult learning was mostly at the core of adult education, which was sometimes developed in ways that conflicted with its basic philosophy and principles, i.e. more organized, systematic and systemic, controlled, used (and misused) for various social purposes, standardized, etc.
Recent trends are showing a new shift – back to adult learning! Progressive discovery of learning, as opposed to education, does not ignore the fact that learning as an individual process is embedded in a predominantly socially organized education. But learning, even if it happens in the framework of adult education, is not limited to it. New global initiatives (UNESCO), numerous projects, research interest and alternative forms of adult education focus more and more on learning. The growing importance of self-directed learning might provide the proof for this development. The person in a modern world is more and more isolated, very often in conflict with the subtle constraints and manipulation of society. Self-directed learning is the form used by many movements and initiatives that stood up against the systems or some of their elements, for example the feminist movement, political changes in Eastern Europe, the ecological movement, anti-globalism, the peace movement, initiatives against the health measures imposed by governments, etc. If a person is ‘against the system’, s/he is on her/his own. Self-directed learning is increasingly the only choice for every form of adult education that goes beyond an adaptive or compensatory function and, being at the heart of lifelong and life-wide learning, is the most available ‘instrument’ to cope with the ever changing world.

A ‘small piece’ of technical progress turns out to be one of the most important factors in the described development, playing a revolutionary role, that is, information and communication technologies, especially the internet. It sheds a completely new light on self-directed learning. Self-directed learning is ‘the wave of the future’, concludes Kerka (1999): having primarily the ‘deliberating potential’ of the internet to deliver new modes of learning. What television was about to achieve many years ago (to revolutionize the learning process), but failed to do because of the passive role of spectator and one-way communication, the internet may achieve in the near future. Huge numbers of options, possibilities, means and communication strategies turn attention to the possibilities that the internet is offering to learning – it is about achieving more control, enhancing the responsibility and initiative towards learning, using more resources. It might be seen as a learning resource, as a means of learning and teaching, as provision, as a communication channel and so on (Popović, 2010). For self-directed learning, it opens a whole new world of opportunities and raises the need to understand more about self-directed learning in a specific context (Song and Hill, 2007). This will challenge both our theoretical-conceptual approach to self-directed learning (especially its emancipatory character) and to a series of practical issues (such as instructional deficiencies) related to learning via/from(with) the internet. More importantly, it might challenge the nature of adult learning itself.

References
