

Self-Direction

The ultimate goal of education is to produce students who can learn on their own. This is especially critical in the 21st century, a time of rapid technological change, when skills must be constantly learned and relearned. Self-directed learners are efficient at planning and following through without prompting. They know how to identify and use a wide variety of resources and tools. They take appropriate risks and learn from their mistakes.

The literature shows that classrooms promoting self-directed learning develop students who are curious and willing to try new things (Garrison, 1997), view problems as challenges, desire change, and enjoy learning (Taylor, 1995). Taylor also found students in these environments to be motivated and persistent, independent, self-disciplined, self-confident, and goal-oriented. All of these characteristics support the 21st century skills that students must acquire to be successful in their future endeavors.

Project Plans

Project plans are usually contracts between students and teachers that describe the components of a project, such as the goals, the process for reaching the goals, a timeline, and criteria for assessment of learning. Plans are either developed solely by the students themselves or, more often, with teacher assistance. When students have a plan to refer to throughout the project, it helps them monitor their progress, adjust as necessary, reflect on the process, and ask for guidance when needed. This method balances students' choice in their learning with responsibility for expectations.

Project plans encompass two distinct areas of assessment:

- The resulting product or performance, which is assessed by the criteria established in the plan
- The student's process of setting up and carrying out the project or performance

Initially, students need help setting goals and deadlines for these plans. Goal setting is critical because students need clear targets to measure their performance.

Students often set goals and timelines that are too difficult to reach. Facilitate this process by questioning, negotiating, and helping students create feasible plans of action. Also consider modeling learning strategies, such as predicting, questioning,

clarifying, and summarizing, so students will develop the ability to use these strategies on their own while they work on projects. Critical questions to ask include:

- What do you intend to learn?
- What strategies and resources will you need?
- What evidence will you produce to demonstrate your learning?
- What will be the criteria for assessment? How will you know you have been successful?
- What is your timeline for completing your learning?

During project implementation, control gradually shifts from the teacher to students. Students develop ownership in setting goals and deciding what is worthwhile to learn, and then continue to exercise a great deal of independence as they approach the learning tasks.

Some of the benefits of using project plans include:

- Encourages responsible self-directed learning
- Helps students learn to plan and make decisions about their learning
- Helps students learn to manage their time
- Allows for individual pacing
- Involves students in curriculum planning
- Targets meaningful tasks
- Provides students with clear goals and expectations
- Fosters self-reflection and self-assessment

Peer Support

When providing feedback to peers, students are learning about learning by reflecting on the activities of other students. Students are forced to think analytically about their peers' performance, and in turn, they are able to extend that thinking to their own performance. Peer feedback encourages a greater sense of involvement and responsibility, and helps students define what excellence looks like.

Teachers must set clear criteria for students when they provide feedback to their peers. Students need to know what to look for in their peer's work. One way to ensure students understand this type of assessment is to give them a practice session. In this way, students can experience the process, and become familiar with the procedure and what is expected of them before they conduct their first review.

One way to start is to provide two completed student samples, one at a very high level and one at a low level, so students can compare the strengths and weaknesses of each. Discuss the criteria with the class, passing out the checklist, rubric, or

question prompts. In small groups, students then apply the criteria to the student samples. This method allows for a rich discussion while students try to come to consensus about the criteria as it relates to each sample. When the small groups have finished, each group shares their thinking and feedback on the samples with the whole class so that all can benefit from the insights of others.

When students are learning how to give constructive feedback to their peers, teacher-made checklists and rubrics can give them the guidance they need. Once students have more experience, however, they can develop the checklists and rubrics for peer feedback themselves. The [Assessing Projects](#) application has many examples of peer feedback checklists and rubrics.

Reflection and Goal-Setting

Self-directed learners are proficient at setting goals and reflecting on their learning. Students who practice metacognition make their learning processes explicit and are, therefore, able to examine their learning, explore alternatives, and make constructive adjustments.

Closing Circle

At the end of the day or class, ask each student to share one thing they now know about a topic or a connection that they made. Make notes of responses requiring a follow-up discussion.

Exit Slips

Pose questions at the end of class and ask students to write a response in order to exit the class. Read the responses and plan necessary instruction.

Write a Letter

Have students write letters to themselves, another class, or to the subject they are studying. This helps students to think of connections in a very personal way. Use the reflections to assess understanding.

Reflective Journals

Ask students to reflect on their own learning, providing either guiding, reflective questions for the students to respond to or open-ended questions.

References

- Garrison, D. R. (1997, Fall). Self-directed learning: Toward a comprehensive model. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 48(1), 18–34.
- Taylor, B. (1995). *Self-directed learning: Revisiting an idea most appropriate for middle school students*. Paper presented at the Combined Meeting of the Great Lakes and Southeast International Reading Association, Nashville, TN, Nov 11–15. [ED395287].