

## Self-Directed Learning

By David P. Byers Ph.D.

*An Excerpt from Homeschooling in High School for Higher Education by David P. Byers Ph.D.*

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Humans go through a variety of development stages as learners (Merriam, 1991 and Grow, 1991). In the first stage, usually in elementary school, we needed a teacher or parent to help decide what was important for us to learn so they decided for us which specific topics we would learn and to what depth/breadth. Later on, we may become effective with how to learn, but we may still need an “expert” to help us learn about certain subjects like algebra or chemistry—at least enough to pass the class.

If we continue to progress as learners, we may only need to have someone to guide us along our learning journey, to provide critical answers or resources, to share experiences, and to test our understanding of what we learned; but for the most part, we determine what we learn and we possess the skills to do so. For example, if your hobby is photography, you might know the basics about operating a camera to take pictures and you might know what you like to take pictures of, but you might need an expert to help you learn how to take better pictures or to learn how to develop your own photos.

Eventually, as learners we are able to initiate a need or desire to learn and then are able to follow through to fulfill that need or desire without any assistance. For instance, if you wanted to learn how to quilt and you knew nothing about the subject, at this stage you should be able to figure out what you want to learn, find the resources you need, and use them in an effective manner by combining your new knowledge with knowledge and experience you already have until you become the quilter you want to be. This last stage is really what self-directed learning is all about.

The learning stages outlined above are representative of two categories of teaching approaches into which many educational options fall—teacher-directed and student-directed. The first two stages of the learner development process can be associated with teacher-directed methods, whereas the last two stages can be associated with student-directed methods.

In the homeschooling environment, the teaching methods parents employ range from strictly teacher-directed to completely student-directed to somewhere in between the two. Understanding that it is important to help your children develop critical thinking and self-directed learning skills for success in higher learning and throughout

life better enables you to evaluate your methods of instruction to determine how you can best help to develop these skills in your children.

Some types of teaching approaches that help develop critical thinking and self-directed learning skills, especially at the high school and college levels, include: individual and group assignments, short-term and long-term assignments, giving assignments that require an oral presentation, providing options for learning about a subject, and most of all, developing assignments that have a worthwhile purpose that is relative to the student's interests (Campbell, 1991).

When students have the opportunity to study something that is of interest to them, they are not only more motivated to learn, but are motivated to learn to a greater depth. Students who are unmotivated by what they have to learn usually learn only enough to get past a test or to complete a task, but little knowledge is retained (Marton, 1976 and Chambers, 1992).

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