

**SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING:  
THEORY AND PRACTICE**

**A Thesis  
Submitted in fulfilment  
of the requirements for the Degree  
of  
Doctor of Philosophy**

**at the  
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**by  
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## **CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP/ORIGINALITY**

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature of Candidate

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## **Acknowledgements**

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## **Abstract**

Self-directed learning has become very popular in Western adult education. It is promoted for both educational and economic/political reasons. In this research project I investigated self-directed learning with a group of adult educators enrolled in a Bachelor of Education programme. I wanted to find out what meanings they had for self-directed learning and what their experiences of self-directed learning had been.

I used classical and new phenomenology, the former to investigate the meanings participants held for self-directed learning, the latter to investigate their experiences of it. The principal research method was interviews supplemented by focus groups and questionnaires.

From the data gathered I interpreted five meanings for self-directed learning. Four of these relate to an external dimension of self-direction – taking control of learning. They included having choices, taking control and making decisions; freedom; learning on my own; and learning with others. An internal dimension of self-directed learning, the responsibility for constructing personal meaning, was represented in one meaning I interpreted: making meaning.

Participants' experiences of self-directed learning in formal and non-formal contexts were investigated. While they all learned in self-directed ways in their non-formal learning many did not recognise or value this as learning. In addition, few appreciated the degree of self-direction they used in these non-formal contexts.

I identified eight themes in participants' comments about their experiences of self-directed learning in formal contexts. These relate to factors that influence their willingness and ability to be self-directed in these contexts. The eight factors include: the context of the learning; the learner's existing domain knowledge and the level of the learning being done; the learner's past socialisation experiences, both within and outside of educational contexts; the learner's confidence; their motivation; the time they have to give to the

learning; the resources they have access to; and the learner's age. Two other themes emerged: the need for guidance from a teacher and participants' views of self assessment in self-directed learning. Arising from these themes is a series of implications for practice in formal adult education that I discuss.

The findings in this research support many of the views expressed in western adult education literature. I do, however, argue two points. First, that self-directed learning in formal education is a re-conditioning process – a process that helps learners to rediscover their willingness and ability to be the self-directed learners they often are in non-formal contexts. And second, that in future self-directed learning should emphasise meaning-making as well as taking responsibility for learning.