

Promoting Self-Directed Learning for the *Florida GED PLUS* Student

It is increasingly obvious that education of a preparatory or pre-employment nature is inadequate in today's changing economy and social conditions.

Guglielmino, L.. M., Guglielmino, P. & Long, H. (1987)

Some GED students bring a dependent attitude towards learning to their classes. Others have experience with independent or self-directed learning in areas of interest to them, but haven't applied the same attitudes or skills to school work. The traditional, formal education system promotes the acquisition of knowledge, but does not necessarily help students learn how to acquire knowledge independently.

With rapid changes in technology and the

growth of information, students need to be able to learn on their own, not only as a college survival skill, but also to survive in the workplace and as a life skill.

High levels of readiness for self-directed learning have been linked with high levels of workplace performance, entrepreneurial success, and greater life satisfaction. Also, with the proliferation of distance learning opportunities, self-directed learning skills and attitudes become necessary for **Florida GED PLUS** students. For some students, becoming a more self-directed learner is a transformational experience which alters their basic assumptions about school and learning and empowers them to be more active, rather than passive, in their learning.

Self-Directed Learning: A Necessity in Today's World

An important skill in today's ever-changing world is that of self-directed learning. Self-directed learning is often defined as any study form in which individuals have primary responsibility for planning, implementing, and even evaluating their learning process. The skills to become an effective self-directed learner are very important to the success of the **Florida GED PLUS** student.

Many adult education programs provide a highly structured learning environment for their students. The instructor provides the plans, resources, and knowledge. In this type of setting, students often do not view themselves as active in their own learning process. Programs that support self-directed learning assist students in taking responsibility for their own learning through working with instructors to design a learning program that addresses their personal goals.

Nearly 25 years ago, it was estimated that 70% of adult learners were self-directed. Self-directed learning is a life-long strategy that allows the individual to take the initiative in determining his/her own learning goals, select a personalized strategy, and then decide the value of what was learned. Although, these are positive activities, many GED students do not possess the confidence, positive self-concept, or independence to involve themselves in self-directed learning. It is the role of the **Florida GED PLUS** instructor to influence adult students and facilitate their self-directed learning experiences.

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*John Winn, Commissioner
Florida Department of Education
Dr. Bonnie Marmor, Vice Chancellor
Florida Division of Workforce Development*

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Introduction to the Self-Directed Learner

Who is the self-directed learner? Dr. Lucy Guglielmino provides a description based on a survey of experts.

“A highly self-directed learner is one who exhibits initiative, independence, and persistence in learning; one who accepts responsibility for his or her own learning and views problems as challenges, not obstacles; one who is capable of self-discipline and has a high degree of curiosity; one who has a strong desire to learn or change and is self-confident; one who is able to use basic study skills organize his or her time and set an appropriate pace of learning, and to develop a plan for completing work; one who enjoys learning and has a tendency to be goal oriented.” (1977/78, p. 73)

Although this may appear at first to be the “dream student” of every teacher, there does exist a responsibility for the teacher to not only identify this student, but also to bring this student to the realization that he/she possesses many of the above traits. It is the responsibility of the teacher to assist the *Florida GED PLUS* student to hone the skills that allow the student to truly become self-directed.

As the *Florida GED PLUS* student embarks on his/her self-directed learning venture, the student must be motivated to identify specific goals for success, develop a learning plan or contract, implement that plan, and then be able to evaluate the level of progress personally achieved. A plan for self-directed learning should also incorporate a component for continuous improvement that will provide students with an ongoing opportunity to enhance the quality of learning. Continuous self-evaluation or self-efficacy is a necessary component of self-directed learning. Students must be able to monitor that they are moving towards the goals that they have identified or whether modifications are necessary to either the goals or the steps being taken.

All learners encounter obstacles that need to be overcome. For the adult student, these obstacles are compounded by the lack of traditional guidance services to assist them when returning to a formal educational settings. Many adult students also exhibit a greater fear of failure and need to be “other directed.” They do not want to fail in the presence of their friends and family. These barriers to success often interfere with the adult student striving to become self-directed.

A major role of the instructor is to provide motivation, goal-orientation, self-efficacy, and self-control to the student. Motivation is a set of values unique to each person. The skill and energy of the instructor is required to define and utilize the appropriate methods of motivation, e.g., praise, recognition, reinforcement, positive counseling, etc. Having established the student’s motivational needs, the student and teacher can then jointly define the immediate short- and long-term goals.

It is important that the teacher assist students in identifying their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances. Students

need to have a self-awareness that they can achieve their goals. A “can do” attitude is fundamental to the concept of self-directed learning.

A self-directed student must also be motivationally engaged in the task. He or she must have a personal interest in achieving a specific goal. If the goal is perceived as important in attaining, the student’s motivation towards achieving this goal is increased.

Another essential quality of a self-directed learner is self control. Self-control is a combination of being able to recognize what a person is capable of achieving and possessing the discipline to work toward that goal without being monitored by others.

Defining the primary qualities of a self-directed learner provides an instructor with the opportunity to create an environment for the student to achieve his or her goal.

Selected Characteristics of a Self-Directed Learner (Listed in Order of Importance)

- Initiative
- Independence
- Persistence
- Sense of responsibility for one’s own learning
- Tendency to view problems as challenges
- Self-discipline
- High degree of curiosity
- Strong desire to learn or change
- Ability to use basic study skills
- Ability to organize one’s time and set an appropriate pace for learning
- Self confidence
- Ability to develop a plan for completing work
- Joy in learning
- Tolerance of ambiguity
- Preference for active participation in shaping educational program
- Ability to evaluate one’s own progress
- Exploratory view of education
- Above average risk-taking behavior
- Knowledge of a variety of potential learning resources and ability to use them
- Ability to accept and use criticism
- Ability to discover new approaches for dealing with problems
- Ability to formulate learning objectives
- Ability to select and use many learning strategies
- Positive orientation to the future
- Emotional security
- Average or above average intelligence
- Creativity
- Preference for independent study or relatively unstructured sources

Based on L. Guglielmino’s Delphi Study

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How Do We Develop Self-Directed Learners?

To begin working toward the development of a successful self-directed learner, the role of the teacher is to first identify the student as having the potential to be self-directed. This includes not only the skill level required, but also the possession of psychological characteristics to accept this method of learning.

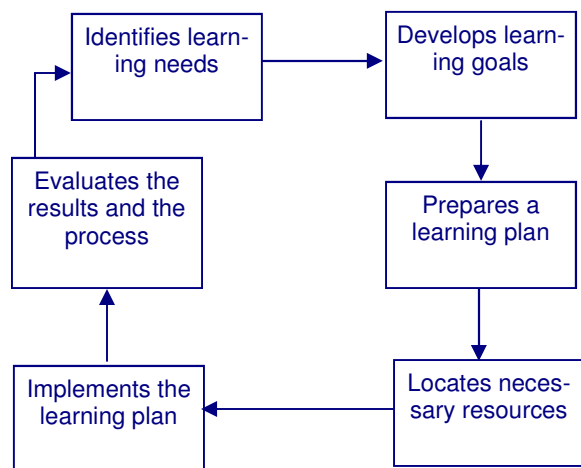
To develop self-directed learners, the teacher should:

- Define who is a self-directed learner
- Teach or assist students to become self-directed learners
- Create school environments that nurture self-directed learning, while ensuring that accountability for standards based education exists

Self-Directed Learning Process

The process of self-directed learning generally follows some basic steps.

The learner . . .



However, there are many barriers that students may experience throughout the process, interfering with them meeting their goals. This is why the process is generally not as straight-forward or neat as the above chart. Developing learners exhibit an array of characteristics which include a mix of attitudes, values, skills, and personality characteristics. Some of the traits include initiative, independence, responsibility, self-discipline, self-confidence, and curiosity, as well as planning, time-management, and study skills. However, for many GED PLUS students, becoming a self-directed learner is a step-by-step process.

Preparing a Self-Directed Learning Plan

“Goal oriented individuals set challenging goals for themselves and maintain high levels of commitment to those goals despite encountering obstacles or challenges.”

Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (December 2004)

One of the first steps is for a student to develop a learning plan or contract. A self-directed learning plan is very simply a record of one’s proposed plan. The plan can include both long- and short-term goals. Students who are planning on attending college may wish to develop a long-term goal and several shorter range learning goals. At its most basic, a learning plan or contract can simply include a learning objective that students develop, work to achieve, and evaluate. An example of a basic learning plan is as follows:

Self-Directed Learning Plan for Florida GED PLUS Program

My learning objective is:	
To achieve my learning objective, I will:	Target
What help or assistance will I need from my family, friends, teachers, advisors?	
Evaluation Standard (How will I know if I learned what I set out to learn?)	

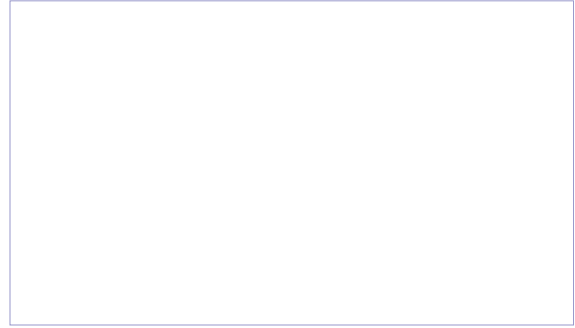
For students to develop into self-directed learners, they must proceed along a continuum from dependence to independence. The level of independence and self-directedness that they attain can vastly increase their chances of success in postsecondary education. The added benefit is that learners who increase their ability and function as self-directed learners are better prepared for success in their personal lives and in their workplaces.

Florida Atlantic University

Dr. Lucy Madsen Guglielmino
Project Director

Development & Research Consultants

Susan K. Pittman
Bonnie Vondracek



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To Get You Started

There are many ways that self-directed learning strategies can be incorporated in the **Florida GED Plus** classroom. The following are some ideas to get you started.

- Involve students in planning. You may wish to have students develop questions for a lesson or assist you in identifying topics that need to be included in a specific lesson.
- Allow students to make choices regarding the way in which they demonstrate learning. They may wish to complete a project instead of a paper for an assignment.
- Schedule time for students to select activities that they wish to do.
- Use individual and group projects with planning guidelines.
- Present problem situations and have students discuss how they would go about solving the problem and where they would obtain information.
- Have students describe how they learned to do specific skills.
- Encourage exploration and discovery in order for students to make valuable connections..
- Discuss the importance of self-directed learning in all facets of life, including at school, in the workplace, and at home.
- Teach goal-setting skills and have students use learning contracts and/or develop task lists.

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