Self-directed learning is an important feature of WCIU’s MA Program in International Development. WCIU as an institution is interested in overcoming those hindrances that block the demonstration, spread and growth of God’s Kingdom, as our mission statement indicates: “Preparing men and women to discover and address the roots of human problems around the world.” We want graduates and current students of WCIU to diagnose and solve real problems of societies so that those societies may better reflect God’s glory and carry out His purposes in the world. We intend self-directed learners to serve the purposes of Kingdom-oriented International Development and their sponsoring NGO’s.

This article is by no means a survey of self-directed learning. Some important topics in the field of self-directed learning are not mentioned at all, while the topics we do discuss are done so only in an abbreviated manner. The purpose of this article, then, is not to tell students all they need to know about self-directed learning, but to increase their competence as self-directed learners by highlighting some important features of it. Becoming better self-directed learners will also facilitate students to serve better the purposes and goals of their sponsoring NGO's or future employer, in addition to increasing the likelihood that they will succeed in their studies. To a small degree, this Introduction to self-directed learning may also help students better understand the role of their mentors, as the complementary roles of student and mentor are discussed briefly in the course of the article.

We first set self-directed learning in the context of Kingdom-oriented International Development, followed by a treatment of its importance for the MA Program at WCIU. After discussing certain misunderstandings of what self-directed learning is, we contrast it with teacher-directed learning. We identify certain important practices and habits of mind critical to self-directed learning, and briefly describe typical stages that students go through on their way to becoming self-directed learners.
Two Contexts of Self-Directed Learning

No doubt a moment’s reflection would produce a list of serious problems within your own society and between societies in our world. An additional moment’s reflection might also suggest that these problems are usually murky and complicated, hard to diagnose and difficult to address. If those factors that darken societies were simple to illuminate and repair, all the societies of the world would now be in much better shape than they obviously are. If simple, tried and true solutions were all it takes to make things right in our world, then everyone on earth would already be doing God’s will in the here and now, as it is already done in heaven.

Evidently, solutions to these murky and complicated issues require something other than repeating or perpetuating already tried solutions. We do not mean that what has been done or imagined in the past is worthless or irrelevant, for much that has already been tried and done is good. We do mean that merely continuing with business as usual probably will not solve complicated societal problems. In other words, God’s servants must learn to think and act in novel ways, which is why self-directed learning is so important. God needs people who on their own initiative are able to interact with Biblical, historical and cultural-anthropological data so as to illuminate the actual causes of seemingly unsolvable problems. Such a person learns how to ask better questions so as to elicit the information needed to help fulfill God’s purposes. A self-directed learner is also able to initiate a series of learning activities aimed at discovering hitherto unrecognized solutions to a complex problem of a particular society. Becoming better self-directed learners is important for WCIU students because no one can tell you what to do in order to solve the complicated societal problems we are referring to.

A second context that highlights the importance of self-directed learning is that of the tremendous increase in knowledge currently underway in our world. For example, when the author of this article was a child, he “learned” that only Saturn in our solar system was encircled by rings of rock and ice. By the early 1990’s, data from space probes informed us that all the gas giants in our solar system have rings. Additional knowledge forced us to abandon incorrect ideas about the cosmos. Moreover, virtually every major sphere of knowledge is adding data at a prodigious rate every year. In history, for example, it is not merely that new archaeological discoveries give us more information about the past, for even the ways of understanding the past keep changing. In this sense, the past is not “dead” and unchanging, since historians continue to revise their conclusions about what “really” happened.

A contemporary student must not assume that even the knowledge acquired in a Master’s program will give him all or nearly all the knowledge he may need for ministry. This reality underscores the importance of self-directed learning, for given how fast the total amount of human knowledge is increasing it really is up to a learner to figure out what he needs to continue to learn in order to serve God better. For WCIU students, this means that they do not wait to be told by someone else what is important to learn, but decide for themselves which subjects they want to continue to learn about.

Misunderstandings about Self-Directed Learning

In some educational settings self-directed learning is defined as complete learner control over the content and methods of what is learned. In this view, a person ought to learn only what he wants to learn. The content of what is to be learned is in no way or degree specified or directed by another person, such as a teacher.

This definition of self-directed learning is in our view problematic for three very important reasons. To non-western students and their sponsoring NGO’s, the repetition of the word “self” in this article might be misunderstood as implicitly urging students to become completely autonomous learners bent on fulfilling their personal and private learning...
agendas, unrelated to the purposes of their sponsoring NGO’s. On the contrary, our desire is that through learning the skills of self-directed learning our students may better serve the goals and purposes of their sponsoring NGO’s. In addition, we recognize that one’s actual circumstances have a lot to say about how much choice a person has in deciding what and how much to learn about any subject. Finally, we do not intend for self-directed learning to be used as a pretext not to acquire knowledge accumulated over the millennia that is still relevant and useful in contemporary settings. WCIU stresses the acquisition of foundational knowledge in particular areas upon which students may continue to build in the areas they choose after completing their course of study with us.

Teacher-Directed Learning Contrasted with Self-Directed Learning

Probably every student has experienced education in a traditional, formal, residential setting, where students are teacher-directed. A teacher lectures in a classroom in order to pass on knowledge to students. The teacher’s role is conceived of as an expert, one who already possesses knowledge that students are expected to master. Students are conceived of as empty vessels into which the teacher pours information. Educators say that in the traditional educational setting, the teacher is active in the educational process, while the student is passive. It’s interesting to note that the practice of traditional education originated when the volume of knowledge was growing at a much slower rate than is the case today.

Self-directed learning in the WCIU MA Program is very nearly the opposite of teacher-directed learning, although the content of what a student learns is specified in the curriculum. The authors of the required readings are the “experts” who convey foundational knowledge to students.

If the content of what a student is supposed to learn is already specified, how can we say that WCIU MA students are to be self-directed in their learning?

First, there are no objective tests and essay tests in the study program in which a student is required to repeat back facts. Mentoring sessions are not intended to be times when students repeat back to mentors the “correct” answers to questions.

Second, we expect students to scour or ransack the readings for information that is relevant to their own settings, asking themselves how some piece of foundational knowledge speaks to an issue in their international development work.

Third, we encourage students to create an agenda of the topics they want to discuss in each mentoring session with their mentors. A wise self-directed learner knows that a mentor has a wider range of experiences and probably deeper knowledge of some issues than he or she does. Thus, even a self-directed learner listens to the wisdom a mentor has to offer.

Fourth, students continue to direct what they want to learn by their choice of research paper topics, within the limits of directions for each assignment. Students choose to research topics that seem to them to be most relevant for their own work.

To be successful in your academic career, you must become a self-directed learner, an active learner, one who initiates, manages and modifies his own learning goals and activities. At WCIU, we want you to learn and practice these self-directed learning skills while a student so that you may use these same skills in your NGO work.

Practices of a Self-Directed Learner

Initiator of Learning

A self-directed learner initiates his or her own learning goals and activities. The student decides what he or she wants to learn, whether it is knowledge or skills, as well as the level of proficiency desired in them. How does the learner herself prefer to learn a new skill? By watching and mimicking what someone else is doing? By having a coach instruct her about how to perform the skill? By reading about it in a book? The student herself makes these decisions. The learner also acts out of some motive
intrinsic to herself or the situation in which she finds herself. There is something about what she wants to learn that drives the learner to acquire the knowledge or skills. She starts to learn something because she wants to, because for some reason learning that new thing is desirable to the learner.

Manager of Learning

In order for learning to continue up to the point where the goal of the learner is actually reached, the learner must also manage and modify as necessary both the learning activities and the learning goals. The learner must ask herself several questions: Am I learning what I want to learn? Am I satisfied with my progress to this point in time? Am I happy with the learning methods I’ve chosen to use? Are the chosen methods actually yielding the anticipated results? To manage well one’s progress towards achieving the student’s own learning goals, the student must monitor her own progress – or lack of it – towards reaching a learning goal. The self-directed learner also monitors her own actual circumstances in life to discern which elements might be hindering the learning. Finally, the self-directed learner monitors herself to ascertain how she is feeling about the learning process and the learning goals initially established. Such self-monitoring is essential for a self-directed student to manage and modify her own learning goals and activities.

Modifier of Learning

As a student monitors herself, her circumstances and her progress, it may be that the original learning goals established by the learner turn out to be either unrealistic, too general, or off-target. As the learner acquires more knowledge, she may decide to shift her focus of learning from one section to another, to discontinue learning of a particular concept entirely, or recognize the need to add an area of knowledge to the list of things to be learned. It may also be that the self-directed learner either loses interest in acquiring a skill or reaches a level of satisfaction with a new skill faster than anticipated.

Of course, the self-directed learner may also discover that learning a particular thing is turning out to be much harder than anticipated! Perhaps a particular learning goal, however desirable, is simply not achievable in the actual circumstances. Or, as the self-directed learner acquires more knowledge of a particular area, she realizes that more is possible to achieve than first thought! Thus the learning goal may actually be expanded or raised in light of new knowledge gained and the methods and means employed.

Habits of Mind Critical to Being a Self-Directed Learner

To actually initiate, manage and modify one’s learning goals and activities, it is essential for a self-directed learner to acquire certain habits of mind. Let us emphasize that the following habits of mind are in fact habits that can be cultivated and learned; they are not inherent characteristics of certain kinds of people or of certain kinds of personalities.

Motivation and Persistence

Let’s consider together curiosity, motivation and persistence. We already understand that a self-directed learner is motivated primarily by his own interests and perceived needs. Although every person has external constraints and requirements imposed on him and must, in fact, live within those real limitations, a self-directed learner nevertheless in reality is still primarily a self-motivated learner. Over the course of longer periods of time, every person to the greatest extent possible tries to live in harmony with one’s own deepest motives and desires. Each of us is in fact driven to fulfill our deepest desires, which may also be described as motives. Given enough motivation – and simple curiosity is one motivating factor in people’s lives – every person will persist in seeking ways to fulfill a desire until it is satisfied. In learning as in the rest of life, persistence is tied to motivation.

A self-directed learner interrogates himself about his own motives so as to identify the
real reasons why he wants to initiate a particular learning task and persist in the learning activities until his own goals are reached. Any goal worth achieving almost inevitably will have obstacles to be overcome and frustrations to be endured, in order to achieve that goal. If you think the goal is worth it, you will persist. The self-directed learner is honest with himself when he is frustrated in the achievement of a learning goal and identifies the sources of the frustration. If the motivation is strong enough, he will persist in working towards the desired end.

Perhaps as a student have already identified to your own satisfaction the real reasons why you want to study at a particular university. Persistence in your studies, as well as in your service to God in general, is tied directly to your motivations.

Curiosity

The learning assignments of the MA Program at WCIU are strongly influenced by a problem-solution approach to learning. We assume that students have encountered some complicated problem in service to God for which they would like to find solutions. We assume that students are curious about how to understand better, initiate, improve, or repair some activity. That curiosity is one thing that drives a self-directed learner to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to solve a ministry problem. As you gain more skill and knowledge in a particular area, it is likely that your interest and curiosity in related skills will increase, as you realize the relevance or impact of those related skills on your primary skill of interest. This is typical for self-directed learners.

Reflective Thinking

Another important habit of mind may be characterized as “asking good questions” of yourself, of the process and of the goals you’re seeking to achieve. A self-directed learner, acknowledging that he does not yet know the proper questions to ask, tries to find out from more knowledgeable people which questions he should be asking. A self-directed learner, having discovered an area of ignorance in oneself, seeks ways to fill the knowledge gap by consulting with an “expert,” or by asking someone to recommend whom to ask in order to find that “expert,” whether the expert be a living person nearby or the author of a book or journal article.

Critical thinking and reflective thinking are ways of “asking good questions.” What we mean by reflective thinking is “… not mere daydreaming, but a purposeful activity; an act of turning thought back to action” (Hammond and Collins 1991, 164). Reflection and action are not disconnected and unrelated activities, for reflection should lead to changes in actions already underway or contemplated. In reflective thinking, the learner mentally revisits an event or situation in order to understand it better (what actually happened? And why?) so as to understand its significance (what does it mean?) in order to evaluate its implications (What should I change? What should remain unchanged?) for present and future activity.

Flexible Thinking

Another aspect of reflective and critical thinking is the practice of deliberately choosing to view a situation or event from multiple perspectives. Depending on the student’s background, adopting even temporarily an alternate point of view may be unsettling, as some may infer that adopting that point of view to gain insight into a problem necessarily means agreeing with it. Yet you need not commit yourself to another point of view in order to appreciate what it may have to contribute to your own understanding of a problem or situation. Although you may feel that some position, idea or practice doesn’t make sense or must be rejected, the fact that other people subscribe to that idea or position and are engaged in that practice testifies that it makes sense to them. Why does it make sense to them? If you look at the idea or practice from their point of view, you will discover the sense in it to them.

A self-directed learner has learned to think flexibly, for it is in problem solving that flexible
thinking is particularly useful. The World Christian Foundations curriculum, for example, requires you to use multiple perspectives to gain greater insight into issues. You are required to view problems in terms of their historical antecedents and in their cultural contexts. Doing so does not negate a biblical perspective on life.

At the same time, the learner reflects on the premises or assumptions upon which the questions are based. One’s underlying and sometimes-unarticulated assumptions may determine which questions a researcher, for example, thinks are important to ask. Which questions a researcher asks determine the information collected, which then strongly influences how a problem is diagnosed and solutions to it conceived. If a learner/researcher asks enough of the right questions, the collected data probably will not be badly skewed in favor of or against a particular class of diagnoses or solutions. Asking enough of the right kind of questions must include identifying the assumptions that frame a discussion about a particular issue.

**Critical Reflection**

In **critical reflection**, the focus is turned inward on the learner himself. What is motivating me to ask these questions? What assumptions do I have that cause me to ask certain questions and not others? The self-directed learner reflects critically not only on what others have done, not only on the assumptions that others bring to a discussion, but on himself, as well. Through this self-interrogation the self-directed learner gradually becomes more aware of his own assumptions and beliefs that shape his understanding of both causes and solutions.

**Deep-Level Learning and Encapsulated Learning**

Another habit of mind might be called the practice called **deep-level learning**. When this kind of learner is reading a journal article, for example, she is seeking to understand the basic message of it, including the author’s intentions for writing it in the first place. She is also seeking to relate the information in the article to what she already knows about the topic, noting its consistency or inconsistency with knowledge already possessed.

By way of contrast, other learners may be fairly characterized as **surface-level learners**, who practice what we describe as **encapsulated learning**, where knowledge is viewed as discrete and disconnected bits of information unrelated to anything else. These learners do not see the connections that already exist between pieces of information, and they are certainly not looking to make new connections between already existing pieces of knowledge. These learners collect only disconnected facts.

Self-directed learners seek to relate new information to other subject areas not directly related to the subject of the article itself. A self-directed learner knows that the knowledgeable person is one who also sees relationships between facts, and recognizes that understanding relationships between them helps you to know how to use or apply those facts to other situations.

**Moving Towards Self-Directed Learning**

L. Dee Fink (Fink 2003, 54) summarizes the work of two authors, Gerald Grow and Margaret Martinez who created descriptions of typical kinds of learners that may help you understand something of the process that every learner must go through in order to become more self-directed, rather than remain teacher-directed, in learning. A passive learner is a typical kind of learner produced by traditional educational practices. Grow calls this kind of learner a dependent learner, one who usually has little or no initiative in learning, waiting to be told what to do. A second kind of student Grow identifies is an interested learner, whom Martinez characterizes as a conforming learner. “Interested” and “conforming” suggest that the student is focused only or primarily on satisfying the requirements of the degree program, with little or no thought given to the application of the knowledge and academic skills learned to the student’s own context. A self-directed student somehow takes ownership of the Learning Outcomes of their
program for the purpose of applying the knowledge and skills learned to his own setting. That is, the Learning Outcomes of the Program are means to an end, not ends in themselves. A self-directed student views gaining a degree as a way to achieve a larger purpose.

Conclusion

We conclude this Introduction to Self-Directed Learning by quoting from and reflecting briefly on our description of ideal graduates of the MA Program at WCIU.

Ideal Graduates are self-directed learners who are able to interact critically with Biblical, Cultural-Anthropological, and Historical knowledge, keeping in mind the larger picture of God’s global purposes. As a result, graduates are scholar-activists who use research and communication skills to identify and solve real world problems.

In this statement, self-directed learning is deliberately placed at the very beginning as a way to emphasize the importance we give to it in our study program. Becoming a self-directed learner is crucial for student success. Becoming practitioners of self-directed learning skills such as critical and reflective thinking is essential for scholar-activists who are determined both to diagnose and propose solutions to the complicated problems of international development waiting to be solved. This article will have achieved its central purpose if it has stimulated you to approach and engage in your studies in a more active and intentional manner.

References
