

Self-Directed Learning: **A 2021 Landscape Analysis and** **Recommendations for Transforming** **Educational Practice**

Executive Summary

four pages – six minute read



Institute for
Self Directed
Learning

Executive Summary

The Institute for Self-Directed Learning envisions a world where every high school graduate is a self-directed, independent learner.

The Institute recently published a landscape analysis of the field of self-directed learning. The full report [can be found here](#). This 4-pager is a high-level executive summary of key concepts and findings further outlined in the landscape analysis, including:

- The Institute's definition of self-directed learning
- The *why* of self-directed learning
- Key theories that support self-directed learning
- Shifts schools can make toward self-directed learning
- Key levers of self-directed learning design
- Exemplary self-directed learning schools and research hubs
- The mission and work of [The Institute for Self-Directed Learning](#)

We invite you to sign up [here](#) for one of our upcoming workshops or webinars for an even deeper exploration of self-directed learning!

What is Self-Directed Learning?

Many researchers and organizations have offered their own definitions of what exactly is self-directed learning. Similar terms used include “learner-driven education,” “learner-led environments,” “student-centered education”, and others. Regardless the nomenclature, current definitions lack: clarity about the kinds of humans we want to foster through self-directed learning (values, beliefs, mindsets, skills, and character); the type of work adults will need to do to cultivate self-directed learning mindsets, skills, and habits with learners from diverse backgrounds; and the kind of society a large-scale system of self-directed learning might produce.

We, then, have developed an evolved definition of self-directed learning:

Self-directed learning is when learners—in the context of an interdependent community of peers, trained educators, and caring adults—choose the process, content, skills, learning pathways, and outcomes of learning, with the guidance, accountability, and support of others, in service of finding a calling that will change their communities and the world.

The Why of Self-Directed Learning?

If this education system existed—one that truly empowered every child to be self-directed and equipped with the knowledge of self and the world they need to make informed choices—it would address many of the issues currently plaguing us as a nation and world because we would have:

- A society of citizens who graduate ready to do the hard and critical work of participating in democracy;
- An education system that is more equitable in its experiences and outcomes;
- Young people with the opportunity, insights, and skills to develop the innovations of the future; and
- Individuals who are empowered to follow their passions and discover their calling.

Key Theories Supporting Self-Directed Learning

To design equitable, empowering self-directed learning environments, it is critical to examine the science of learning and human development, broadly. Self-directed learning educators benefit from incorporating theories that address the foundational cognitive, socio-cultural, motivational, and developmental underpinnings of learning. Each of the following theories are backed by decades of research, and we argue that they are critical for moving from a definition of self-directed learning, to an empowering enactment of it in practice.

- **Constructivist Theory**—Individuals make, or “construct,” meaning based on their own experiences of the world.
- **Sociocultural Theory**—Learning is a social process, influenced by cultural contexts, the environment, and social relationships.
- **Social Cognitive Theory**—Learning and knowledge are acquired through observing others within one’s environment.
- **Social Career Cognitive Theory**—The interests we have, the goals we set, and the actions we take are influenced by our backgrounds, person inputs, learning experiences, self-efficacy (what am I capable of?), and outcome expectations (what will happen?).
- **Information Processing Theory**—Compares the human mind to a machine, and serves as an underpinning theory for learning new skills, mindsets, and habits.
- **Self-Determination Theory**—Argues that environments that support an individual’s experience of autonomy, competence, and relatedness foster the most volitional and high quality forms of motivation and engagement for activities, which result in enhanced performance, achievement, persistence, and creativity.

Mindset and Priority Shifts Schools Can Make Toward Self-Directed Learning

- **Accountability for learning, not administrative efficiency.** Accountability is both personal and community focused, providing opportunities for gauging individual learning and growth through choice-making and experiencing natural consequences, which in turn yields community or school-wide lessons, achievements, and accolades. This culture in turn fosters a growth mindset and a willingness to “fail” or, in other words, to learn.
- **Connection, not compliance.** In self-directed learning spaces, accountability is often to oneself and one’s community and compliance is not top-down from teacher-to-student, but instead is a set of norms created for, and by, the learners within a community.
- **Equity enabler, not inequity reproducer.** Self-directed learning addresses equity concerns by acknowledging and nurturing the gifts and existing cultural capital within each learner, and approaching learning experiences through a lens of agency-filled democratic processes that build autonomy within a community context. To this end, self-directed learning environments support children to find and develop their unique voice, and to therefore have a direct say and influence in their own learning journey and impact within their communities.
- **Designing equitable and empowering environments and experiences, not “fixing” learners.** Self-directed learning moves educators and our system away from deficit ideologies about children to focusing on what educators have control over: the environments and experiences they create.

Key Levers of Self-Directed Learning School Design

- **Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment:** Provide choice, make the why behind the learning relevant, give illustrative examples, provide formulas and recipes, embed real-world feedback, and give opportunity for public demonstration.
- **Adult Roles:** Guides, not teachers. The learner is responsible for their own learning, and the educator, through Socratic guiding and the designing of learning experiences, helps learners cultivate the skills of self-directed learning.
- **Community and School Culture:** Self-directed learning environments are communal and relationship centered. To cultivate self-directed learning, educators and learners must co-create a strong sense of community and accountability.
- **Spaces and Facilities:** Traditional school spaces are not typically designed to be inspiring, flexible, and to promote learner agency. The way a classroom, maker space, or entire school building is designed is a key part of creating a self-directed learning environment.
- **Technology:** E-learning platforms and affordable laptops have provided the opportunity for self-directed learning at scale. With current content and the continuous innovations at work, the world truly is at a learner's fingertips.

Exemplars of Self-Directed Learning

[Summerhill](#) Suffolk, England

[The Sudbury Valley School](#)
Framingham, Massachusetts

[The Putney School](#) Putney, Vermont

[The Workshop School](#) Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

[The Acton Academy Network](#) International

[Ad Astra School](#) Los Angeles, California

[The Chicago Free School](#) Chicago, Illinois

[Red Bridge](#) San Francisco, California

[Workspace Education](#) Bethel, Connecticut

[The Albany Free School](#) Albany, New York

[The Forest School](#) Fayetteville, Georgia

[Prenda micro-schools](#) U.S., Nationwide

[Freie School](#) Frankfurt, Germany

[Ecole Mahana](#) Courgenay, Switzerland

[Native American Community Academy](#)
Albuquerque, New Mexico

[The New School](#) Atlanta, Georgia

[The Life School](#) Atlanta, Georgia

Research and Networking Hubs

- [The Alliance for Self-Directed Education](#)
Dedicated to creating a future in which Self-Directed Education is embraced as a cultural norm and is available to all children, everywhere.
- [The International Society of Self-Directed Learning](#)
Works toward the promotion of self-directed lifelong learning and to the encouragement and dissemination of continued research on self-directed learning both within and outside of institutional contexts: in childhood education, higher education, adult education, training and human resource development, as well as formal and informal contexts.
- [Alternative Education Resource Organization](#)
Advancing student-driven, learner-centered approaches to education by providing information and resources to students, schools, and families on educational choices.

Research and Networking Hubs (continued)

- [Alternatives to School: Welcome to the World of Self-Directed Education](#)
Provides resources and a list of schools that practice self-directed education.
- [North-West University - Research Unit Self-Directed Learning](#)
A collective of researchers at Northwest University in Potchefstroom, South Africa that focuses on the promotion of Self-Directed Learning in all education sectors.
- [Learning 1 to 1](#)
Focuses on Relational Learning and cultivating autonomous learning habits in students.

To Advance the Field of Self-Directed Learning

To catalyze learning and implementation of self-directed learning, our [Institute](#) has identified the following Core Purposes:

1. **Capacity Builder**—We will coach and consult with others to build their capacities for self-directed learning.
2. **Community Building Catalyzer**—We will connect researchers, educators, administrators, and learners in the field of self-directed learning.
3. **Equity Enabler**—We will work to build the social capital and access to opportunity for all learners.
4. **Learning Lab**—We will learn by doing, putting self-directed learning pedagogies in place at our lab school, [The Forest School](#) in south Atlanta, Georgia (U.S.).
5. **Resource Hub**—We will be the world leader in self-directed learning research and resources. Our near term research agenda includes: a literature and field review for self-directed learning, seeding relationships with other experts and practitioners, and researching to codify a framework for self-directed learning that can be scaled widely.

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