

## Moving on to Self-Directed Learning

Moving on from the formalities of education in school is expected to be a transitioning process that happens within the later years of the school experience. There are perhaps two stages at which self-direction begins to emerge and necessarily, take root. The first occurs at the age of 16 when the first round of public examinations becomes the qualification for entry into the sixth form, further education college or apprenticeship. This is the point at which classwork may have a role but there is an increasing expectation that the student is able to manage their own learning.

The second comes two years later when students seeking to enter higher education and university find themselves in a situation where they are expected to have learned how to learn. Again, some tutoring will require classwork but students will have to adjust to a learning process that is enquiry-based and dependent upon the building of a body of knowledge for which the students themselves will have been responsible.

***'What the learner already knows is the most important factor influencing learning'*** Ausubel

It is the learner's past experience that determines what information will demand their attention and how they will interpret it. Thus, past experience forms the basis for new learning but it also creates obstacles within the learning process. If new learning cannot be linked with what is already known, or it appears to conflict with existing beliefs, learners are left with a choice. Do they acknowledge the inadequacy of their present understanding, or do they reject the new ideas and withdraw?

### Transformational Perspectives

Moving ahead and trying to grapple with the new understanding, may mean risking '*an unknown transformation of our self-concept*', in other words, accepting a change in ourselves. If we are to overcome this threat we need time to stand back and explore our established meanings and values before we can move on to a new awareness.

In adulthood our fund of new experiences brings about a learning process that '*focuses on modifying, transferring and re-integrating meanings, values, strategies and skills rather than forming and accumulating the new, as in childhood*'. The greater the accumulation of learning in childhood, the richer the building and modifying of learning in adulthood.

### Pressures Exerted by Lack of Time

Time is a very precious to every adult. We tend to see life as 'an ever increasing past, a fleeting pressured present, and a finite future.' Therefore, when learning projects are undertaken voluntarily, the investment of time becomes a more important pillar of the learning process than an investment of money or effort. Indeed, it also stands to reason that with the many calls on adult time, adults are more likely to value and profit from learning activities that are practical. '*The moment of greatest learning for any of us is when we find ourselves responsible for a problem that we care desperately to resolve.*'

### Readiness to Learn

Research suggests that adults are more receptive to learning following periods of transition leading to major changes in their lives. At these times they are likely to reassess their personal goals, re-confirm self-esteem and reassert themselves as members of a society that is changing around them.

Research has also revealed that learning needs that accompany developmental tasks such as becoming a parent, or indeed, facing the difficulties and opportunities of changed relationships, create a learning experience that is much more difficult to by-pass or reject. These times of *readiness to learn* have been seized upon as 'teachable moments' within the developmental spectrum of the life-cycle. Nonetheless, it is perhaps more likely that an orientation towards meeting the demands of life's journey means that an adult can usually identify what it is they need to learn, and when.