

# **TEACHING LEARNERS TO BE SELF-DIRECTED**

by

GERALD O. GROW

## **Author**

Gerald Owen Grow is professor of magazine journalism at Florida A&M University. He graduated from Harvard in 1964 and received a Ph.D. in English from Yale in 1968 (in the peaceful days before Deconstruction), with a dissertation on Shakespeare's tragedies and Milton's Paradise Lost. He is the author of Florida Parks: A Guide to Camping in Nature, a nature-lover's guide to the Florida outdoors. Address correspondence to:

Gerald Grow  
Division of Journalism--TH 428  
Florida A&M University  
Tallahassee, FL 32307

Email: [ggrow@famu.edu](mailto:ggrow@famu.edu)

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## **The Author**



**HIRSUITE AND TIE**

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Portrait of the Author dressed for a formal lecture.

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## TEACHING LEARNERS TO BE SELF-DIRECTED

GERALD O. GROW

### ABSTRACT

Based on the Situational Leadership model of Hersey and Blanchard (1988), the Staged Self-Directed Learning Model proposes that learners advance through stages of increasing self-direction and that teachers can help or hinder that development. Good teaching matches the learner's stage of self-direction and helps the learner advance toward greater self-direction. Specific methods are proposed for teaching students at each stage, although many different teaching styles are good when appropriately applied. Several pedagogical difficulties are explained as mismatches between teacher style and learner stage, especially the mismatch between a student needing direction and a non-directive teacher.

When I began teaching college in the late 1960s, many of my students were teachers taking classes for recertification. It never occurred to me that I was practicing adult education. But they learned so differently than younger students -so much more personally and willingly, and with so much independence -that they taught me new ways to teach. The First and hardest lesson took about a year: to shut up and listen. Inspired by the possibilities, I Sought out educators in the San Francisco area with similar interests and joined them in workshops, retreats, and study groups to learn what we called "humanistic" teaching. Characteristic of the times, I wrote a manifesto on self-education, "Notes Toward an Ideal College" (Grow, 1973), which was published in a teacher education journal.

After fifteen years outside academia, I returned to the college classroom- teaching magazine journalism to adults-to-be at a state university. Only now students responded differently. Many were passive and dependent upon being taught. Others resisted what I had thought were learner centered methods of teaching. A few became defiant, or defiantly indifferent. The response of one student, though, drove me to rethink what I knew about teaching.

She hated me.

I had received the usual range of student responses, from like to dislike and everything in between. But no one had ever hated me. No matter how nice I was, no matter how much interest I showed in her own learning process, she simply hated me. I was too unnerved to find a constructive <sup>1</sup>response. I couldn't get her to talk to me. Colleagues could not help me understand what was happening or what to do. (Some thought I must be a bad teacher to be admitting such problems.) Since her hatred symbolized other lesser failures to reach other students, I knew then that I would have to learn to teach differently -or leave.

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<sup>1</sup> End of page 125 in printed article

While struggling with this problem, I found a concept around which to organize my observations: Students have varying abilities to respond to teaching that requires them to be self-directing. The main outlines of this paper emerged in 1987 as a series of diagrams and teaching practices. Only later did I have the opportunity to begin a literature review. That search uncovered few articles specifically addressing the question of how to teach students with varying degrees of self-direction, but it introduced me to the basic literature on adult education, which contains some of the most exciting thinking about teaching that I have encountered. The search confirmed that others considered this line of thought important. Indeed, nearly every point in this article has been stated elsewhere, for example, in Mezirow's urging that "enhancing the learner's ability for self direction in learning [is] a foundation for a distinctive philosophy of adult education" (1981, p. 21). Reading the dissertations by Candy (1987) and Gerstner (1987) was particularly exhilarating and humbling.

This paper presents a model, the Staged Self-Directed Learning (SSDL) Model, that suggests how teachers can actively equip students to become more self-directed in their learning. Although the model may apply to less formal learning situations, it is directed to teachers, expressed in terms of "teachers" and "students," and was devised with educational institutions in mind.

## THE MODEL

As its starting point, the SSDL model borrows several key concepts from the Situational Leadership Model of Paul Hersey and Kenneth Blanchard. One of the leading concepts of modern management theory, Situational Leadership is described in full in their classic work, *The Management Of Organizational Behavior* (1988). Hersey and Blanchard argue that management (and, by extension, teaching) is situational: The style of management should be matched to the employee's "readiness." Readiness, a combination of ability and motivation, ranges from "not able" and "not willing or motivated" to do the specific task at hand, to "able and willing" in the task at hand. Readiness is situational and it may even be task specific. (A salesperson may be good at selling, yet "able but unmotivated" to complete the necessary paperwork.) A good manager chooses a mix of directiveness and personal interaction ("socioemotional support") that accomplishes two things. First, it matches the employee's readiness so that the task at hand can be accomplished. Second, it helps move the employee toward being more self-managing. There is no one good way to manage everyone, yet <sup>1</sup>everyone can be managed in such a way that they increase in the ability to be more self-managing.

The idea of a progression from dependency to self-direction is not unique to Situational Leadership. A movement of that kind is often presumed to be part of maturing into adulthood (e.g., Knowles, 1980). Erickson and others have charted life as a series of stages that have the same tendency. The seminal article on how leaders can assist this progression is Tannenbaum and Schmidt's (1957) description of a leadership continuum, which influenced the Situational Leadership model and is reflected in several articles in adult education. For example, Millar et al. (1986) use Tannenbaum and Schmidt's model, and Pratt (1988) employs some of their terminology to explore the roles teachers should take with students who have differing degrees of self-direction. Situational Leadership has a wide following among managers in business and education, but studies of its effectiveness are inconclusive and it has critics and competitors. Nicholls (1985) claims that the model suffers from fundamental flaws, but like several other critics, offers an only slightly revised version of Situational Leadership to replace it. Blake and Mouton's Managerial Grid (1964) advocates a team approach as a way to maximize both productivity and personal development, claiming, in effect, that there is a single best way to manage. Both models -Managerial Grid and Situational Leadership-have attempted to subsume one another and the debate between them is not over.

In developing this paper, I have become aware of holding certain assumptions, which I state here:

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<sup>1</sup> End of page 126

1. The goal of the educational process is to produce self-directed, lifelong learners. Many current educational practices in public schools and universities, however, do more to perpetuate dependency than to create self-direction.

2. There is more than one way to teach well. With some exceptions, good teaching is situational-it varies in response to the learners.

3. The ability to be self-directed is situational in that one may be self-directed in one subject, a dependent learner in another. Self-direction, however, is not entirely situational; it is partly a personal trait analogous to maturity. Once developed, certain aspects of self-direction -are transferable to new situations.

4. Self-direction is advantageous in many settings and this model is built upon a strong belief in its value-but there is nothing inherently wrong with being a dependent learner, whether that dependency is temporary or permanent, limited to certain subjects or extending to all.

5. Just as dependency and helplessness can be learned, self-direction can be learned -and it can be taught.

6. A theory does not have to be right to be useful. Nearly every action we take results from a workable convergence of misconceptions.

Brookfield (1984; 1985; 1986), Candy (1987), and Gerstner (1987) have devoted more than a thousand pages to analyzing the meaning(s) of self-<sup>1</sup>directed learning.<sup>1</sup> Yet, in spite of its complexities, self-directed learning remains the North Star of adult education. Few people have ever defined self-directed learning with precision; nonetheless, self-directed learning is an immensely useful concept for orienting oneself to education at all levels.

Some features of self-direction are distinctly situational: Few learners are equally motivated toward all subjects. Some features appear to be deep, familial, perhaps even genetic traits of individual personalities-such as persistence. Self-directed learning is a good candidate for what the great cognitive psychologist Vygotsky called a "higher mental function" or a "tool of thought" (1978, p. 126), a mental "organ" developed over time through a particular history of social interaction, which can operate in any situation. Parts of self-directed learning develop before the whole, yet the components do not necessarily combine (to paraphrase Vygotsky) into a constellated unity made of separately-developed parts. Some aspects of self-direction develop best in nurturing environments while others are nearly impossible to suppress. Some develop as the peak of Maslow's pyramid of needs; others are so essential to survival that they emerge almost before the self.

Faced with a concept like self-directed learning, one can either conclude that it appears messy merely because it has been inadequately defined, or one can realize that beneath all of our indispensable labels for basic human activities (e.g., "behavior," "perception," "thought..... experience..... communication") lie the roots of a similar complexity. The idea of self-directed learning continues to fascinate partly because it embraces so many credible inconsistencies. It sounds like people we know. And even though the fundamental terms have widely come into question-whether there is a "self" that "directs" an "activity" called "learning," and what "education" has to do with all this (see Gerstner [1987], especially)-no other concept has superseded self-directed learning as a working idea.

Candy (1987) usefully distinguished three meanings of the term "self-directed learning": autonomy as a personal quality; autodidaxy as learning outside formal instruction; and learner-control (along with teacher-control) as an essential consideration of formal instruction. In those terms, this article uses "self-directed learning" to refer to the degree of choice that learners have within an instructional situation. I would almost be happy to adopt the term "learner control," except that highly self-directed learners sometimes choose highly directive teachers. In this paper, "self-direction" retains some of its aura of undefined possibilities and appears as the open-ended opposite of "dependent" learning. Besides, this article is not about self-directed learning theory; it is about teaching. Specifically, it proposes a way teachers can be vigorously influential while empowering students toward greater autonomy. Figure 1

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<sup>1</sup> End of page 127

introduces the four stages of the SSDL model, which were inspired by the four leadership styles described in Situational Leadership.<sup>1</sup>

**Figure 1.** The Staged Self-Directed Learning Model

*The teacher's purpose is to match the learner's stage of self-direction and prepare the learner to advance to higher stages.*

Stage	Student	Teacher	Examples
Stage 1	Dependent	Authority Coach	Coaching with immediate feedback. Drill. Informational lecture. Overcoming deficiencies and resistance.
Stage 2	Interested	Motivator, guide	Inspiring lecture plus guided discussion. Goal-setting and learning strategies.
Stage 3	Involved	Facilitator	Discussion facilitated by teacher who participates as equal. Seminar. Group projects.
Stage 4	Self-directed	Consultant, delegator	Internship, dissertation, individual work or self-directed study-group.

### Stage 1: Learners of Low Self-Direction

Dependent learners need an authority-figure to give them explicit directions on what to do, how to do it, and when. For these students, learning is teacher-centered. They either treat teachers as experts who know what the student needs to do, or they passively slide through the educational system responding mainly to teachers who "make" them learn. Some learners are dependent in all subjects they are "taught;" others are dependent only in some subjects. Some dependent learners become excellent students within specialized area; they can be systematic, thorough, and disciplined, mastering a settled subject or transmitting a fixed tradition. Some learners are enduringly dependent; others are temporarily teacher-dependent because, in Pratt's terms, "they lack either relevant knowledge, skills, and experience or the motivation and self-confidence to pursue educational goals" (1988, p. 168).

Being a dependent learner is not a defect; it can, however, be a serious limitation. All learners of whatever stage may become temporarily dependent in the face of new topics. For example, learners of other stages may freely choose to learn in a dependent mode for efficiency or to gain access to a certain teacher.<sup>2</sup>

*Teaching Stage 1 Learners: Coaching.* There are at least two ways to approach the teaching of dependent learners—through coaching and through insight. To use the coaching method, you must first establish your credibility and authority. In this stage, the teacher is an expert whose mastery must be real. Dependent learners respond best to a clearly-organized, rigorous approach to the subject. Prescribe clear-cut objectives and straightforward techniques for achieving them. Many students at this stage expect discipline and direction, so provide it.

Some Stage I learners test their teachers, so decide in advance how you will answer overt or veiled challenges to your authority. Organize the course clearly with rigorous assignments and definite

<sup>1</sup> End of page 128

<sup>2</sup> End of page 129

deadlines. Keep S1 students busy learning specific, identifiable skills. Set standards beyond what students think they can do, then do whatever is necessary to get them to succeed. Create and reward success. Many well established behavioral teaching methods work well in the S1 stage.

Avoid giving choices to S1 learners. Keep your communication clear and thorough, but mainly one-way. Instruction does not have to be impersonal, but the focus should be on the subject-not on the learners. Grading must be unequivocal, objective, and clearly related to the task at hand. Feedback should be immediate, frequent, task-oriented, and as impartial as possible.

Teacher expertise and effectiveness are the key in dealing with the dependent learner. Don't be too nice about it. If you are, they may dismiss you as soft, try to take advantage of you, or lapse into self-defeating habits of non-learning. Many learners at this stage of development depend on teachers to make decisions they themselves will later learn to make. Don't be shy about accepting the role. (Many S1 learners respond to gentler, more interactive methods. It is important, however, to be prepared for resistance.)

Many of the characteristics of Stage 1 teachers sound terrible to proponents of student-centered styles of teaching. Fox (1983), for example, criticizes this method as the "transfer" theory of teaching, where teachers pour knowledge into students. Freire (1968) calls it the "banking" approach. Stage 1 teaching can be limiting and even punitive; the SSDL theory proposes however, that Stage 1 teaching is bad only when it is applied to the wrong students or used to perpetuate dependency. Learning in a dependent mode goes against the grain of progressive, humanistic, and adult education. Yet, as Pratt emphasizes, "there is nothing inherently demeaning or destructive in pedagogical, temporarily dependent, relationships" (1988, p. 168).

A different approach to teaching Stage I learners requires involving them in the design and content of the learning. Students begin from insight into who they are and what they want or need to learn. Adult educators customarily begin this way. Another learner-involvement approach, critical pedagogy, is derived from the work of Paulo Freire (Freire, 1968; Shor, 1987; Shor & Freire, 1987). Teachers in this approach lead students to take responsibility for their own learning, especially by confronting the ways they are held back by society and by themselves. Although insight methods are<sup>1</sup> often used with Stage I learners, the SSDL model calls them Stage 3 approaches. Some Stage 1 learners are not good candidates for insight approaches, and they may resist sharing responsibility for learning.

Examples of Stage 1 teaching include formal lectures emphasizing subject matter, structured drills, highly specific assignments, "ditto'd" exercises, and intensive individual tutoring. Examples of the insight method: Developing critical awareness of one's life situation, needs analysis, and goal-setting (more tinker Stage 3). Examples of Stage 1 models are coaches in sports, drama, music, vocabulary and spelling drills, karate instructors, drill sergeants, and high school band conductors at the phase of getting the mechanics of the music right.

Stage 1 teaching seems to be rejected by many writers on education, but it has tremendous popular appeal. People who want to go "back to the basics" usually want to get there in Stage 1 classrooms. A successful Stage 1 teacher can be seen in the film, *Stand and Deliver*. That teacher drives, goads, pushes, and cajoles a group of disenchanting underachievers until they learn calculus almost to spite him. Then he lifts their self-esteem with the realization that they did it, and they can do it again. He prepares them (as a good Stage 1 teacher must do) for higher levels of achievement and self-direction. Another example of a Stage I teacher appears in the film, *Lean On Me*, where a strong father-figure with an authoritarian style revives a high school that had gone out of control. But like most admirers of Stage 1 methods, the makers of this film do not ask how students progress to greater autonomy and responsibility.

## **Stage 2: Learners of Moderate Self-Direction**

Stage 2 learners are "available." They are interested or interestable. They respond to motivational techniques. They are willing to do assignments they can see the purpose of. They are confident but may

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<sup>1</sup> End of page 130

be largely ignorant of the subject of instruction. These are what most school teachers know as "good students."

*Teaching Stage 2 Learners: Motivating..* Stage 2 teaching is what is known as "good teaching" in many schools and colleges. The Stage 2 teacher brings enthusiasm and motivation to the class, sweeping learners along with the excitement of learning. Such a teacher will persuade, explain, and sell, using a directive but highly supportive approach that reinforces learner willingness and enthusiasm. Learners at this stage go along if they understand why and the instructor provides direction and help. Or they will go along because they like the teacher. Learners at this stage respond positively to personal interaction from the teacher, something not always true of S1 learners. To teach at this stage, give clear explanations of why the skills are important and how the assignments help attain them. Show concrete results in what you teach. Motivated and encouraged, S2 students will continue to learn on their own.<sup>1</sup>

Because part of the function of a Stage 2 teacher is to prepare students to become more self-directing, it is important at this stage to begin training students in such basic skills as goal setting. Use praise, but with an eye to phasing out praise (extrinsic motivation) and phasing in encouragement (which builds intrinsic motivation) (Dinkmeyer & Losoncy, 1980). Build confidence while building skills. Help students begin to recognize their different personality types, life-goals, and styles of learning. Set high standards and motivate students to achieve them.

Communication is two-way. The teacher explains and justifies each assignment and persuades students of its value. Students communicate their responses and interests. A good Stage 2 teacher ties the subject to the learners' interests. However, Stage 2 teaching is still quite directive. The Stage 2 teacher resembles Fox's (1983) "shaper"-the teacher who "views students, or at least student brains, as raw material (metal, wood, or clay) to be shaped, or molded, or turned to a predetermined and often detailed specification" (p. 153). Typical of innovative educators, however, Fox devalues the Stage 2 teacher and promotes other, less-directive teaching styles. The SSDL model proposes that this teaching style may be the best way to teach learners who are at the S2 stage (in relation to the specific subject matter to be learned), so one should be prepared to use it without apology.

Examples of Stage 2 teaching include a lecturer as inspiring performer, industry training programs, teacher-led discussion, demonstration by an expert followed by guided practice, structured projects with predictable outcomes, close supervision, ample encouraging feedback, highly interactive computerized drill, structured projects of commercial art and design studios (Fox's example), and a mother teaching a child to talk. These examples involve the combination of two elements: strong personal interaction and a strong focus on subject matter.

Many inspiring school teachers are Stage 2 teachers. Other models include great lecturers, evangelists, and charismatic TV teachers, such as Carl Sagan. Aerobic dance classes combine Stage 1 directiveness with Stage 2 motivation. Stage 2 teaching is what many learners need when first faced with a difficult subject, such as Shakespeare. The teacher's enthusiasm carries students until they have learned enough to become self-motivated. If students remain dependent upon the teacher for motivation to learn, however, the teacher has failed.

The Robin Williams character in *Dead Poets Society* is an example of the Stage 2 teacher as lecturer-performer. He challenges a jaded but accessible group of boys to become excited about poetry. His methods are theatrical in that he is a master performer when he lectures. He also requires them to become involved, to stand before the class and recite their own work, to take risks. Interestingly, in response to his encouragement, they move to a version of Stage 3: They form their own poetry group. Notice that their self-direction is situational: They do not also form a geography group or become more self-directing in the ability to talk to their fathers.<sup>2</sup>

Shirley MacLaine, in the film, *Madame Sousatzka*, shows a different kind of Stage 2 teacher who drives, goads, cajoles, inspires, woos, critiques, and dominates the developing student (incorporating many

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<sup>1</sup> End of page 131

<sup>2</sup> End of page 132



Stage 1 methods). The poignancy of this film derives from the fact that her best pupils must and do outgrow her and move on to less-directive teachers.

### **Stage 3: Learners of Intermediate Self-Direction**

In this stage, learners have skill and knowledge, and they see themselves as participants in their own education. They are ready to explore a subject with a good guide. They will even explore some of it on their own. But they may need to develop a deeper self-concept, more confidence, more sense of direction, and a greater ability to work with (and learn from) others. Stage 3 learners will benefit from learning more about how they learn, such as making conscious use of learning strategies (Derry, 1988/89).

As part of the process of weaning from other-direction, students in Stage 3 may examine themselves, their culture, and their milieu in order to understand how to separate what they feel from what they should feel, what they value from what they should value, and what they want from what they should want. They learn to identify and value their own experiences in life. They learn to value the personal experiences of others. They develop critical thinking, individual initiative, and a sense of themselves as co-creators of the culture that shapes them. This may involve a therapy-like shift of a personal paradigms "perspective transformation" (Mezirow, 1981) or "life-world transformation" (Wildemeersch & Lirman, 1988 )-or it may come as a gradual enhancement of developing power (Brookfield, 1987).

Stage 3 college students see themselves as future equals of the teacher, as professionals or worthwhile adults in the making, but they may not be experienced or motivated enough to continue on their own. They want to be involved with teachers and other learners and to be respected for who they are and what they can do. Stage 3 learners work well with the teacher and with each other in the design and implementation of learning projects. Students can learn collaboratively at any stage, but students who are ready for Stage 3 learning can accomplish far more together than students in earlier stages. Stage 3 can be an exciting phase, and many students don't want to leave it. They are happy working in the warm interaction of a friendly group. A vital part of Stage 3 is for students to learn to create lifelong learning situations for themselves.

*Teaching Stage 3 Learners: Facilitating.* The teacher comes closest at this stage to being a participant in the learning experience. Teacher and students share in decision-making, with students taking an increasing role. The instructor concentrates on facilitation and communication and supports students in using the skills they have.

The teacher can serve in the role Fox (1983) calls an experienced "local guide." The teacher leads students through terrain that is well-studied but full of variety. The teacher offers tools, methods, techniques of mountain-<sup>1</sup>

climbing, and ways of interpreting the experience. The teacher-guide shares experiences and opens others to those experiences.

As students mature toward greater self-direction, the Stage 3 teacher will help them structure the transition toward independence. The "facilitator" might begin by negotiating interim goals and interim evaluations, and then give learners more rope. Standards at this level are not the teacher's; they are negotiated with the student and often related to some external standard, such as professional accreditation requirements. Stage 3 learners can be assigned to work in groups on open-ended but carefully-designed projects. Written criteria, learning contracts, and evaluation checklists help learners monitor their own progress. As they become more competent at goal setting and pace, learners can take on greater freedom and more difficult assignments. The facilitator's goal is to empower learners.

Examples of Stage 3 include a seminar with instructor as participant, student group projects approved and facilitated (but not directed) by the instructor, and group projects progressing from structured assignments with criteria checklists, to open-ended, student-developed group projects performed without close supervision.

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<sup>1</sup> End of page 133

Examples of Stage 3 models are humanistic education, humanistic group therapies, critical pedagogy as described in Shor (1987), collaborative learning, training literature for adult professionals, non-directive teachers who develop students' own motivation rather than provide that motivation, and andragogical adult education. Carl Rogers is a good example of a Stage 3 teacher: listening, drawing out, facilitating, encouraging, validating feelings, honoring risks, supporting those who venture beyond what is safe and known for them, and cultivating personal awareness and interpersonal respect.

#### **Stage 4: Learners of High Self-Direction**

Self-directed learners set their own goals and standards-with or without help from experts. They use experts, institutions, and other resources to pursue these goals. Being independent does not mean being a loner; many independent learners are highly social and belong to clubs or other informal learning groups.

Learners at this stage are both able and willing to take responsibility for their learning, direction, and productivity. They exercise skills in time management, project management, goal-setting, self-evaluation, peer critique, information gathering, and use of educational resources. The most mature Stage 4 learners can learn from any kind of teacher, but most Stage 4 learners thrive in an atmosphere of autonomy. Some learners become situationally self-directed while some become self-directed in a more general sense.<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, Stage 4 learning does not completely do away with teachers. As Candy (1987) puts it, "There are certain skills and other bodies of knowledge which are best and most easily mastered under the tutelage of an expert" (p. 229).<sup>1</sup>

*Teaching Stage 4 Learners: Delegating.* The progression is now complete from the subject-matter focus of the earliest stages to the learner-focus of Stage 4. The Stage 4 teacher's role is not to teach subject matter but to cultivate the student's ability to learn. The ultimate subject of Stage 4 is the learner's own personal empowerment. The teacher may: Consult with learners to develop written criteria, an evaluation checklist, a timetable, and a management chart for each project they develop; Hold regular meetings so students can chart and discuss everyone's progress and discuss problems; Encourage students to cooperate and consult with each other, but not to abandon responsibility; Focus on the process of being productive, as well as the product; Work on more advanced projects with clear meaning outside the classroom; Emphasize long-term progress in career or life, through stages such as intern, apprentice, journeyman, master, and mentor; Bring in speakers who represent each stage in such a journey. Suggest biographies of role models; Require self-evaluation.

There is clearly more than one way to be a good Stage 4 teacher. The Situational Leadership model, which assumes an organizational setting in which the manager is trying to produce self-managing subordinates, advocates a lessening of interaction between teacher and student. Due to the psychological maturity of Stage 4 students, the instructor gradually reduces both two-way communication and external reinforcement. As enjoyable as it is to interact with such advanced learners, such a teacher will fade back, so that the learner's own efforts become the unequivocal focus. The relationship between teacher and student is collegial and distinctly not intense; instead the relationship is high between students and world, students and task, and perhaps among students. The teacher actively monitors progress to ensure success, but steps in only to assist students in acquiring the skills to be self-directing and self-monitoring. The teacher weans the student of being taught.

There are other S4 roles besides delegating. Another S4 teacher might inspire and mentor. Another might challenge or provoke the learner, then step back. Another might become the externalized professional conscience of the learner, directing and evaluating the learner in almost oppressive detail-but ensuring that the learner internalizes those functions thoroughly. (S4 learners sometimes need the enlightened reapplication of S1 methods.) Another might plant concepts, questions, or paradoxes in the learner's mind which require a lifetime to work through. Fully self-directed learning is not possible in an

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<sup>1</sup> End of page 134

institutional setting, and the SSDL model does not require an institutional setting. Rather, self-directed, lifelong adult learning is offered here as the single most important outcome of a formal education.

Examples of Stage 4 are internships, term projects, independent study, senior project, dissertation, student-directed discussion with teacher involvement as invited, student newspaper or magazine with faculty sponsor, and creative writing. (Many other examples occur outside educational institutions.) Examples of non-institutional models are non-directive therapies and<sup>1</sup> meditation, consultants, writing coach for professional reporters, inservice teacher training, and mentoring.

In Stage 4 the learner may not need a teacher at all. A Stage 4 teacher might set a challenge, then leave the learner largely alone to carry it out, intervening only when asked to help-and then not help meet the challenge, but instead help empower the learner to meet the challenge. Castaneda's Don Juan, Gandhi, and Joseph Campbell are possible models. Judging from the Tao Te Ching, Lao Tzu must have been one of the ultimate Stage 4 teachers. Some Stage 4 teachers, like the Sufi master Ajnabi, teach invisibly: "Nobody ever knew what they were learning, because he made them possessors of learning in a manner which prevented them from prizing learning. They generally thought that they were taking part in some completely irrelevant activity" (Shah, 1970, p. 22).

Many graduate professors are Stage 4 teachers of a more familiar kind. They supervise the learner in a project or thesis, stay far enough away for the student to progress alone, but remain available for consultations. They monitor to assure that students make progress, rise to the occasion, and use what they know. They are always ready to step in to offer a change in direction, to suggest a skill, to help evaluate, to serve as a sounding board, and to empower. But the ultimate task of a Stage 4 teacher is to become unnecessary.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

### Mismatch between Teaching Styles and Learning Stages

Problems arise when the teaching style is not matched to the learner's degree of self-direction. Figure 2 represents one of the most important outcomes of the SSDL model. Out of the grid of 16 possible pairings between teaching styles and learning stages, six pairings are mismatches, and two of those are severe.

Verner (1962) believed that teaching method must be matched to subject matter, and he mapped student "participation" (similar to the dependent-independent dimension in this theory) against subject matter (ranging from abstract to experiential). The present theory presses toward a different conclusion, and, while I have some doubts about this conclusion, here it is: The SSDL approach is independent of subject matter. Teaching style should be governed not by subject matter but by the balance between teacher directiveness and student control, usually set by the student's ability to participate as a self-directed, self-motivated, responsible learner-though sometimes negotiated between teacher and student (such as when students capable of self-direction choose a directive teacher).

*The T1/S4 Mismatch.* When Stage 4 self-directed students are paired with a Stage 1 authoritarian teacher (referred to here as T1), problems may arise. Some S4 learners develop the ability to function well and retain overall control of their learning, even under directive teachers (Long, 1989). Other S4 learners will resent the authoritarian teacher and rebel against the barrage<sup>2</sup> of low-level demands. This mismatch may cause the learner to rebel or retreat into boredom. To make things worse, the SI teacher will probably not interpret such a rebellion as the result of a mismatch; the teacher is likely to see the student as "surly, uncooperative and unprepared to get down to the hard craft of learning basic facts" (Fox, 1983, p. 160). Hersey (1983) describes the result of this mismatch as "havoc," in which "extreme over control by the leader can result in stress and conflict where the follower engages in behavior designed to get the leader out or to get out from under the leader" (p. 4).

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<sup>1</sup> End of page 135

<sup>2</sup> End of page 136

The T1/S2-S3 mismatch is one of the fundamental difficulties with the public school system. Students who are capable of more individual involvement in learning are often relegated to passive roles in authoritarian class-<sup>1</sup> rooms. Adults who return to college may find themselves faced with a similar mismatch. Their life experiences and learning skills enable them to learn at the S3 or S4 level in many subjects, but at many colleges they find faculty accustomed to using S1 and S2 methods on adolescents. Furthermore, after many years of responsibility, adults may experience difficulty learning in from S1 teachers. Adults may be unused to blindly doing what they are told without understanding why and consenting in the task. Many of them are accustomed to having authority. They don't jump through hoops just because somebody says to--even though younger students are ordinarily expected to do so without question. Older adults returning for graduate study, in particular, may run aground on courses like statistics, which are often taught by briskly directive faculty using the S1 mode. The S3 mode is sometimes not used with older learners, even when it is possible and appropriate, simply because teachers lack experience in this type of teaching. Mature students may respond like the disgruntled dog in a recent New Yorker cartoon, who complained, "It's always 'Sit,' 'Stay,' 'Heel'--never 'Think,' 'Innovate,' 'Be yourself'" (Steiner, 1990). Qualification.

**Figure 2.** Match and Mismatch between Learner Stages and Teacher Styles

*The most severe problems occur when dependent learners are mismatched with non-directive teachers and when self-directed learners are mismatched with directive teachers.*

S4 Self-Directed Learner	<b>Severe Mismatch</b> Students resent authoritarian teacher	<b>Mismatch</b>	Near Match	<b>Match</b>
S3 Involved Learner	<b>Mismatch</b>	Near Match	<b>Match</b>	Near Match
S2 Interested Learner	Near Match	<b>Match</b>	Near Match	<b>Mismatch</b>
S1 Dependent Learner	<b>Match</b>	Near Match	<b>Mismatch</b>	<b>Severe Mismatch</b> Students resent freedom they are not ready for
	T1: Authority, Expert	T2: Salesperson, Motivator	T3: Facilitator	T4: Delegator

<sup>1</sup> End of page 137

*The T4/S1 Mismatch.* A different problem occurs when dependent learners are paired with a Stage 3 or Stage 4 teacher who delegates responsibility that the learner is not equipped to handle. (I developed the entire SSDL model just to gain the insight reported in the following paragraph.) With such students, humanistic methods may fail. Many will not be able to make use of the "freedom to learn," because they lack the skills such as goal-setting, self-evaluation, project management, critical thinking, group participation, learning strategies, information resources, and self-esteem, which make self-directed learning possible--skills such as those described by Guglielmino (1977), Oddi (1986), and Cafarella and O'Donnell (1987). In this mismatch, students may resent the teacher for forcing upon them a freedom they are not ready for. In Pratt's words, they may feel "frustration and anger when, in a misguided spirit of democracy, they are expected to make decisions without sufficient knowledge or expertise" (1988, p. 169). Wanting close supervision, immediate feedback, frequent interaction, constant motivation, and the reassuring presence of an authority-figure telling them what to do, such students are unlikely to respond well to the delegating style of a nice humanistic facilitator, hands-off delegator, or critical theorist who demands that they confront their own learning roles. They may even hate the teacher (as my student hated me), or, like the Chinese law students described by Nadler (1989), they may dutifully recite the words of authority figures and shy away from the kind of independent thinking Americans value.

Hersey (1983) describes the results of this mismatch a kind of "havoc" that occurs when the followers do not receive the guidance they need, and,

lacking the ability to perform the task, tend to feel that the leader has little interest in their work and does not care about them personally [This form of leadership makes] it difficult for these followers to increase their ability and reinforces their lack of confidence If the leader waits too long but then provides high amounts of<sup>1</sup> structure, the followers tend to see this action as punitive rather than a helping relationship. (p. 4)

Several telling examples of this kind of mismatch can be found in the reports of innovative teaching in Rogers (1983). One student, whose ability to respond with self-direction was less than that demanded by the course, wrote:

I am the product of a system built around assignments, deadlines, and conventional examinations. Therefore, with this course graded by the flexible method and four other courses graded by the more conventional methods I tend to give less attention to this course than it merits due to lack of well-defined requirements. (Rogers, p. 91)

In another section, Rogers acknowledges "the shock and resentment that sometimes occur when students are faced with the necessity of making responsible choices" (p. 93). Other teachers in the book blame such students for not taking responsibility for their own learning, concluding that in dependent learners "old conditioning feels safe and operates well" (p. 66). The teachers quoted in this book want students to be more self-directing, but they have no pedagogical method for helping students move from dependency to self-direction. That is what the Staged Self-Directed Learning Model proposes.

### **Discussion of Mismatches**

The T4/S1 mismatch (or the milder mismatch of T4/S2) points to a fundamental problem with the extreme "free school" approach to education (practiced by Neill [1,960] and attempted by many). This approach trusts that, left alone, children will learn on their own. The literature on self-directed learning, however, suggests that "learning on your own" requires a complex collection of self-skills and learning skills which not all learners spontaneously acquire. Unless self-direction is explicitly encouraged, "free" schools and "open" programs may work only for those whose family background has already prepared them for self-direction (Tunian, 1988).

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<sup>1</sup> End of page 138

Teachers using critical pedagogy have also reported difficulties when the method does not match the learning stage of the student. Even though critical pedagogy is specifically designed to address the learning problems of students in their real situations (including the classroom), some students do not respond. "Most of my mainstream college students ... are waiting for the teacher to speak and do all the work and leave them alone to copy down what should be memorized," Ira Shor reported. "They generally begin passively alienated, and many stay that way until the end" (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 129). For all its virtues, critical pedagogy alone may not be sufficient to move students from dependent to independent learning. The SSDL model suggests that problems may arise when the S3 approach of critical pedagogy conflicts with the need SI students have for being taught.<sup>1</sup>

Though adult educators recognize that adult learners are not necessarily self-directed learners, it is widely assumed that adults will become self-directed after a few sessions explaining the concept. (See, for example, Rutland & Guglielmino's [1987] well-designed program for teaching adults about self-directed learning before they begin a self-directed learning group.) But not all adults will become self-directed when told. Adult learners can be at any of the four learning stages, but the literature on adult education is dominated by advocates of what the SSDL model would call a Stage 3 method—a facilitative approach emphasizing group work (epitomized by the generous, gentle approach in Knowles, 1975). Even teachers of adults, however, may need to approach certain learners in a directive, even authoritarian style, then gradually equip those learners with the skills, self-concept, and motivation necessary to pursue learning in a more self-directed manner.

Freire, advocate of a classroom in which student and teacher receive equal respect, acknowledges the paradoxical need to be directive:

On the one hand, I cannot manipulate. On the other hand, I cannot leave the students by themselves. The opposite of these two possibilities is being radically democratic. That means accepting the directive nature of education. There is a directiveness in education which never allows it to be neutral . . . My role is not to be silent. (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 157)

Every stage requires balancing the teacher's power with the student's emerging self-direction. Pratt (1988) makes a similar case for practitioners of andragogy to "acknowledge states of dependency as potentially legitimate" (p. 170) and provide the needed direction.

*Good Teaching.* The SSDL model suggests why "good teaching" is widely misunderstood. Most people seem to think that there is one way to teach well. Awards usually go to a teacher who is outstanding in one of the first two stages—the one who "pours it on" or the one who leads and motivates students—less often to the one who encourages students to develop on their own, or the one who engages the most advanced students with deep, open ended problems.

What is "good teaching" for one student in one stage of development may not be "good teaching" for another student or even for the same student at a different stage of development. Good teaching does two things: It matches the student's stage of self-direction, and it empowers the student to progress toward greater self-direction. Good teaching is situational, yet it promotes the long-term development of the student.

In my experience, teachers of the SI-S2 types and teachers of the S3-S4 types have an almost innate antipathy for one another's methods, and often for one another's personalities. Humanistic educators (for example, Fox, 1983) often ridicule or reject S1 and S2 methods. "Back-to-the-basics" teachers, conversely, often ridicule those they consider fuzzy and non-directive. In typical polarizing fashion, each group compares its virtues to the other's faults.<sup>2</sup>

This split is reminiscent of an old debate in adult education. Teachers of the S1 and S2 types appear more "pedagogical," while teachers of the S3 and S4 types appear more "andragogical," and the two camps readily oppose each another. But like more recent discussions of andragogy (and staged models like Pratt's), the SSDL model infuses the assumptions of andragogy through all levels of education and

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<sup>1</sup> End of page 139

<sup>2</sup> End of page 140

through all methods of teaching -even directive methods, when they are part of a long-term program for developing greater self-direction. I have listened for many years to colleagues who devalue their counterparts. Whatever its faults, the SSDL model provides a way to honor the strengths of a broad range of teaching styles.

Nearly any teacher can teach in more than one style. Hersey and Blanchard (1988) give an interesting account of all possible pairs of management styles in the Situational Leadership Model, though I suspect that teachers lump into two large groups: those for whom the S1-S2 styles come naturally, and those for whom the S3-S4 styles come naturally. The S3-S4 group seems dominant among writers on adult education

A study of 122 high school and college choral conductors found different ones favoring styles 1, 2, or 3, but many using a dominant style and one or more secondary styles (Allen, 1988). I believe that some teachers use all four styles quite naturally. In tapes of Toscanini's rehearsals, for example, the maestro's dominant style is what I would call S2 (the same style Allen found dominant in choral directors) -leading by motivating. When mechanical difficulties arise such as tuning, balancing sections of the orchestra, or mastering his interpretation, he does not hesitate to ask world-class musicians to follow blindly while he drills them in the S1 mode. When rehearsing with a soloist, however, Toscanini shifts to an S3 mode in which he uses the entire orchestra to facilitate the soloist's interpretation. Changes can be negotiated; but the maestro does not dictate them. And, in the S4 moments of transcendent magic, he (without ceasing to be dynamically present) virtually disappears, so that the music plays itself through him and through the orchestra. In those moments, each player is independently self-directed in one of the great communal experiences of human culture. Such convergences underscore the difficulty in drawing clear lines between self-direction, other-direction, and teaching style.

*Some traps for teachers and learners.* The temptation for the Stage 1 teacher is to be, authoritarian in a Punitive, controlling way that stifles initiative and creates resistance and dependency. The temptation for the Stage 2 teacher is to remain on center stage, inspiring all who will listen but leaving them with no more learning skills or self-motivation than when they began. The Stage 3 teacher can disappear into the group and demoralize students by "accepting and valuing almost anything from anybody" (Fox, 1983, p. 162). The Stage 4 teacher can withdraw too much from the learning experience, lose touch, fail to monitor progress, and let students hang themselves with rope they are not yet accustomed to handling. Alternately, a misguided Stage 4 mentor can insidiously infiltrate all aspects of an advanced<sup>1</sup> student's life (Bishop, 1988). In each instance, the teacher falters in the immensely difficult juggling act of becoming vitally, vigorously, creatively, energetically, and inspiringly unnecessary. Don't underestimate how difficult it is for a teacher to move from being a requirement to being just one among many choices in how to learn.

Learners fall into traps, too. One kind of student gives the appearance of being a Stage 4 self-directed learner but turns out to be a highly dependent student in a state of defiance. The one who shouts loudest, "No! I'll do it MY way!" is likely to be a "false independent" student who may resist mastering the necessary details of the subject and try to "wing it" at an abstract level. Such students may apply for early admission to graduate seminars, for example, before they have the background knowledge or learning strategies to handle Stage 3 and Stage 4 learning situations. False independents need to have their knowledge and skills brought up to the level of their self-motivation. They may well need to learn how to learn productively from others. They may benefit from a strong-willed facilitator who challenges them to become not only autonomous but also effective.

Other students get caught up in resisting direction. A group of highly resistant learners can coerce teachers into an authoritarian mode -and then frustrate them. This game is played out daily by millions of school kids, with the help of their teachers. The resistant form of Stage 1 is probably not a natural condition. Most preschool children seem naturally to be Stage 3 or 4 learners when undirected. Even when taught in a directive manner, they are generally available, interested, excitable, and have a spontaneous creative energy that they are willing to direct into satisfying projects under the guidance of

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<sup>1</sup> End of page 141

a capable teacher. Many of us wonder why that magnificent desire to learn cannot be cultivated continuously throughout schooling.

Resistant dependent learning may well be a product of culture, upbringing, and the public education system. Students do not naturally arrive at high school, college, or adult education programs at once dependent upon teachers and resentful of being taught. They become that way as a result of years of dependency training. And they continue resisting with the implicit cooperation of teachers. Quigley (1990) describes sources of resistance in adult basic learners, including threats to cultural identity. We need a better understanding of dependency in context, and we will have to face the possibility that certain forms of help only make the problem worse.

### **APPLYING THE MODEL IN CURRICULUM, COURSE, AND CLASS**

So far, this paper has presented the SSDL model and used it to provide insights into several common teaching situations. We will conclude by considering it as an overall guide to instruction. The fundamental movement implicit in the SSDL model is the movement from dependent to self-directed learning. Teaching is matched to learners with the explicit purpose of helping them attain the knowledge, skills, motivation, and goal of becoming more autonomous in learning and (I add somewhat idealistically) in life.<sup>1</sup> Returning to Figure 2, we can see that there are six areas of significant mismatch between teaching style and learning stage. Blocking out the mismatches highlights the 10 areas in which teaching style and learner stage are matched or nearly matched. Those 10 areas, moving in the diagram from lower left diagonally to upper right, constitute an area of workable match -a "learning field" (in a similar figure, Hersey [1983] calls it the High Probability Match diagonal) -onto which several pedagogical activities can be usefully mapped.

Paul Hersey, co-author of the Situational Leadership Model, described an experimental course in which students were moved through more dependent roles into self-directed roles (Hersey & Blanchard, 1988). The course began with lectures (delivered in a Stage 1 teaching style), moved to directed discussions (Stage 2), then to less-structured discussions (Stage 3), and finally to student-directed discussions (Stage 4). During the semester, the teacher gradually changed role, (see Figure 3) from expert, to guide, to facilitating<sup>2</sup> participant, to consultant for student-directed activities. Student roles changed during this time in response to the teacher's role -from dependent to participant to student-led learning. Hersey (1988) reported student resistance to moving into Stage 3 and 4 learning (a resistance Millar et al. [1986] discuss in some depth), but found the course to be more successful than a control course taught in the regular way. (As far as I know, no one else has duplicated this basic experiment in staged self-direction.) Following this example, the SSDL model can be used to plan a course, so that students move from dependent to more self-directed learning over a semester.

**Figure 3.** Applying the Staged Self-Direction Model to a Course<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> End of page 142

<sup>2</sup> End of page 143

<sup>3</sup> Figure 3 appeared on page 143 of the original article.



S4 Self-Directed Learner			Independent projects. Student-directed discussions. Discovery learning, Instructor as expert, consultant, and monitor.
S3 Involved Learner		Application of material. Facilitated discussion. Teams working closely with instructor on real problems. Critical thinking. Learning strategies.	
S2 Interested Learner	Intermediate material. Lecture-Discussion. Applying the basics in a stimulating way. Instructor as motivator.		
S1 Dependent Learner	Introductory material. Lecture. Drill. Immediate correction.		
	T1: Authority, Expert	T2: Salesperson, Motivator	T3: Facilitator T4: Delegator

In a similar way, the overall plan for a college curriculum can be mapped into the four boxes highlighted in Figure 3. Introductory college courses match the S1 student with T1 and T2 teaching styles. Intermediate courses match S2 students with T1/2/3 teaching styles. Advanced courses match S3 students with T2/3/4 teaching styles. S4 students are matched to graduate courses, internships, independent study, and senior thesis, taught in the T3 and T4 teaching styles. In such a way, the SSDL model might be used as a planning tool for coordinating faculty efforts so that students do, in fact, progress toward greater self-direction as they move to upper-level college courses.

Even a single class meeting could be organized so that students move from dependency, through intermediate stages, to more self-directed learning. The teacher can demonstrate a skill, coach them through using the skill, facilitate their application of it, and then have them work in groups to create new situations in which to practice the skill on each other. On a small scale, this progression takes students through the stages of increased self-direction and empowerment as the teacher moves from a directive role to one of facilitating and monitoring.

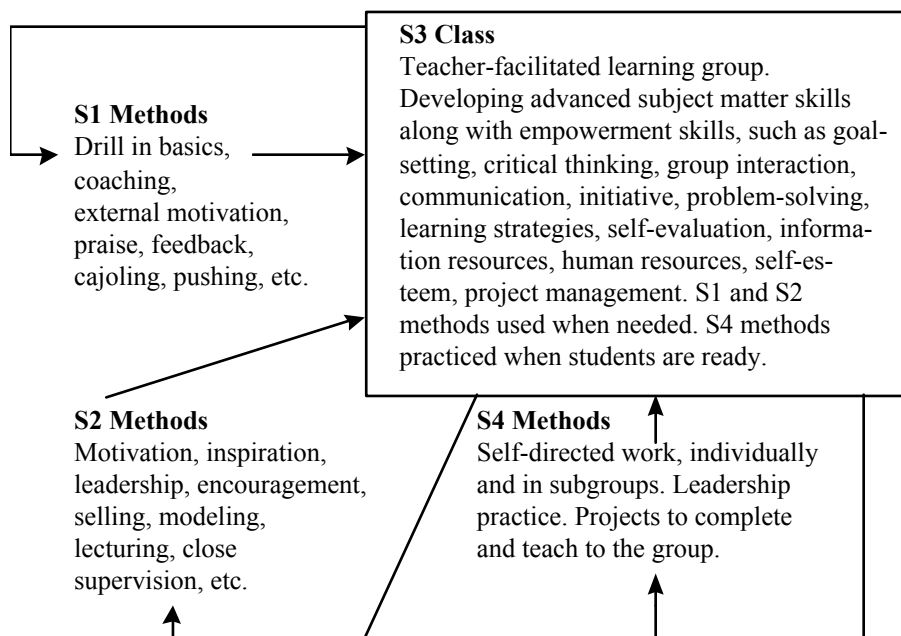
The SSDL model describes a progression of stages, but the progress of a student or a class will rarely be linear, and most classes will contain students at different stages of self-direction. A more realistic, though more complicated, version of the model would be non-linear and iterative. Consider an upper-level college course designed in the S3 model. The teacher serves as group facilitator, with the job of empowering students to take greater charge of their learning and making certain that they master advanced levels of the subject matter. Most of the work of the class takes place in the S3 arena, where the teacher seeks ways to phase out external leadership and empower more student self-direction. But there will be times when other learning modes are necessary (see Figure 4). When the group (or some of its members) are deficient in basic skills, they may need drill and practice, which is an S1 mode. (Even advanced students sometimes choose S1 teachers who push them to achieve goals the students cannot achieve under their own motivation.) Sometimes the S3 teacher may determine that coaching or

confrontation are necessary to reach a student. The class may loop back to the S1 mode for a while, then return to S3.

The need may also arise for continued motivation and encouragement. Sometimes members of the class will supply it. Sometimes the teacher will<sup>1</sup> have shift to the salesmanship mode of S2. There will also be times when the teacher's knowledge matters more than anything else; lecturing may be the best possible response at that point. During the lecture, the class loops back to the S1 or S2 mode, then returns to the group interaction and subtle facilitation of the S3 mode. At times, individuals or subgroups will become ready to exert self-direction and leadership. Those students can go into the S4 mode, carry out a project independently, then conic back to the group and teach the results. In these ways, with the S3 mode of the facilitated group as a base, the class can loop out to the other three stages when they are appropriate.

**Figure 4.** Loops Around the Active Style

*A course may be organized around a specific style, with other styles used as appropriate.*



In a similar way, a class focused on another stage of learning, S1 through S4, can draw support from earlier stages and lean toward later stages. Many college courses center around a series of S1/S2 lectures but have a weekly discussion group more in the S3 mode. Looping may be a more effective way to use the SSDL concept than trying to follow a sequence of linear stages. Still, the map provided by the SSDL model identifies the educational terrain we are traversing. The rigid application of this model would, of course, lead to just another unfortunate orthodoxy. Yet, until a better way arrives, the SSDL model helps one stay focused on the task of developing self-direction.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> End of page 144

<sup>2</sup> End of page 145

## IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

Most teaching models imply a theory of education that sharply constrains their validity, and this one might as well. The goals of training (to perform known tasks well) and education (to develop people who can live in an unpredictable world) are sufficiently different to make one worry that the SSDL model may unwittingly carry the limits of a management model into the much wider arena of education. At what points do management models and education models clash, and how can their differences be reconciled?

The SSDL model represents teaching as independent of subject matter. Yet hatha yoga, karate, and some other subjects are always taught in the same mode, without regard for the self-direction of the learner. Why isn't the learner's ability to be self-directed an important variable in the teaching of such subjects?

Nowhere does the SSDL model ask what learners think about all this. That's a major omission. The model's focus on teacher-facilitated learning further limits its usefulness by excluding teacherless learning. Teaching the already-resistant, chronically-dependent learner remains problematic in this model. In life, we often devote ourselves to solving with one hand the very problems we are creating with the other. Is there another way to construe teaching and learning so that some of the SSDL's solutions become unnecessary?

Teacher expectation may play a greater role than this theory allows. Will students of all kinds act more self-directed merely because that is what the teacher expects? How well can self-direction be faked? Can self-direction be summoned into being by the power of expectation alone, or does it require the separate practice of separate skills?

What do teachers do that causes students to feel more directed or more autonomous? If two teachers deliver identical instructions for a learning exercise, will students perceive them as identically directive? What could make a difference? How much is directiveness a matter of instructional method and how much is it a matter of personal style? The very concept of "directiveness" needs to be examined closely.

This paper has discussed overt teacher directiveness. What about directiveness that is "hidden" in instructional materials, curricula, designed exercises, group procedures, cultural conventions, room design, hypertext links, and the structures of computer-assisted instruction? What about the subtle directiveness of an expert facilitator or designer of educational environments? Do learners relate to hidden directiveness the same way they relate to overt directiveness? Does hidden directiveness promote dependency more or less than overt directiveness? (Does either promote dependency?) Is there a difference in directiveness between a teacher telling the learner what to do and the learner reading a book (or a computer screen) that tells the same thing?

Like any exploratory theory, this one is based alternately on seasoned observations and plausible guesses. Are there really stages of self-direction -or<sup>1</sup> is the Tannenbaum-Schmidt continuum a better description of the relation between teacher and learner control? If there are stages, can teachers identify them accurately? Can learners? What marks a learner's passage from one stage to another? To what extent are these stages developmental, and to what extent are they situational? Would it make sense for each learner to keep a "checklist" of the subskills of self-direction and the extent those are at work in each area of learning? To what degree can teachers alter their natural teaching styles to accommodate students in different stages? When learner and teacher are mismatched, how do they currently handle the situation? What strategies, for example, do mature, self-directed adults use when suddenly faced with an S1 teacher? Do learners develop sequentially through the stages, or are the stages actually modes of learning that can occur in alternation, or even simultaneously, in the same learner?

Anyone interested in relating this model to other leading management models (Theory X and Theory Y, for example) should consult chapter 20 in Hersey and Blanchard (1988). But if stages of the Situational

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<sup>1</sup> End of page 146

Leadership model bear any relation to "learning styles" (clearly an important but tangled area of educational theory), Wittstruck (1986) did not find it.

The SSDL model is a powerful concept, and like all powerful concepts, not to be trusted. Onto the, many complexities of learning, it imposes a brisk, no-nonsense interpretation. It is valuable in the sense of a bright, single-minded colleague who keeps explaining everything so clearly that one is challenged to uncover what is missing and find a better explanation. I have lived my life in the presence of predatory theories that explain too much too easily; even before completing the thought behind this paper, I was arguing with it--and I argue with it still. Yet the SSDL model has a life of its own, it has a contribution to make, and it would not leave me in peace until I wrote it up. I present this model, not as a definitive thing, but as another statement in the ongoing conversation of those who encourage self-directed, lifelong learning.

## NOTE

1. Is self-direction a personal attribute that develops in stages, or is it a situational response? -It is both. Even though one's ability to be a self-directed learner is ultimately (and sometimes strikingly) situational (depending, for example, on self-motivation in the specific learning situation), it is possible to learn how to learn, to learn how to see, to learn how to be, in ways that make one more self-directing in many areas of life. This conclusion goes against a widely-accepted position in the literature today, namely that self-direction is only "a situational attribute, an impermanent state of being dependent on the learner's competence, commitment, and confidence at a given moment in time" (Pratt, 1988, p. 162). Whether the difference in these two positions is one of substance or one of emphasis remains to be seen.

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Note. These cartoons illustrate four styles of teaching described in my article "Teaching Learners to be Self-Directed." The idea of identifying teachers by verbs comes from an article by Dennis Fox, cited in my full article.--Gerald Grow

## The Stage 1 Teacher



Verbs used to describe this teaching style:

Tell, impart, transmit, give, propound, convey, expound, transfer, direct, fill, inform, coach, input, drill, condition.

## The Stage 2 Teacher



Verbs used to describe this teaching style:

Develop, mold, produce, instruct, reinforce, prepare, direct, demonstrate, push, motivate, inspire, shape, drive, persuade, sell, train.



## The Stage 3 Teacher



Verbs used to describe the Stage 3 teaching style:

Lead, guide, initiate, help, show, point the way, explore, facilitate, discuss, share, participate, offer, suggest, negotiate, collaborate, validate.

## The Stage 4 Teacher



Verbs used to describe the Stage 4 teaching style:

Cultivate, encourage, nurture, develop, foster, enable, bring out, mentor, plant, challenge, advise.



## Determining a Student's Degree of Self-Direction

The SSDL model does not contain any method for reliably ascertaining a student's degree of self-direction. This is a major weakness, but not a debilitating one.

Teachers using the model have confirmed to me that they, too, find it possible to make workable estimates of students' stages. From them, and from my experience, I've gathered some clues to look for when estimating a student's degree of self-direction:

- Notice the student's level of motivation. Does he take assignments and run with them, or does he do the minimum, and in a perfunctory way? Does he come to class on time?
- How well does the student perform when asked to take initiative in an assignment? Is she stopped by the first obstacle, or does she invent ways to continue? Can she explore a topic on her own, or does she always need a series of steps to follow?
- Does the student participate in class discussions? Does he come prepared? Does he not only read the assignment, but actually learn from it, remember it, and make it his own?
- How much detailed direction does this student require? Can she take a suggested extra credit assignment, develop it, and relate it to the course? Or does she insist on having everything spelled out--exactly what to do, when it is due, how many points it is worth?
- How well does this student work with others on group projects? Can he take a project, define it, break it into tasks, schedule the tasks so that the group completes them, and finish the project on deadline, up to standard, and with an internal understanding of why it was important?
- How much pressure does this student put on you (the teacher) to be an authority figure who dictates the learning cycle? To what extent does this student want to take charge of her own learning?
- Can this student practice on his own to assimilate the skills necessary to the subject? Or does the practice have to be mandatory and directed?
- In the case of a dependent learner, to what extent does the dependency result from a lack of skills (which he is learning), and to what extent does it result from a lack of interest, low confidence, low motivation, and discouragement?
- More to come....

## **Karate**

For the past two years (as of early 1996), my son and I have taken a martial arts class together. Usually highly self-directed and independent, in this instance I have been a highly dependent learner--and the experience has given me some lessons in good Stage 1 teaching:

- A person who is out of shape may not have the internal ability to choose good exercise. A period of submission to an expert teacher may be necessary before one can learn to design certain learning experiences for oneself--as in learning a musical instrument.
- In our class, beginners always practice where they can see more advanced students doing the same thing. This modeling is highly effective. Perhaps schools should find ways of providing such modeling, instead of grouping children of the same age together.
- In this school, students are encouraged to take a test (for a higher rank) only when the teacher feels confident that they are ready to pass it. They "test to pass." Some students take longer than others, but failure is almost unheard-of.
- In good T1 style, advancement is tracked through a series of ranks (belts), so that students always know where they stand and what the next goal is. Also, feedback in class is frequent, objective, and task-specific.
- As students advance, they begin to teach others. And while the practices are highly regimented, the higher forms encourage a good deal of individual freedom and initiative. Somehow, students gradually become more self-directing as they progress through this highly directed system.
- Like some other martial arts, this class actually sets out to teach self-discipline, self-confidence, persistence, a non-defeatist attitude, personal qualities like kindness, and perceptual skills like awareness of one's surroundings and attunement to one's internal senses. These are important components of self-direction. I have been struck by how these attitudes are physical as well as psychological. Paradoxically, as students learn to kill with their bare hands, they learn that they don't want to. And as students learn more ways to be dangerously powerful, they become gentler human beings.
- I would like to see some university require all students to master a martial art--not only for self-defense but for the personal qualities it develops.

## **A Different Idea about Teaching Stage 1 Learners**

Hersey and Blanchard handle Stage 1 learners (low self-direction) in a detached, objective, efficient manner, with little personal interaction. It is almost a behaviorist mode.

When Ames and Ames adapted the Situational Leadership model, they advocated treating Stage 1 learners differently--with warmth, encouragement, and support. Ames and Ames seem to be saying that students at the bottom of this ladder need the most encouragement, the most motivating, the most enthusiasm from their teachers.

I don't know if one approach is best. Teaching at a historically Black university has exposed me to many teachers, and students, who agree more with Ames than with Hersey and Blanchard. It seems natural for many of my African American colleagues to teach with great personal warmth. And many of my least-independent students seem to expect that kind of warmth. Some are so accustomed to being encouraged that they actually seem to suffer, in a manner of speaking, from too much self-esteem--or at least from a self-esteem that is unconnected with personal achievement. I have had students who showed

no shame at failing to perform, but took this cheerfully as if it was just another minor intrusion of an irrelevant world.

At this point, I can only identify one problem that arises when you try to replace the strict, objective Stage 1 teaching style with a warm and encouraging tone: Many students who have been accustomed to warmth, encouragement, and support appear to have become rather addicted to it. They expect it. They demand it. They demand that teachers bend over backwards for them, meet them 90% of the way, do work for them, forgive their slackness, and promote them whether they passed or not.

It is in this situation that a Stage 1 teacher can be effective, requiring immediate, definite performance by the student and evaluating it frequently. Awarding grades strictly on the basis of objective, measurable progress. Requiring that students accomplish clearly defined tasks that are within their ability, and holding them to the timeline and the standards of performance. Letting students know exactly where they stand at all times, in terms of what they have done and what they need to do.

Now this strictness can be combined with encouragement and motivation, but in Stage 1, everything depends upon the student actually doing the work. That is why so much Stage 1 learning takes place in the classroom, on the spot, under close supervision, step by step by step, until students are ready to move to material that demands greater self-direction.

There is a delicate balance between encouraging and requiring, motivating and demanding performance. The Stage 1 teacher must always stay on her side of the line and insist that students perform. Real achievement is essential to self-esteem.

Naturally, this can lead to problems of student resistance and subversion mentioned in the article. The best antidote I know to this is to give Stage 1 students things to do that are clearly meaningful, and which enable them to make a clear chart of their progress.

# In Defense of the Staged Self-Directed Learning Model

by Gerald Grow

This article appeared in *Adult Education Quarterly*, 1993, Vol. 43. No. 3, in response to Mark Tennant's AEQ article criticizing the Staged Self-Directed Learning Model. Material in [brackets] is new to the on-line version. Extra subheads have been added.

## Abstract

The author welcome's Tennant's point that a mismatch between teacher and student styles may be at times more effective than a match. And his reminder that self-direction should not be considered a generic quality like psychological maturity.

The model, however, does not denigrate directive teaching methods. Also, it has found wide acceptance and has been recently re-invented by others at least twice. Teachers can detect a student's degree of self-direction by observation (though Grow admits that this may be more difficult that it first appeared). The article restates the major claims of the model and identifies new research questions.

## No Prejudice Against Teaching Styles 1 and 2

Mark Tennant's critique of my article, "Teaching Learners to be Self-Directed," misrepresents a crucial point, gives an unsympathetic reading of two others, and provides two useful correctives. Tennant presents me as depicting certain teaching styles as "lower level" and describing them in a "stereotyped and damning fashion" (164). This is not what I believe or what I wrote. When I began developing the Staged Self-Directed Learning (SSDL) model, I did briefly consider some teaching methods "lower" and others "higher," but I consciously abandoned that view more than two years before writing the article in question. In the published article, I tried various methods to avoid calling certain teaching styles "low" and others "high"-such as arranging Figures 1 and 2 so that the spatial relations were reversed among the teaching styles--giving directive teaching the "low" position in one, the "high" position in the other. I have searched the disk file of the published article and can confidently affirm that I never described any teaching or learning style as "lower" than another. Tennant used the term "lower level" in quotes (p. 164), implying that I said it; but those are his words, not mine. In a similar manner, Tennant uses the phrase "expert role" in quotes, and, although this quote accurately represents my view on the point, I never used those exact words. If you are going to argue with a quotation from my publications, Prof. Tennant, start by getting the quote right.

There is absolutely no truth to Tennant's statement, "Grow, by his own admission, has an antipathy for highly structured, teacher-directed learning methods" (164). The passage Tennant quotes as proof of my "antipathy" comes from a description of the traps teachers of each style are susceptible to. It is not a description of what Stage 1 directive teachers are like -- except when they fail in the manner described.

Contrary to Tennant, my article is a defense of a variety of appropriately-applied teaching styles--aimed at adult educators who have focused predominantly on facilitative methods at the expense of directive methods. The article justifies highly-directive, teacher-centered methods--and provides a model for deciding when such methods are appropriate. Indeed, the personal drama that frames the article tells of my own experience in discovering the value, even the necessity, of using highly directive teaching methods with certain students. It is possible that Tennant interpreted the term "authoritarian teacher" as a

criticism; it is purely descriptive. I work around many authoritarian teachers, and that is the best word I know to describe their methods, which, with the right students, work well.

## **Changing Styles During a Course**

In his "second problem" Tennant maintains that I have neglected to address "important questions," such as: In a course that progresses through several teaching styles, "at what point should teachers change their style?" Should the teacher "follow or lead the readiness of students?" (165). While it is true that the article does not specify such changes in detail, I addressed this topic on pages 144-5, where this situation is described: "There will be times when other learning modes are necessary... When the group (or some of its members) are deficient in basic skills, they may need drill and practice, which is an S1 [dependent learner] mode... Sometimes the [facilitative] teacher may determine that coaching or confrontation are necessary to reach a student.... Sometimes the teacher will have to shift to the salesmanship mode of [the motivator]." And so on. As for how to change teaching styles, the example depicts the teacher changing styles both proactively to lead students toward the skills that enable them to be more self-directing, and reactively in response to needs that students present for skill, information, encouragement, or motivation. The question of when to change teaching style is not addressed, because the article does not include such level of detail in the short section on applying the model.

In that section, Tennant says something I find puzzling: "setting aside for the moment the unlikelihood of progression towards self-direction given Grow's descriptive categories of teaching styles..." but he never develops the implication that the SSDL approach is inherently unlikely to lead students toward self-direction. Not setting anything aside, why exactly does a progression toward self-direction seem to Tennant to be unlikely under the SSDL approach? He doesn't say, and I find it amazing that an unsupported allegation of such seriousness would be published in the form of an aside.

## **The SSDL's Excellent Reception**

Many individual teachers, several graduate students, and some college departments have let me know that they find the SSDL model helpful in teaching and curriculum. For example, it helped an engineering department revise its curriculum to include greater student involvement. It helped a directive teacher think through how she might need to change when assigned to teach graduate students. Minnesota used the model to help new teachers develop self-direction in students. [The SSDL model has been reprinted in course packets around the country, including at Harvard.] Since publishing the SSDL model in AEQ, I have found two other groups (Baker, Roueche, & Gillett, Karam, 1990; Ames & Ames, 1991) who have adapted Situational Leadership to teaching, inventing models closely similar to mine. [See Note 1] If the SSDL model is a partial misconception (most concepts are), it is so far proving to be a fruitful one.

## **A Point I Agree With**

On page 165, Tennant makes an excellent point: I agree that we "need to develop an understanding of the circumstances under which a mismatch of styles may be more preferable than a matching of styles." One of the major strengths of the SSDL model--I quickly add--is that it enables one to ask that kind of question clearly for the first time. It also gives one kind of answer, for, inherent in the SSDL model is the concept that the teacher leads students from their comfortable learning style toward greater self-direction. The teacher's task is first to work within the student's comfortable style, then to introduce a creative mismatch that promotes growth. My thinking here was influenced by Hersey and Blanchard

(1988) but additionally focused by Vygotsky's concept (1978) of the "zone of proximal development"--a degree of challenge that promotes learning without producing discouragement.

The prospect of using other mismatches effectively is one I thank Tennant for mentioning. Such an approach can be found, for example, in Zen literature (Herrigel, 1953) and in Castaneda (1968), where some of the teaching methods rely on extreme incongruity between what the student asks and what the teacher provides.

## **Diagnosing the Stages of Self-Direction**

Tennant's third concern is with "how the diagnosis of the stage of readiness for self-directed learning is made." In the absence of an accepted instrument for making such a diagnosis (and the Self Directed Learning Readiness Scale shows how complex and controversial the development of such instruments is), I have the working faith that a teacher can reasonably estimate a student's learning stage from classroom behavior and work submitted. I am suspicious of concepts that draw major conclusions from simple quantifiable measurements, and I am reluctant to exaggerate the precision of this model by prematurely offering a way to quantify it. Such quantification may develop; meanwhile, the model is useful for what it is, without any more quantification than teachers routinely use when grading. I hope someone will study whether the Situational Leadership tests would be useful in quantifying teaching styles and learning stages. It might even be more useful to measure how students assess each teacher's style. (Any graduate students reading this?) But in the meantime, to Tennant's question -- "Who is to be the judge of ability, the teacher or the student?" -- the SSDL model clearly implies this answer: the teacher. This is, as it states, a classroom-centered model.

Tennant asks, "What are the consequences of a mismatch between ability and willingness?" (165). This mismatch is treated explicitly in Hersey and Blanchard (1988), and anyone interested in the SSDL model should read their book for additional background. It says far more than one article can. But in the article does address one such mismatch explicitly, another implicitly.

## **The False Independent Learner**

Tennant asks, "What style should a teacher adopt if students have a strong desire to learn in a self-directed manner, but patently do not have the ability to do so?" He implies that by failing to address this question, the article fails to serve teachers, who "clearly need to make much more complex judgments about their students than Grow's four stage model implies." (165) However, that very question was raised in my article on page 142: "One kind of student gives the appearance of being a... self-directed learner but turns out to be a highly dependent student in a state of defiance..." My article went on to say what a teacher might do in this situation: Such students "may benefit from a strong-willed facilitator who challenges them..." and so on.

Tennant asks: What style should a teacher adopt "if the ability is present [in students] but the will is lacking?" This condition is all but explicitly included in my description of Stage 3 learners, who have knowledge and ability, but "may not be experienced or motivated enough to continue on their own" (Grow, 133). The fairly obvious answer is: a facilitative approach.

Of course, not every question Tennant raises is answered in my article. Otherwise, it would have had to be a book--which I have solemnly promised not to write. (You're welcome.)

## **I Can't Always Judge Self-Direction Correctly**



Although I am not yet convinced of the need for (or value of) a simple test to measure a student's degree of self-direction, a recent experience has challenged my initial conviction that teachers can easily arrive at a correct diagnosis on their own. In a class consisting mainly of college seniors, I turned students loose on several projects that, I thought, would enable them to extend and consolidate the bits and pieces of their knowledge about magazine design and production. Following my own teaching model, I withdrew enough from the class to give them room to exercise what they knew and solve the problems they created. This freedom worked for two thirds of the class. But before I detected the problem, a group of students mismatched to this non-directive approach worked up considerable discontent and suddenly began attacking me for not teaching them.

Ironically, this is the very situation that prompted me to develop the SSDL model in the first place! I should have carefully examined each student early in the semester for clues to the level of self-direction. And I should have continuously monitored the class so I could know when they needed me. But I confess that I don't always take my own advice, even when it works. Still, in such moments--those terrible, awkward moments when you see the experiment failing but have not yet salvaged anything from it--I was never entirely alone. At the lowest point, the Staged Self-Directed Learning Model leaned over and whispered, "I told you so."

### **A Useful Clarification on the Meaning of Self-Direction**

Tennant's final concern (p. 165) with "the tension between conceptualizing self-direction as a generic quality, as opposed to a situation-specific ability" provides a genuinely useful clarification. Tennant rightly says that we should not be "too eager to consider self-directed learning to be synonymous with autonomy, psychological growth and maturity, at least without considerable qualification." In describing the self-directed learner, I did indeed focus on the example of the psychologically mature individual, for I had in mind mature graduate and returning students as examples. At the time of the article, I was not so concerned with describing all the characteristics of all learners in every stage as with using typical examples to characterize an overall cycle of stages, in order to emphasize the implications of a mismatch between learning stage and teaching style. It is painfully clear that certain individuals can be intensely self-directed learners without being mature, wise, or even sane. Iago comes to mind as a literary prototype.

### **Use All Models with Caution**

Once we agree on such a point, we have to admit we are not reaching our conclusions by means of quantitative research methods based on incremental hypothesis testing and inferential statistics, but with the methods of observation, insight, and synthesis used by practitioners. We discuss swimming as swimmers, not as scientists in a fluid dynamics laboratory.

And so I am almost relieved that Tennant thinks the SSDL model lacks explanatory power, internal consistency, and is not capable of handling a range of observations (166). I had feared it did these too well--sure signs of the kind of self-justifying supercoherence that true believers produce. His critique does not establish, however, why a concept like the SSDL model needs any more consistency or explanatory power than it has. It maps new territory well enough, provides useful concepts, and shows you where the path begins. Perhaps he and I have require different things of models. I treat models as ladders to pick fruit with, not as the fruit itself.

I briefly considered writing the article in terms of synchronic and asynchronous correlations between instructor-originated pedagogical gambits and student-originated skill-acquisition-oriented behavior initiatives. But obfuscation rankles me. More people have thanked me for the weeks of rewriting that led

to the article's clarity than for any other thing. For Tennant to slight the SSDL model for having an "easy, simplistic explanatory style" (166) is to mistake clear writing for simplistic thinking.

I'm glad Tennant agrees that the SSDL model should be approached in a critical spirit; I said so myself in the original article. The idea isn't mine; it isn't even Hersey and Blanchard's any more. Like all powerful ideas, it has a life of its own. It gets inside you and thinks through you; it translates problems into its terms, then solves them in its terms. You must maintain a dual relationship--use it but fear it; depend on it but explore alternatives--to any such idea. I welcome Tennant's comments, and any others that will be helpful in promoting a critical discussion of the appropriate applications of the Staged Self-Directed Learning model.

## **The SSDL Model Summarized**

Tennant's reading of my article leads me to paraphrase what I consider the major claims of the SSDL model:

- Learners can progress toward greater control of their learning, but simply being an adult does not assure the ability to take a high degree of learner control.
- Teachers can assist in that progression by cultivating not only the basic knowledge but also the metaskills whose integration makes greater learner control possible. Programs can be designed to gradually increase the degree of learner control as students master basic content and skills. Teachers can shift their teaching styles productively to stimulate learner progress or respond to learner need. The SSDL provides workable labels for such shifts.
- There is no one way to teach or learn well. Different styles work for different learners in different situations. Good teachers understand and use the learner's present stage and help the learner progress toward greater self-direction characterized by greater learning readiness, flexibility, and learner control.
- Degree of learner control depends in part on the situation and in part on learners' ability to transfer skills and metaskills to a new situation. Learner control may also be related to subject matter: some subjects (such as beginning karate) seem to be taught effectively by the same methods to learners in all degrees of self-direction.
- Some mismatches between learner control and teacher control cause educational problems--especially the two extremes: the directive teacher paired with the self-directed learner, and the delegating teacher with the dependent learner.

## **Research Questions Raised**

The SSDL model gives rise to a number of research questions, listed at the end of the original article. I add these new questions, the first one derived from Tennant's critique:

- The SSDL model advocates that a teacher begin by matching the learner's style. When it is more effective for the teacher to adopt a style that is mismatched with the learning style?
- Many teachers appear to use one style only. How do they handle students who have differing readiness to exert learner control? How do students with varying learning styles adapt to a teacher with one style? Is there a single teaching procedure that works for all students, regardless of their ability to exert learner control? For example, the approach described in McCarthy (1987) describes a different set of

four learning styles and advocates an approach to teaching that moves through all four styles in a planned progression during each unit of instruction. Does such systematic eclecticism constitute a single, workable approach to all varieties of learners? Is there a more efficient way to accomplish the same goal, without repeating every lesson in each of four learning modes?

## Recent Thoughts

Since writing the SSDL article, I have become more impressed by two things:

- Some learners have a gift for creating self-defeating non-learning experiences. Many students and teachers in public schools seem to engage in games of coercion and resistance; some of these resistant students become resistant adult learners, for whom facilitative methods will not work. How will they learn to learn?
- The concept of an isolated "self" that is "self-directing" leaves out technological, political, cultural, psychological, biological, spiritual, and other interconnections that should be core concerns in education. How can we talk about education in the context of such ecologies?

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## Note 1

Baker, et al., derive the situational model from their primary model, "Teaching as Leading," which is based on Kolb's Learning Styles Inventory. In their situational model, they apply supportive teaching to a different group of students than I do. That difference could be used to frame a good question for a research project. Ames & Ames describe motivational methods appropriate for students with different degrees of self-direction.