

Launching Self-Directed Learners

Through thoughtfully designed instruction, schools can teach students to take charge of their own learning.

Arthur L. Costa and Bena Kallick

Schooling is much like a spaceship launchpad. All the life-support systems remain attached to the command center until the moment of liftoff when the spaceship is suddenly on its own. So, too, are students launched from school into life, internalizing the lessons they have learned in the classroom so they can successfully navigate on their own.

Skillful navigation depends, however, on effective feedback systems. Students need to learn how to guide themselves along the way, monitor their progress toward a specific destination, and make small maneuvers and midcourse corrections. Thus, school becomes the launchpad for a life of self-directed learning.

Defining Self-Directed

What does *self-directed* mean? When confronted with complex and sometimes ambiguous and intellectually demanding tasks, self-directed people exhibit the dispositions and habits of mind required to be self-managing, self-monitoring, and self-modifying (Costa & Garmston, 2001; Costa & Kallick, 2004).

Self-managing. Self-managing people control their first impulse for action and delay premature conclusions. They generally approach tasks by clarifying outcomes and gathering relevant data that will illuminate the problem. They think flexibly and develop alternative



© Susan Fitzhugh

strategies to accomplish their goals. Self-managing individuals draw on past knowledge and apply it to new situations. They imagine, create, and innovate (see Costa & Kallick, 2000).

Self-monitoring. Self-monitoring people think about their own thinking, behaviors, biases, and beliefs as well as about the effects that such processes and states of mind have on others and on the environment. They have sufficient self-knowledge to know what works for them. They establish conscious metacognitive strategies to monitor the effectiveness of their plans and help them make any necessary alterations. Self-monitoring people persevere in generating alternative plans of action, and they know how and where to turn when confronted with perplexing situations. They listen to others with understanding and empathy.

Self-modifying. Self-modifying people can change themselves. They reflect on their experiences and evaluate, analyze, and construct meaning. They apply what they have learned to future activities, tasks, and challenges. Such people communicate their conclusions with clarity, precision, and prudence, and they readily admit that they have more to learn. Curious and motivated, they remain open to continuous learning.

Self-managing, self-monitoring, and self-modifying capabilities transcend all subject matter commonly taught in school and characterize peak performers in all walks of life. These capabilities make for successful relationships, continuous learning, productive workplaces, and enduring democracies. Education should strive to develop these intellectual dispositions more fully.

Self-Directedness and Self-Assessment

The challenge for educators is to move these expectations from rhetoric to reality by making self-directed learning an explicit outcome for students. Lesson units and learning activities should challenge students to engage in a

FIGURE 1 How Are We Doing? A Process Checklist for Group Work			
STRATEGIC DISPOSITIONS	OFTEN	SOMETIMES	NOT YET
The team member:			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Listens with understanding and empathy ■ Paraphrases ideas before responding ■ Clarifies ideas, concepts, or terminology ■ Poses questions to engage thinking 			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Energizes the group with new ideas ■ Supports the group when there is frustration ■ Persists/finds alternatives when the group is stuck 			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Monitors for accuracy and precision ■ Cross-checks references ■ Uses spell-checker ■ Edits with care 			
Source: Adapted from Costa & Kallick, 2000.			

variety of authentic, rich tasks that require strategic planning, creative approaches, and complex thinking skills (Moulds, 2003–2004). The following scenarios illustrate how students can practice self-directedness and self-assessment in the classroom.

Self-Directed Learners in Secondary School

As part of a project in their U.S. history class, high school students tackle aspects of the upcoming presidential election. They divide into groups on the basis of their interest in a particular candidate and set to work preparing a one-minute TV ad for the campaign. The groups draw on their prior knowledge of the candidates, become aware of their biases, and examine the assumptions underlying campaign rhetoric. Students construct, clarify, and pose questions to guide their investigations, developing a set of process and content goals for their projects. Goals might include listening to one another with understanding and empathy or welcoming multiple perspectives on an issue.

The teacher invites students to

monitor their teamwork using a “How Are We Doing?” checklist (see fig. 1). Checklists provide guidelines for applying, monitoring, and evaluating performance on specific indicators of self-directed learning. Students respond to questions that encourage them to develop awareness of their own and others’ skills and behaviors, to operate from data rather than from speculation, and to know when to relinquish certain ideas in favor of other, more valid ones (Baker, Costa, & Shalit, 1997).

The teacher poses several metacognitive questions to encourage students to reflect on their thinking: How did you decide to participate in your particular group? What did you learn from your group’s “How Are We Doing?” assessment? How will you carry this learning forward to future group work? How did your decisions affect you and others in your group? As you anticipate future team meetings, what commitments might you make to strengthen the group’s productivity? The students respond to these questions in writing. One student indicates that although she is learning to think interdependently, she is too shy and sometimes feels that

she has nothing to add to the group. She decides to focus on improving her group communication skills.

The teacher asks students to describe whether or not they met their established goals. Team members point out that they are working more and more interdependently, and they explore modifications that will enhance their productivity.

With their first-draft storyboard and script in hand, students devote a class period to thinking interdependently with "critical friends," who may be either inside or outside their group. They reflect on project goals, due dates, strategies, and suggested changes. Partners agree on a specific time to meet again to monitor the process for accuracy and quality. Groups then pair up to

**Students ask themselves,
"What have I learned?
Who am I becoming?"**

present their scripts and share critical feedback about presentation strengths, weaknesses, and possible improvements. Groups also meet with the teacher to clarify work plans, strategies, midcourse adjustments, and criteria for project completion (see fig. 2 for a checklist for educators).

After revising their ads, group members present their projects to a community-based audience. The students ask the audience to complete a checklist that rates how effectively each ad promoted its candidate and illustrated student knowledge of the U.S. election process. This type of evaluation is important because it provides students with critical feedback from adults other than their teachers.

The teacher scores presentations using a rubric that focuses on content accuracy, organization, strength of

persuasive images, and appropriate use of conventions (see fig. 3, p. 54).

Students self-assess using the same rubric, and teacher and students meet to discuss any discrepancies. These discussions have proven powerful in terms of clarifying what the standards-based rubric means and how well the work stacks up against the standards.

Following their formal presentations, students rate their group's effectiveness by writing an evaluation in their journals. They consider a number of ques-

tions: How did you think about solving the problem of creating a persuasive presentation? What steps did you take? Draw the metacognitive pathways you followed and the dead ends you experienced on the road to solving the problem. What strategies enabled you to persist when you encountered obstacles? What intrigues and wonderments will you continue to ponder long after this project is completed and the election is over?

One student wrote that when various

FIGURE 2 Self-Directed Learning A Checklist for Educators

The following structured opportunities help students become self-directed:

Have students confer with a "critical friend."

- Presenter discusses his or her goals and timeline.
- Responder asks clarifying questions.
- Both parties discuss any possible modifications.
- Partners schedule a meeting to check work for accuracy and quality.

Hold student-teacher conferences. Ask students such questions as

- What is your work plan?
- What difficulties are you having in accomplishing your plan?
- How realistic are your goals given your time frame?
- What part of this project especially intrigues you?
- What strategies have you tried? What strategies might you try?
- How will you know when your work is ready to turn in?

Provide a self-reflection worksheet for new subject matter that has students reflect on the following questions:

- Do I understand why I have to read this material? For a test? For a report?
- What do I already know about this subject?
- What predictions about this material might I make even before I read it?
- Where can I obtain additional information?
- How much time will I need to learn this?
- What are some strategies that I can use to learn this?
- Did I understand what I just read?
- Do I know it well enough to retell it after I have finished reading? Do I know it well enough to answer questions on a test?

Determine whether students are becoming more aware of their own thinking by asking them about the problem-solving process. Have students

- List the steps and explain where they are in the sequence of a problem-solving strategy.
- Trace the pathways they took and any dead ends they encountered.
- Describe what data are lacking and the students' plans for producing those data.

obstacles to his plan surfaced, he wanted to quit and walk away from the group. But he stuck with it and remained confident that his project would turn out fine. Another student, musing on the challenges of the assignment, wondered how presidents could persevere through all the problems they encountered on the job.

The teacher scores presentations on content accuracy, organization, strength of persuasive images, and appropriate use of conventions.

Self-Directed Learners in Elementary School

Students in this 6th grade classroom have been keeping a folder of their writing throughout the school year. The teacher suggests that they build a portfolio, which should show improvement on the basis of the standards emphasized during the year. Students look over their work and choose examples that show growth, selecting two pieces from early in the year, two from the middle, and two from the end.

Students actively make choices and reflect on their thinking by responding in writing to a number of questions: Why did you choose this piece? How did you modify your writing using the feedback you received from both your "critical friend" and the teacher? How does your progress as a writer demonstrate your continuous learning? One student noted that she was trying to become more creative in her writing and that she enjoyed making readers laugh.

Students also write a letter to the reader of their portfolios, celebrating their growth as writers during the year.

FIGURE 3 How Effectively Did You Present Your Political Candidate?

Assessment will be based on the following criteria:

- Clarity of content and perspective
- Organization
- Presentation: Use of examples and visual aids

Speaker rating (1 = excellent, 4 = limited):

- 1. Excellent speaker** confidently explains the candidate's point of view. The main points are significant and accurate. Speaker provides good examples and clear, creative, and persuasive visual aids.
- 2. Very good speaker** presents the candidate's point of view and is clear and well organized. The speaker provides good examples and effective visual aids.
- 3. Moderate speaker** presents the candidate's point of view. Chosen points are not always the most significant ones. The speaker provides few examples; the visual aids do not necessarily help to make a point. The sequence of the presentation is sometimes confusing.
- 4. Limited speaker** shows a limited understanding of the candidate's point of view. The presentation is difficult to follow, with few examples. Visual aids are limited and difficult to interpret.



Writing a letter to a particular audience helps students recognize their thinking styles and capabilities as they formalize their perceptions about how they work. Students respond to prompts that ask them to clarify what they are good at in writing, what skills they have difficulty with and where they would like to improve, and what gets them excited about the writing process (see fig. 4). In one such portfolio, a student explained that she learned about microbiology most effectively when she was conducting lab activities and building models. She noted that as a physically active person, she learned best when she could move around the classroom. She also pointed out that her growing understanding of science bolstered her respect for a healthy body and a healthy environment.

An Other-Directed Era

Unfortunately, educators are awash in a sea of too many standards for the number of days in a school year, and they are struggling to find their direction (Marzano & Kendall, 1998). Further, in the current political climate, the key to school success is higher test scores. Externally administered assessments tied to these standards shift the focus of teaching to transmitting test-related information and make it difficult to sustain curriculum and instructional strategies designed for individual meaning making and personal, self-directed learning. Although we may desire to develop students' capacities for self-directedness, we may be helping to mold a generation of other-directed, dependent, externally motivated learners.

Educators must persist in developing self-directed learners in an other-directed education era. We must reclaim a sense of direction based on what we value most and provide education experiences that enable students to become responsible, self-directed, continuous learners.

We must make our good intentions a

FIGURE 4 I Am Celebrating My Growth in Writing This Year.

I am good at

There are things I want to improve. I have difficulty with

What really makes me feel excited about writing is

Self-managing,
self-monitoring, and self-
modifying capabilities
characterize peak
performers in all
walks of life.

reality by explicitly addressing what we value through curriculum design, thoughtful instruction, and opportunities for student self-assessment and reflection. Students need the opportunity to look back and reflect on finished work. They also need to learn how to look forward to the next assignment with strategies for improvement. Too often we hear students say, "I already finished that assignment!", as though completing the task—rather than learning from the process—is what matters. When teachers focus on student self-direction, however, the question changes. Students ask themselves, "What have I learned? Who am I becoming?"

Striving for excellence is a lifelong task, not a singular event meant to satisfy a teacher. We want to see students develop a love of learning and

not feel solely dependent on the judgment of others to determine the value of what they are learning. Given many opportunities over time, students will frequently assess themselves and cultivate the strength and humility of continuous learning. ■

References

- Baker, B., Costa, A., & Shalit, S. (1997). Norms of collaboration: Attaining communicative competence. In A. Costa & R. Liebmann (Eds.), *The process-centered school: Sustaining a Renaissance Community* (pp. 119–142). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Costa, A., & Garmston, R. (2001). *Cognitive coaching: A foundation for rennaissance schools*. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon.
- Costa, A., & Kallick, B. (2000). *Habits of mind: A developmental series*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Costa, A., & Kallick, B. (2004). *Assessment strategies for self-directed learning*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Marzano, R. J., & Kendall, J. S. (1998). *Avastb in a sea of standards*. Aurora, CO: Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning.
- Moulds, P. (2003–2004). Rich tasks. *Educational Leadership*, 51(4), 75–79.

Arthur L. Costa is Professor Emeritus at California State University, Sacramento, California; artcosta@aol.com. **Bena Kallick** is an education consultant in Westport, Connecticut; bkallick@aol.com. They are coauthors of *Habits of the Mind: A Developmental Series* (ASCD, 2000).

Copyright of Educational Leadership is the property of Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.