

BALANCING THE INNER AND OUTER SELF: THE ROLE FOR SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

Roger Hiemstra

Abstract

Each of us has an “inner self” (our private side) and an “outer self” (our public side). We generally develop our public side when we are younger. Developing our private or inner dimension becomes a lifelong activity, one that often becomes increasingly more important as we age. In this article I explore both of these sides and describe how I have attempted to enhance by inner self during the past two decades via self-directed learning and self-reflection. This has involved such activities as journaling, creating a family history, discussions with friends, and vocal music. [I welcome any dialogue.](#) *

Key Words

Inner Self, Outer Self, Self-Directed Learning

Introduction

My interest in what would become a primary contribution to self-directed learning came about almost 50 years ago. I was a relatively young assistant professor of adult education at the University of Nebraska. Although I had completed my Ph.D. in 1970, I really had no experience or training associated with teaching graduate students. In essence, I struggled with my teaching in 1970 and 71, as all but one of the 25-30 students I typically had in my classes were older than me and I felt unprepared for success as a teacher. Then in 1972, two extraordinary things happened that initiated what would become changes in my approaches to working with adult learners and provide a primary focus for my long term research and scholarship. I was influenced by the work of both Allen Tough and Malcolm Knowles. Thus, what began as efforts to improve my teaching, resulted in my embarking upon research, experimentation, and scholarship that ended up taking over a big part of my professional life.

I first heard Allen Tough when he presented at a 1971 adult education conference on his work related to adults’ learning projects and what initially became known as self-planned learning (Tough, 1971). I found his ideas interesting but had no idea of the impact his work would soon have on me and my teaching. I purchased his book and admit to only skimming through it without really understanding the profound implications of the research. Then Allen came to the University of Nebraska campus and presented to our faculty and graduate students. Allen’s interviews with adult learners led to a discovery that the majority of such learners planned their own learning (Donaghy, 2005).

That same year Malcolm Knowles, considered by many the father of SDL, also came to our campus. He talked about his work with andragogy (Knowles, 1970). Fortunately I had read his book but, again, did not fully appreciate the implications for me as a teacher until he spent several hours with our faculty and students. The next day I

helped create a corresponding television program featuring Malcolm and his discussion of andragogy that ran for many years on the Nebraska Public Television Network (Hiemstra & Knowles, 1972). Their work facilitated my moving to an andragogical learner-based approach as an instructor. This also initiated what has now been a 46 year focus on SDL in much of my scholarship.

Subsequent to that 1972 period I began experimenting with my teaching during which various epiphanies began arriving. The students began to respond positively when I used my growing understanding of andragogy and self-directed learning to give them more control of their own learning. My curiosity, knowledge, and skill as a teacher seemed to grow throughout the next couple of years and it finally felt like I had a good handle on what worked for me as a teacher.

Then in 1974 I launched a large study in Nebraska of 256 older adult learners, those 55 and older, using Allen Tough's research protocol (Hiemstra, 1975). Several graduate students joined me in this project and we were excited about our findings that, in essence, affirmed what Allen and his students had found (Hiemstra, 1976). I began realizing that understanding yourself as a learner, especially for older learners, was critical to success in any learning situation (Hiemstra, 1978).

Thus, I began to think of a concept that eventually became my mantra, "Helping learners take increased responsibility for their own learning." Perhaps the first time I started referring to adults directing their own learning was in a background paper developed for the ERIC system. I further expanded on this notion in an inaugural speech at the 1986 SDL symposium (Hiemstra, 1988) and in two co-authored books on the topic a few years later (Hiemstra & Sisco, 1990; Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991).

The Inner and Outer Self

After nearly a career of helping learners take increased responsibility, I am in the latter part of my career. I now find myself doing more self-reflection. Each of us has what Marshall (2018) has referred to as a private side and a public side. Our public side is the visible one, what others see, hear, and experience about us. Our private side, an inner dimension, relates to our values, ideals, and inner strength. Marshall says that this can often be called the "soul ... the essence of a person." (p. 206). In thinking about self-directed learning as the framework for this article, I like what was described by Cunic (2019, para, 1) in the website *Very Well Mind*, as the inner and outer self. He says there is often considerable tension between "the inner self and outer self ... in the modern world. Each of us is tugged multiple directions every day and our actions and behaviors do not always align with our core values as a result." The outer self is how we present ourselves to others, the groups we join, and how we cope with the demands of daily living. Cunic notes that this external environment "can be demanding, leaving little time for you to consider whether what is taking place on the outside of your life matches what you ultimately desire on the inside." (para. 4).

Thus, there is often conflict between your inner and outer self. When they are out of balance or even a mismatch, you can find yourself thinking one thing but doing another. One personal example revolves around my personal discipline as a writer. My inner self is urging me to set a writing schedule, stay dedicated to that schedule, and continue to create

scholarly output. However, now that I am retired my outer self often suggests that I pursue leisurely activities. Nothing is wrong with the latter but this does present a conflict that can be plaguing at times.

Another example relates to how I engage with my close friends. I have two groups of close friends, one group consists of three guys and me who go out for breakfast once a month and simply enjoy each other's company, discuss all the world's problems, and try to outdo each other with humorous antidotes. We are all fairly similar in terms of religion, political persuasions, and education. The other group consists of three other guys and me who go out for lunch once a month. Generally we all could not be much different from each other in terms of religion, political persuasion, and conservative-vs-liberal beliefs. However, we all share the same love for vocal music. We discuss just about everything having to do with singing and our love of music but stay away from religion and politics.

I very much enjoy being with each group and would really miss these convivial opportunities. However, my example with these two groups demonstrates that with the first group my inner self is front and center during our conversations. However, with the second group I simply refuse to let my inner self "bump" into the outer self. In essence, I now realize that I am intuitively keeping a balance between my inner and self, but in different ways each time.

I surmise that conflicts or the lack of balance often can come from spending too little time thinking about your inner self, especially during your working years. How you present yourself to others, how you find success on the job, and even how you try to cope daily as an adult must involve spending lots of time and energy on your outer self. There actually has been much said about this inner self and the value of understanding if not engaging with it more. Deepak Chopra notes that by not judging our internal dialogues and truly listening to our inner voices, "this opens ... the doorway to creativity." (2020) Hodge (2020) in *From Within I Rise*, says that within "there is something profoundly known, not consciously, but subconsciously. A quiet truth, that is not a version of something, but an original knowing ... it is there, guiding us along the path of greater becoming, a true awareness."

Suggs (2020, para. 6) goes a bit further in urging us to know our inner selves better: "I find it sad that too many do not understand themselves, or their potential. They don't even take the time to get to know their unconsciousness. You can truly learn so much, by simply getting to know the 'you' that is behind the reality of yourself."

Knowing Thyself

Thus, knowing yourself as best you can is very important. However, this action takes some conscious efforts, especially given the many urgent needs, demands, and pressures we and others place on our outer selves. Personally, and in all honesty, it has really only been possible the past couple of decades. Others have talked about the inner self in various ways such as inner glow, inner strength, voices from within, and self-awareness. All seem to converge on the personal value, potential as Suggs (2020) put it, in knowing yourself better. This includes such approaches as listening to yourself, trusting your instincts, asking yourself meaningful questions, and having honest discussions with friends about their view of your inner strengths.

What then, does this have to do with self-directed learning? For me, as I get older and take the time to be more reflective, I listen more to my inner voice, trust more my natural instincts, and embrace my preferred ways of self-directed learning. I am sure it does not have to be tied to the aging process and some may regularly listen to their inner voices and regularly seek the balance I am suggesting. However, I have been employing various procedures for several years that have enabled my inner self to emerge.

For example, I became the Hiemstra family genealogist back in the early 70s when I took an adult education class on how to carry out genealogical research. This started my interest in gathering family history and I have intensified those efforts in the past few years. I realize now that way back then I was speaking to my inner self as I could work on this “hobby” as a meaningful break from my professional life, i.e., my outer self. I have not only maintained that interest since then, but have visited the Netherlands on four occasions, taught for a semester at the University of Twente in Enschede, Netherlands, and worked with a relative there who also is a genealogist to do extensive research on my family ancestors. Thus, during the past several years I have endeavored to record my family’s history and lineage. I now have entered in my genealogy software some information on nearly 3000 people in the Netherlands, the United States, and beyond. I can trace my lineage through my father back to a man named Thomas, who was born around 1500, most likely in a village in the NNW part of the Netherlands now called Oostermeer. In essence, I am suggesting let your inner self have a role in your life.

As another example of how I have massaged my inner self, soon after I retired I decided to analyze my own life more deeply by gathering everything I could via my own record keeping but also by soliciting information from my siblings and parents (including interviewing each of my parents extensively) about their memories and any documentation (letters, photos, memorabilia, etc.) pertaining to me they might possess. I scanned and recorded all the important information, maintain a database of material, sorted chronologically, and it all is stored digitally in my computer and/or in file folders within large banker boxes. In essence, I utilized my self-directed learning skills related to data gathering, listening, oral communication, and technology in gathering and analyzing all this information. I also begun my writing process. My long-term goal is to create personal stories and even a memoir that can be shared with others.

I also maintain a daily journal with each entry typically beginning with the day, date, and weather, followed by two to five paragraphs representing my recollection of daily activities, people with whom I interacted, and special thoughts or impressions that come to mind. In essence, I believe that journaling is very important and it draws from and contributes to my inner self (Hiemstra, 2001). Malcolm Knowles (1975) introduced readers to notions of personal reflection through activities such as self-assessment and proactive reading of materials. Another useful source is Christensen (1981), in which she describes how a diary can be used as a learning tool for adults. Brookfield (1987, 1995) provides various ideas pertaining to critically reflective writing through such tools as an autobiography, critical incident citing, and seeing ourselves as others see us. In reality, my nightly ritual helps me reflect on and enhance my inner self.

Another part of my life that I know relates to the enhancement of my inner self is my love of and involvement with music. I have sung in high school and college choirs, and even in a military choir during my two-year naval reserve service period. However, my

greatest musical love has been barbershop acapella four-part harmony. I sang in my first barbershop quartet in 1952 as a high school freshman. Over the subsequent years I have sung in five different choruses and four different barbershop quartets.

So what does this all have to do with self-directed learning? I contend that better knowing yourself and working to balance your inner and outer self, can enhance your learning skills, provide personal growth opportunities, and even bring unexpected outcomes.

For example, I know that my research skills, my inquisitive nature, and my love of writing have been critical in my genealogical research efforts and my efforts to write about myself. My preferred self-directed learning approach, auditory, is perfect for learning new barbershop music. My love of reading builds from my visual learning skill and enables me to find, process, and interpret family history information. My tactile learning skills enable me to do the work necessary in figuring out how new technology works, and experimenting with technology enhances my musical learning and performance, provides expertise of value in my various community volunteer activities, and facilitates the continual building of a large web page and adding to a YouTube channel relevant for people interested in adult learning.

Summary

One of the stated purposes of this journal is to provide an international forum for the presentation of important current developments in the study and application of self-directed learning. Our journal from the beginning has been comprised of articles on a diverse range of subjects, ideas, and discussions. This article is designed to introduce readers to some new thinking about the value of discourse on self-directed learning not only to discover how this body of knowledge can be expanded but also to promote thinking about how it can be utilized to enhance personal reflection.

Thus, I have proposed that we each have an inner and an outer self that needs to be better understood. Our outer selves refer to what others see and believe about us. We spend considerable time presenting ourselves to others, being involved in groups, and coping with the exigencies of daily living. Our inner selves often are not only kept private but because of those exigencies we frequently don't take enough time to match our internal desires and needs with those outer demands.

I suggest that there is considerable value in better understanding our inner self. This includes listening to our self, trusting our various instincts, and valuing our inner strengths. I described various ways that I have been using my self-directed learning skills to carry out self-reflection, journal writing, creating a family history, and enhancing my love of music. I believe I am now creating a better balance between my inner and outer self. I look forward to further dialogue on this topic as a means of continuing the enhancement and understanding of self-directed learning.

References

Brockett, R. G., & Hiemstra, R. (1991; Second Edition, 2019). *Self-direction in learning: Perspectives in theory, research, and practice*. London and New York: Routledge.

- Brookfield, S. D. (1987). *Developing critical thinkers: Challenging adults to explore alternative ways of thinking and acting*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Brookfield, S. D. (1995). *Becoming a Critically reflective teacher*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Chopra, D. (2020) . *Good reads*. Retrieved from <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/459338-non-judgment-quiets-the-internal-dialogue-and-this-opens-once-again>.
- Christensen, R. S. "Dear diary -- A learning tool for adults." *Lifelong Learning: The Adult Years*, 1981, 5(2), 4-5, 23.
- Cunic, A. (July 15, 2019, updated January 14, 2020). The tension between inner and outer self. *Verywellmind*. New York: Dotdash, Inc. Retrieved from <https://www.verywellmind.com/tension-between-inner-self-and-outer-self-4171297>.
- Donaghy, R. (2005). *Professor Allen Tough reflects on self-directed learning*. An interview of Allen in his Toronto home. Retrieved from <http://allentough.com/learning/donaghy.htm>.
- Hiemstra, R. (1975). *The older adult and learning*. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service, No. 117 371). Retrieved from <http://roghiemstra.com/olderadult.html>.
- Hiemstra, R. (1976). The older adult's learning projects. *Educational Gerontology, I* (Fall), 331-342.
- Hiemstra, R. (1978). New career opportunities in gerontology for the 1980's: A crystal ball. In M. M. Seltzer, H. Sterns, & T. Hickey (Eds.), *Gerontology in higher education*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Hiemstra, R. (1980). *Guiding the older adult learner*. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. 193 529).
- Hiemstra, R. (1988). Self-directed learning: Individualizing instruction. In H. B. Long & Associates (Eds.), *Self-directed learning: Application & Theory* (pp. 99-124). Athens, GA: Adult Education Department, University of Georgia.
- Hiemstra, R. (2001). Uses and benefits of journal writing. In L. M. English & M. A. Gillen (Eds.), *Promoting journal writing in adult education* (New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, No. 90), San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Hiemstra, R. & Knowles, M. S. (1972). *Andragogy: A discussion about a new concept in adult education*. Lincoln, NE: Nebraska Education Television Council for Higher Education (a 30 minute television program). Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BrDdTgCGYoI&feature=youtu.be>
- Hiemstra, R., & Sisco, B. (1990). *Individualizing instruction: Making learning personal, empowering, and successful*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Hodge, T. F. (2020). *Good reads*. Retrieved from <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/459893-deep-within-there-is-something-profoundly-known-not-consciously-but>.
- Knowles, M. S. (1970). *The modern practice of adult education: Andragogy versus pedagogy*. NY: Association Press.
- Knowles, M. S. (1975). *Self-directed learning: A guide for learners and teachers*. New York, NY: Association Press.

Marshall, B. T. (2018). *In later years: Finding meaning and spirit in aging*. Boston: Skinner House Books.

Suggs, L. (2020). *Good reads*. Retrieved from https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/4824163.Lionel_Suggs.

Tough, A. M. (1971). *The adult's learning projects: A fresh approach to theory and practice in adult learning*. Toronto, Canada: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

-
- This manuscript based on my keynote address at the 2020 Self-directed Learning Symposium was submitted to the *International Journal of Self-Directed Learning*. After a blind review it was suggested that it be reworked and resubmitted. I have chosen, instead, to place it on my web page. A video of that keynote can be viewed on my [YouTube channel](#).

Roger Hiemstra, Professor Emeritus, Syracuse University

Roger Hiemstra is Professor Emeritus, Syracuse University. He has a Ph.D., University of Michigan. He taught at the University of Nebraska, Iowa State University, Syracuse University, and Elmira College. He also was an adjunct professor at Le Moyne College, Empire State College, Montana State University, the University of British Columbia, the University Tennessee, and Florida Atlantic University. (rogerhiemstra@gmail.com)