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# CHAPTER 1

## Why we need self-directed learners

Most states in the United States and several provinces in Canada have imposed extraneous standards for learning. They have implemented externally administered assessments tied to these standards. Most of the states and territories in Australia have adopted federally imposed benchmarks for literacy and numeracy. Extrinsic accountability links teacher evaluation and review. In the current politics of education, the key to school success is higher test scores. Such practices shift the focus toward the transmission of test-related information, making it difficult to embrace and sustain curriculum and instructional strategies designed for individual meaning-making and personal, self-directed learning. We may be contributing to a generation of 'other directed', dependent, externally motivated learners. The basic question is *are we preparing students for a life of tests or for the tests of life?* Or is it possible that, given tests are one of the gatekeepers for a student's future, we should prepare them for both?

If we believe that we are preparing students to strategically confront

The foundational element in effective work systems is self-correcting, self-managing, self-accountable, self-governing behaviour. Energy spent on monitoring and attempting to affect the behaviour of team members or other entities from the outside is energy wasted and energy that could be better expended on improving the business and the capability of people. The critical element is to increasingly create self-governing capability.

—Carol Sanford,  
*Myths of Organizational  
Effectiveness at Work*

Children come fully equipped with an insatiable drive to explore and experiment. Unfortunately the primary institutions of our society are oriented predominantly toward controlling rather than learning, rewarding individuals for performing for others rather than cultivating their natural curiosity and impulse to learn.

—Peter Senge, 'The Leader's  
New Work'

and creatively resolve the ambiguous, paradoxical and dichotomous problems and conflicts they will encounter in our increasingly more complex society, then the focus of education must shift. Both teachers and students must become continual and internally driven learners: self-analysing, self-referencing, self-evaluating and self-correcting. The purpose of this book is to establish a refreshing new view of assessment practices and to illuminate how assessment can enhance continuous, lifelong, self-directed learning.

### Assessing as an essential component of learning

Technology is now driving a new definition of accountability. We have the capacity to track data with greater specificity, thereby providing better information to teachers about test results. State departments are becoming increasingly more astute about how to provide such information. However, given the number of tests that are being given, the cost of such procedures and the lack of timeliness from most state departments, analysis of results does not always provide good individual diagnostic information.

You have the power to declare the person you are becoming.

—Joe Marino

In addition, process-oriented goals, such as the student's capability to become more self-directed and self-evaluative, cannot be assessed using product-oriented measurement techniques. Our existing evaluation paradigm must therefore shift to one that allows for a more balanced method that includes classroom-based assessments that complement state-based assessments. Assessing student growth toward self-direction demands alternative and authentic forms of assessment. Students can become more self-directed when they know the intended learning outcomes and receive constructive feedback regarding their progress during the learning process. Alternate and more authentic forms of assessment are performance based, including rubrics, checklists, portfolios and exhibitions that allow students to demonstrate their understanding and application of knowledge through the creation of a product or performance.

We believe that assessment is a mechanism for providing ongoing feedback to the learner and to the organisation as a necessary part of the spiraling processes of continuous renewal: self-managing, self-monitoring and self-modifying. We must constantly remind ourselves that the ultimate purpose of evaluation is to have students learn to become self-evaluative. When students graduate from our schools, we want them to have methods of self-evaluation and to know how to turn to external critique for self-improvement. We want them to know how to give and receive constructive feedback and how to revise their work based on such feedback. If students graduate from our schools dependent on others without an understanding of what is good, adequate or excellent work, then we have failed them.

Evaluation, the highest level in Bloom's Taxonomy (1956), means generating, holding in your head and applying a set of internal and external criteria. For too long, teachers have been practising that skill. We need to shift that responsibility to students – to help them develop the capacity for self-analysis, self-referencing and self-modification.

We believe that the intent of assessment should be to support learners in becoming self-directing and that what matters most in any assessment strategy is whether learners are becoming increasingly more able to self-evaluate. We want students to know how to give, receive and make good use of constructive feedback.

Self-knowledge is the first step in self-assessment. The intent of this book is to provide educators with strategies to design diverse ways of gathering, organising and reporting evidence of continual learning and meaning-making in their efforts to support learners in becoming self-managing, self-monitoring and self-modifying.

## The demand for self-directed learners

Simply teaching students how to read the Bible was once a sufficient mission for schools. Modern educators are realising, however, that new goals are becoming increasingly apparent as survival skills for our children's future, for the perpetuation of our democratic institutions and even for our planetary existence (Hay, 2001). Such goals include the following:

- The capacity for continued learning
- Knowing how to behave when answers to problems are not immediately apparent

You might well remember that nothing can bring you success but yourself.

—Napoleon Hill

- Cooperativeness and team building
- Precise communication in a variety of modes
- The appreciation of disparate value systems
- Problem solving that requires creativity and ingenuity
- The enjoyment of resolving ambiguous, discrepant and paradoxical situations
- The generation and organisation of an overabundance of technologically produced information
- The pride and craftsmanship of product
- Knowing and accepting ourselves
- Personal commitment to larger organisational and global values

Dave Posner, chief technical officer of Encirq Corporation, states, 'What our 21<sup>st</sup> Century citizens need are trained minds and a passion for creative endeavour. And by a "trained mind" I mean not only the ability to think, to gather data, to formulate models, to test hypotheses, to reason to conclusions and so on. I mean, most importantly, the desire for and habit of thinking.'

Business leaders warn that the workforce must undergo a revolutionary change in order to respond effectively to this new work environment. Workers have to rethink their approach to 'work' as they previously knew it. They are focusing more on learning how to build values, attitudes and skills that will allow them to survive and succeed through multiple job changes and with far less structure and security (Panella, 1997). Dent (1995) states, 'The coming work revolution will force us to rediscover our greatest strength – individual initiative – thus nurturing a spirit of entrepreneurship.'

A person's sense of self-efficacy – believing that you have the capacity to do the job – is the most influential factor in ensuring a person's success in life. Bandura (1997) states,

Perceived self-efficacy is concerned not with the number of skills you have, but with what you believe you can do with what you have under a variety of circumstances . . . effective functioning requires both skills and the efficacy beliefs to use them well.

Our democracy is threatened by a lack of commitment to citizenship, particularly the right to vote. We are exposed to so many sources of information that it has been increasingly more difficult to determine whether sources are credible. Our students will have to learn how to read information and discern the biases. They will have to become better informed about the global as well as local impact that the government's decisions will have. Our democracy is based on the

principles of balance – a delicate balance between local, state and nation. Now, more than ever, we must protect that balance through the constant vigilance of our citizenship. Students will have to know how to develop and defend their opinions based on the information they absorb. This requires continuous self-directed learning.

People governed by an internal locus of control show initiative in controlling their environment. They control their own impulsivity, gather information, are cognitively active, eagerly learn information that will increase their probability for success and show signs of humour. When compared with individuals with an external locus of control, they are less anxious, less hostile, less angry, more trustful, less suspicious of others, less prone to suicide, less depressed and less prone to psychosis (Laborde & Saunders, 1986).

### Self-direction: A natural human tendency

Humans quest for mastery of their environment, control, self-empowerment and continuous lifelong learning. Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers (1998) state,

Each human being is bred with a unique set of potentials that yearn to be fulfilled as surely as the acorn yearns to become the oak within it.

—Aristotle

Every living thing acts to develop and preserve itself. Identity is the filter that every organism or system uses to make sense of the world. New information, new relationships, changing environments – all are interpreted through a sense of self. This tendency toward self-creation is so strong that it creates a seeming paradox. An organism will change to maintain its identity.

Peak performers' primary locus of control is not external, but internal. One element that stands out clearly among peak performers is their virtually unassailable belief in the likelihood of their own success – and their track records reinforce their beliefs (Garfield, 1995).

Recent research in the neurosciences indicates that the human brain reconstructs itself from experience. Ornstein claims, 'To make a personal change, we have to be able to observe the automatic workings inside ourselves. He describes the brain as having a neural selection system that wires up the nervous system differently, depending on the