

THE ROLE OF LIFELONG LEARNING AND SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING IN EDUCATIONAL REFORM IN THAILAND

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Abstract

In the complex context of fast globalization and huge transformation in the new century, “self-directed learning” and lifelong learning are the goals of the 1999 National Education Act in Thailand. Teachers are the principal keys in educational change to lead students towards these goals. It is important that teachers be self-directed learners themselves and to become one of the best and probably the most influential role model for their students. To be self-directed learners, teachers decide what they need to know and what to learn; set their own goals; identify and find resources for learning; and evaluate their own learning. All these skills and qualities must be developed in students. In the teaching-learning process, teachers also need to find ways to avoid unhappy learning situations and to provide resources and an atmosphere for happy learning. Five strategies are proposed for teachers to motivate and develop their students to use “self-directed learning” in the quest of gaining knowledge and life skills throughout their life.

Keyword: self-directed learning

Introduction

The speed of change and the explosion of knowledge are requiring people to learn afresh at many intervals throughout their lives. This has important implications for the role of the school, which is no longer providing a package of knowledge and skills to serve a person for life. Now that it is

possible to have vast stores of knowledge available at the touch of a key, the emphasis in initial schooling needs to be on the process of learning. Today’s children and young people use a level of knowledge which enables them to fit new learning into a coherent framework; but, above all, they need

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to know how to find and evaluate information so that they can apply it in new situations. This places an emphasis on the skills of independent learning and on learning how to learn, including the application of what is “learning”. In addition, computers are also available to many children and young people both at school and home. This development has an important implication for the role of teachers. Finally, we have come to realize in recent years that the teacher is the ultimate key to educational change and school improvement. The restructuring of schools, the composition of national and provincial curricula, the development of benchmark assessments – all these things are of little value if they do not take the teachers into account. Teachers do not merely deliver the curriculum. They also develop, define and reinterpret it. It is what teachers think, what teachers believe and what teachers do at the level of the classroom that ultimately shapes the kind of learning that young people receive.

Purpose

The purpose of this article is to explore how globalization affects Thailand’s educational reform. Thailand’s educational reform has emphasized lifelong learning since 1999. The National Education Act (1999) required educational institutions to focus on child-differentiated learning styles. This means that teachers need to be aware of the self-directed learning of their students.

Globalization from an Educational Perspective

Global competition has increased the performance standards in many dimensions, including those of quality, cost, productivity, product introduction time, and smooth, flowing operations. Moreover, those standards are not static; they are exacting and require continuous improvement from an organization and its people.

Organizational participants increasingly face situations that can be defined as paradoxes: situations that seem not to be resolvable. According to Handy (1994, p.7), a paradox can be defined as a statement or proposition that seems to be self-contradictory. At the individual level, an apparent paradox is expressed by the statement, “The more I do, the less I get done”. For students, the paradox often comes from realizing that the more one learns, the more questions one has. At the organizational level, paradoxes might include cooperating to compete, and managers might see profitability as a trade-off between their own interests and interests of the larger society. Individuals also face a number of paradoxical challenges when they are encouraged to think in linear and process-oriented fashion; to be autonomous and yet to be team members; to have a full life and to devote all their free time to the organization.

There are six paradoxes common to the globalization challenge. These paradoxes are affecting all aspects of life worldwide, including education, economic, social, political, and business (See Table 1).

Table1: Dimensions of the Globalization Paradox

<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Individual achievement VS teamwork- Competition VS cooperation- Hands-off management VS hands-on management- A focus on people VS a focus on profit- An emphasis on process VS an emphasis on results- Organization as engines of economic development VS organizations as contents for human development.

Source: Tornow, 1994, p.7

It is not surprising that there was an early conceptual division between “education” – the process of helping people acquire, store, relate and transmit knowledge, and “training” – the process of helping people to gain and apply knowledge, in conjunction with the use of senses, to perform an activity to a specified standard. Similarly, “thinking” and “doing”, frequently unrelated in the past, have recently been seen as complementary functions (Webster, 1994, p.59)

In addition, rapid change of globalization suggests that individuals must monitor global activities and take an active role in shaping their outcomes. Knowledge of globalization may be the only way individuals can understand and anticipate global activities that affect their lives. The importance of the “human factor” as being fundamental to education, economic and social activity competitiveness and social advance has been rediscovered and needs to be reformed.

The Need for Educational Reform in Thailand

The recent crisis of global competition in Thailand has raised an urgent need to reform all aspects of the economy, to revise the downward trend of production, employment, Gross National Product and to lay a solid foundation for future growth. The educational reform is, among other things, seen as a vital ingredient for building a nation of wealth, stability and dignity, and a capability to compete with others in the age of globalization.

To reflect this goal of sustainable growth, the Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand B.E. 2540 (1997) indicates unprecedented provisions for education. Specifically, Section 81 indicates clearly the responsibility of the country for developing the “teaching profession” and anticipates the necessity of enacting the National Education Act (NEA) in 1999.

Overcoming Some Obstacles

While there is every reason for supporting education reform, it appears that the reform has not traveled on a smooth road. The reform may look great on paper, but little can be achieved without effective leadership, a clear vision, a common goal to strive for, and a network of support from teachers, students, parents, as well as the general public. The process requires time and much change in the work culture. The following are some obstacles that need to be overcome in the process of educational reform:

1. Strong leadership with clear vision and understanding of the mission of education. As Chiangkul (1998, p. 145) stated: "Our leaders from the top ranking ministers down to community leaders still lack vision and understanding of educational reform and this has become the first obstacle of change process". This lack of vision among leaders is reflected by the fact that education was not a top priority for development during the 8th National Economic and Social Development Plan (1997-2001). In the past, the government has viewed education as a part of economic development, but education budgets are the first to be cut substantially any time the country's economy was in a poor state

2. Politics influence education. We must admit that leaders in education, teachers, students, and parents are heavily influenced by politics. They have been trained to be "followers" of the "seniority" system, rather than training to be a leader, to be more self-directed, believing in what is right and what

is wrong. Centralization and top-down policies need to be changed.

3. The third obstacle is the general belief that it is a duty of government to solve any education problem. The public expects the government to increase the number of schools and students, and to shape them to be good citizens. This belief had led the general public to sit back and relax instead of taking an active role in various aspects of the education process.

4. There still is a big gap between academics and the general public in the process of educational reform. These include the gap between academia and schools in vision, development of mission statements and methods in teaching goals. The gaps appear to retard the educational reform process.

5. One of the main issues in educational reform is the change in mentality, behavior, and work culture in education. The new chapter in education emphasizes learner motivation and readiness to be taught. Education is considered a lifelong process and a person can learn in practically any setting or environment. Traditional learning from teachers and textbooks rely heavily on memorization and is considered outdated (Office of National Education Commission, 2000). Today learners are encouraged to read, think, analyze and be more self-directed. Changing from the traditional way of teaching and learning is not always easy. The change process takes time. It takes many seminars, workshops and meetings to change teachers' attitudes and behavior. More than

this, it requires school leaders to inspire and model the new way of teaching-learning, based on lifelong learning and self-directed learning.

6. Parents' thoughts about traditional education need to be reformed. They expect their children to memorize subject contents, and attend tutorial schools in the evening or weekend so that their children can do well in school. Many parents start such practices while their children are in first grade and continue it through to the 12th grade, with the hope that their children could enter a university. It is obvious that parents need to attend seminars, workshops in order to open a new chapter in the education of their children and to make them realize that they, as the first teacher of their children, make a considerable difference in the education of the young.

7. Students' points of view should be considered. During a Young Students Seminar jointly organized by National Office of Primary Education, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the Institute for Cultural Development in B.E. 2541 (1998), in which 304 young students from all 76 provinces in the country attended, the students gave some interesting comments that are significant to educational reform as follows (Chiangkul, 1998, pp. 177-180):

7.1 What makes them unhappy to learn.

7.1.1 Poor teaching; failure to make them understand; punishment.

7.1.2 Troubled family – unhappy at home.

7.1.3 Dirty classroom.

7.1.4 Naughty classmates; disturbed class.

7.2 Subjects children like most.

7.2.1 Recreation- type classes

7.2.2 Communication and innovative classes.

7.3 Teaching style children do not like

7.3.1 Children see no reason to study so many subjects. It has nothing to do with their lives.

7.3.2 Too strict about classroom rules.

7.3.3 Confusing and unorganized teaching

7.4 The kind of teachers they do not like.

7.4.1 Teachers' use of alcohol and cigarettes during class time; asking children to do their personal work.

7.4.2 Poor behavior and not being a good role model

7.4.3 Unreasonable- never listen to children.

7.4.4 Unfair.

7.4.5 Spend less time to teach in class.

7.4.6 Do not teach, only give homework and threaten children not to tell anyone about what the teacher is doing.

7.4.7 Teach over scheduled time-making children late for another class.

The National Education Act(1999)

The 1999 National Education Act (NEA) includes nine Chapters (Figure1) with 78 Sections. It can be seen in Figure 1

that the focus of the NEA is on Chapter 4, Guidelines for Learner-Centered Learning.

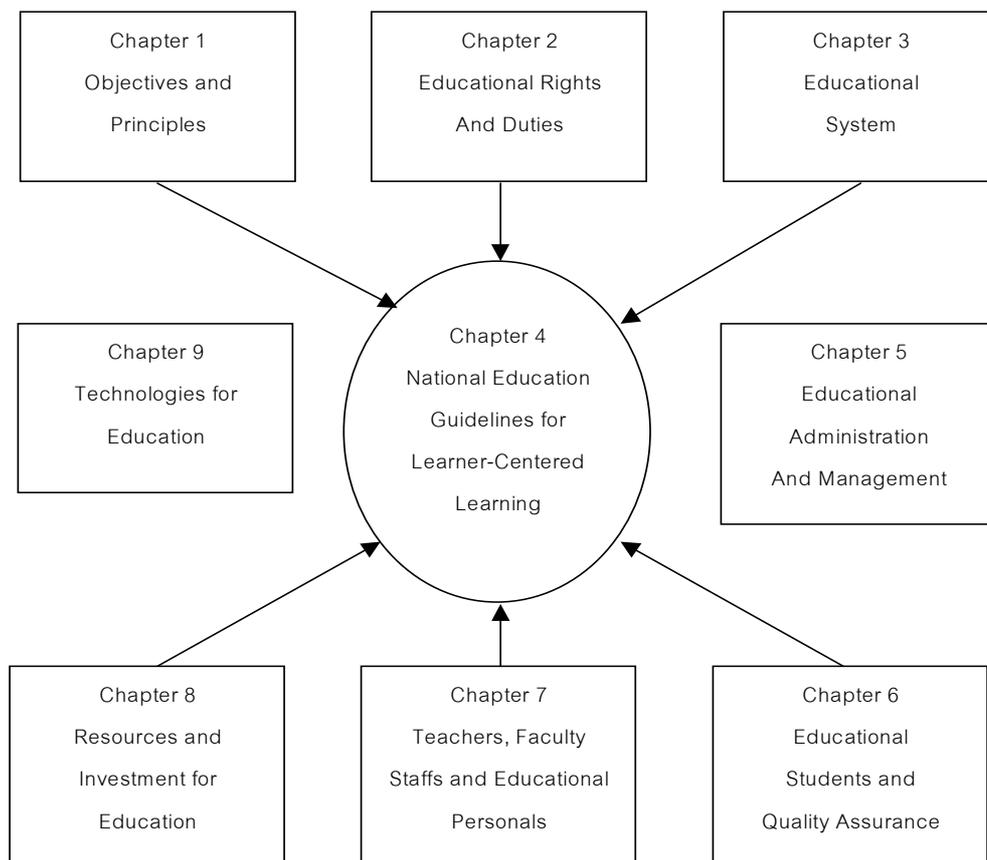


Figure 1: A Holistic Look at the 1999 National Education Act
 (Source: Office of the National Education Commission, 1999)

Self-Directed Learning

The rapidity of change, the continuous creation of new knowledge, and an ever-widening access to information make self-directed learning necessary. Much of this learning takes place at the learner's initiative, even if it is also available through formal

settings. Self-directed learning means learners taking responsibility for initiating and guiding their own learning which is an essential ingredient of lifelong learning and could take place in many settings (See Figure 2).

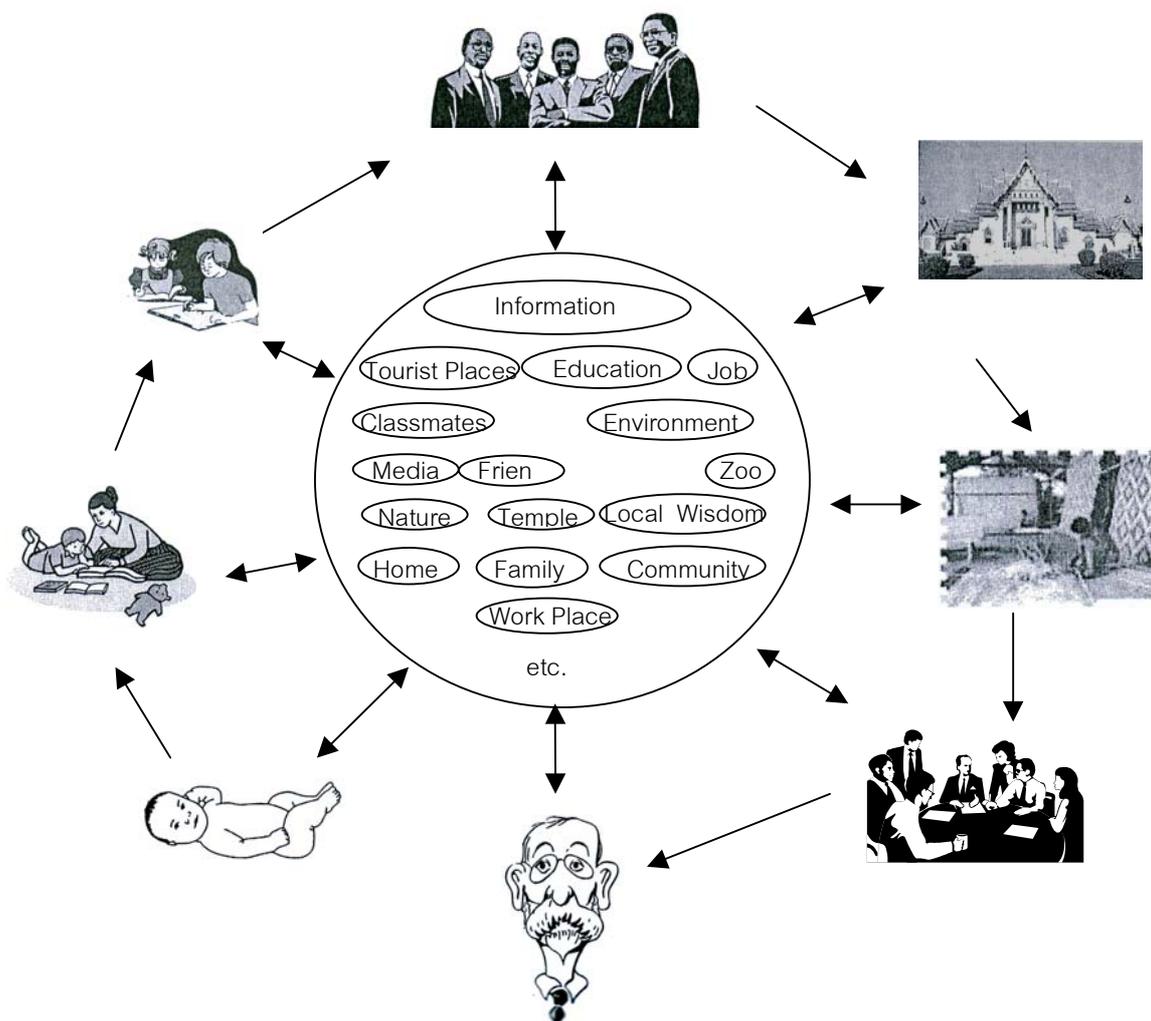


Figure 2: Lifelong learning: A demand for self-directed learning
(Source: Office of the National Education Commission, 2000, p.15)

It can be seen from the Figure 2 that learning is a lifelong process. Learning can take place anywhere, at any time, and use resources ranging from nothing to modern information technology. Thus, if a person develops a will to learn, has a skill to learn, is motivated to learn, and has a supportive environment to learn, he would have a lot of opportunity and be able to initiate and guide himself to learn. In addition, teaching today's facts seems less important than ensuring that students have the skills to learn and relearn

as knowledge develops. This has led to an emphasis on lifelong learning skills which include the ability to analyze problems, define what needs to be learnt, know how and when to access information, evaluate information, and be aware of one's own limitations. The rationale is that students who develop such skills will be equipped for whatever the future holds and will keep up to date when they are no longer members of formal training programs.

The Essential Assumptions of the Self-directed Learning Process

The andragogical model, as conceived by Knowles (1975, pp. 44-45), is predicated on four basic assumptions about learners as they progress to become adult learners:

1. Their self-concept moves from dependence on teachers to independence or self-directness;
2. They accumulate a reservoir of experiences that can be used as a basis on which to build learning;
3. Their readiness to learn becomes increasingly associated with the developmental tasks of social roles; and
4. Their time and curriculum perspectives change from being postponed to an immediacy of application and from subject centeredness to performance centeredness.

Knowles (1975) associated andragogy with a variety of instructional suggestions based on such assumptions and he, too, detailed roles for instructors and discussed ways of helping learners to reach their potential. He provided some reasons for why he believed elements of self-direction should be incorporated into the instructional process with learners. One reason was the emerging evidence that people who take the initiative in educational activities seem to learn more and learn things better than those who remain "passive". A second reason was that self-direction in learning appears "more in tune with our natural process of psychological development" (Knowles, 1975, p.14), asserting that an essential aspect of the maturation process is the development of the ability to take increasing responsibility for life. A third reason was the observation that many

educational innovations, such as distance learning, weekend colleges, and correspondence study, require that learners bear more responsibility and initiative in their own learning.

Defining Self-Directed Learning

The development of self-directed learning capacities is perhaps the most frequently articulated aim of education and trainers. Let us explore the relationship between the two technical terms, lifelong learning and self-directed learning, and their linkage with other terms.

Candy (1991, p.15) asserts that the relationship between self-directed learning and lifelong education is a reciprocal one. On the one hand, self-directed learning is one of the most common ways in which adults pursue learning throughout their lifespan, as well as being a way in which people supplement (and at times substitute for) learning received in formal settings. On the other hand, lifelong learning takes, as one of its principal aims, equipping people with skills and competencies required to continue their own "self-education" beyond the end of formal schooling. In this sense, self-directed learning is viewed simultaneously as a means and an end of lifelong education.

"Self-directed learning" is a most useful concept and is relevant to all teachers and learners, representing the qualitative evolving of a person's sense of cognitive definition and developmental readiness for ambiguous and undefined actions. Besides, there are three elements that characterize self-directed learners: independence, the ability to make choices, and the capacity to

articulate the norms and limits of a learning activity.

As with the development of many new ideas, self-directed learning has created some confusion in that many related concepts are often used interchangeably or in similar ways. Examples include self-directed education, self-planned learning, learning projects, self-education, self-teaching autonomous learning, “autodidaxy”, independent study, and open learning (Candy, 1991; Knowles, 1975). Self-direction has become, for many, a battle flag under which adult educators of remarkably diverse persuasions have rallied. The fact that one concept can unite such disparate interest groups, however, may be less an indication of its inherent power than that it represents several concepts whose differences are submerged and obscured by the use of a single term. In essence, self-directed learning occurs both by design and by chance, depending on the interests, experiences, and actions of individual learners and the circumstances in which they find themselves. The learner’s ability to locate appropriate and useful resources has often been cited as a key aspect of learning on one’s own. It is clear that self-directed learning does not necessarily mean learning in isolation, without assistance. Assistance is often sought from friends, experts, and acquaintances in both the planning and execution of a learning activity.

Conclusion

The terms “lifelong learning” and “self-directed learning” are important for Thai teachers and students at the present time and in the future, because both terms emphasize the learner’s role as an active learner. In these learning styles, both teachers and students are

learners. Learners can be self-directed in several ways and in different degrees. They are self-directed whenever they need to be and decide what to learn; set their own goals; identify and find resources for learning; or evaluate their own learning. Such kinds of methods help learners to be more independent, to have the ability to make choices, and the capacity to articulate the norms and limits of a learning activity.

Strategies to be used by Thai teachers to motivate and develop their students to use self-directed learning may include the following:

1. Prove to students that teachers themselves, being strong role models for students, never stop learning;
2. In their teaching, teachers, starting from primary level, focus on skills in “self-directed learning”, together with teaching facts and theories;
3. Highlight “self-directed learning” by encouraging and/or giving rewards of different kinds to students who do especially well in this learning method;
4. Meet with parents, informing them the values of “self-directed learning” skills and request them to provide resources, be a role model, motivate and guide their children to use self-directed learning methods to learn and emphasize that learning is a lifelong process; and
5. Various agencies outside schools to provide resources, people, documents, information technology (IT), and, if possible, space, time and a supportive atmosphere for learning.

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