

What Is Self-Learning?

Fundamentally, the definition of *self-learning* means learning that is self-directed and personalized for every learner. But the term also implies that learners have the desire to learn *about* their own selves and *for* their own selves. For example, self-learners create their own meaning for what they are learning and even free themselves to learn in their own unique way, and in their own time.

Quite simply, self-learning is the self-management of learning. This often has implications for self-discipline as well. As a self-learner, you might involve becoming your own teacher, motivator and self-evaluator. In these roles, you learn how to accept feedback as a learning tool and to recognize that when you make a mistake you have the choice to either stay stuck in feelings of shame and regret or to bounce back.

Self-learners are often the dropouts in society or learners out for their own pleasure – teaching themselves what they want to know. They are often the ones willing to risk, changing the lives of people, “making complex simple,” and making rebellious or revolutionary leaps through imagination and creativity, for the purpose of creating a “dent in the universe.”

Examples of famous self-learners include Steve Jobs, George Lucas, Maria Montessori, Helen Keller, Anne Sullivan, Thomas Edison, Albert Einstein, Jack Ma and Manoj Bhargava.

Perhaps one of the best descriptions of what characterizes a self-learner is found in Apple’s commercial written by Rob Siltanen:

“Here’s to the crazy ones. The misfits. The rebels. The troublemakers. The round pegs in the square holes. The ones who see things differently. They’re not fond of rules. And they have no respect for the status quo. You can quote them, disagree with them, glorify or vilify them. About the only thing you can’t do is ignore them. Because they change things. They push the human race forward. And while some may see them as the crazy ones, we see genius. Because the people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world, are the ones who do.”ⁱ

➤ **Self-learning is about play**

Self-learning has its roots in play, and in our willingness to risk and get out of our comfort zones. This type of play is both independent in nature yet leading to cooperation. When most of us think of play, we think of playing on the playground at recess. Although physical play is excellent, true play that facilitates self-learning encompasses *all* of the learning dimensions including: conceptual play (mental activity), relational play (social), sharing ideas (emotional), as well as cooperating and supporting one another (spiritual) as we move forward into new breakthroughs of learning.

This self-learning curiosity and joy naturally begins at birth and evolves into an

abundance of early explorations and play throughout early childhood. Unfortunately, in most societies, a child's zeal for self-learning typically ends when a child goes to school when suddenly, young learners are thrust into the structured environment of boredom, intimidation and "get-ready-for-the-test" mentality.

Carlsson-Paige, author of "*Taking Back Childhood*"ⁱⁱ describes this type of scenario in her acceptance speech for the Deborah Meier award by the nonprofit National Center for Fair and Open Testing:

The first time I saw for myself what was becoming of many of the nation's early childhood classrooms was when I visited a program in a low-income community in North Miami.

There were 10 classrooms – kindergarten and pre-K. The program's funding depended on test scores, so — no surprise — teachers taught to the test. Kids who got low scores, I was told, got extra drills in reading and math and didn't get to go to art. They used a computer program to teach 4- and 5-year-olds how to "bubble." One teacher complained to me that some children go outside the lines. In one of the kindergartens I visited, the walls were barren and so was the whole room. The teacher was testing one little boy at a computer at the side of the room. There was no classroom aide. The other children were sitting at tables copying words from the chalkboard. The words were: "No talking. Sit in your seat. Hands to Yourself."

The teacher kept shouting at them from her testing corner: Be quiet! No talking!

What Carlsson-Page describes is actually the magic formula for producing "self-learning dropouts." When a child's zest for natural self-learning dies, so does their motivation to be at school. Young learners who aren't allowed to play and express curiosity in their learning eventually become apathetic, reactant and indifferent to the tasks they are supposed to do – such as homework, reading and studying for tests.

This is especially the case if children do not have parents that support them in their self-learning journey. By the time they become teenagers, they are searching for a new kind of meaning and excitement in their life. Their "normal" situation becomes so boring, that they begin every day with calibrating what to do next to get out of boredom and to find their real identity. This is partly why many teens turn their attention either to drug and alcohol abuse, or they develop an infatuation with musicians and movie stars.

We should never stop playing if we want to create new ideas, new innovations, and to find solutions to problems like the lingering wars, poverty and hunger around the world. As Carlsson-Paige, so aptly put it: "Play is the primary engine of human growth."

So if we want to become self-learners, then play needs to be brought back into our everyday lives. It also needs to be brought back into schools around the world, if we truly want to access our highest potential as humans.

One of the most child-centered schools that I consider a self-learning school is New Zealand's Matapihi Kindergarten (for ages 3-5). It truly allows children to play in order to learn. At least three out of five days a week children are encouraged to make the outdoors their playground – rain or shine – and they do not have toys! The outdoor environment becomes their inspiration.

Located near the small community of Raglan, the kindergarten is set on nearly 8 acres of land covered in native bush, trees, lawns, streams and a tiny lake. On one of the days that I visited, the children went eel hunting. They catch the eels for the purpose of studying them up close for a few minutes before releasing them back into their habitat. To help them catch the eels, the kids construct fishing poles out of sticks and socks. They attached the sock on the end of the stick and then put a sausage inside to use as bait.

After catching one of the eels with a sausage into a sock on a stick, one little girl reached down to pet the eel and compassionately reassured it, "I won't hurt you, Mr. Eel!" Then she released it and put it back into the stream.

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New Zealand's Matapihi Kindergarten is an example of a self-learning school. Their website describes it as "a space where children can grow and learn at their own pace with plenty of challenges to keep them active and involved." <http://www.matapihikindergarten.co.nz>

➤ **Self-learning is about teaching others what you already know**

Instead of using testing as a means to monitor learning, it would be a better option to gauge how much we have learned by our ability to teach it to someone else. This would imply that we are all teachers and learners of one another.

Professor Marian Diamond from UC Berkley, California, reminds us, "Each one, teach one... Why spend the next 12-15 years only being taught? What one learns the first day in school can be shared not only with our other schoolmates but with parents as well." ⁱⁱⁱ

With self-learning, we have the capability to build our own brain and master our own minds as much as we want this to happen. The process of self-learning often begins with our own interest and self-motivation. This could happen through doing projects with others where we begin to get a glimpse of new possibilities, or it could simply be spurred on by our own deep systemic interest giving birth to a new idea right from the onset of our curiosity.

Through self-learning, adults and children alike, can even develop natural self-motivation and self-awareness with the ability to learn about their self and the world, instead of allowing others to “impose” the learning process on them.

➤ **Self-learning encompasses self-education, self-organization, self-management, and self-sufficiency**

Through the process of self-learning, anyone can become self-educated, self-organized self-managed and even self-sufficient. This can be done with or without a classroom. A self-learning environment can be made up of our own community (family, friends, etc.), culture (arts, religion, history, ethics), the Internet, and even our natural environment (such as soil, wind, rivers, climate).

The industrial age of yesterday fostered *separatist thinking*, but in today’s new information age, people are becoming more conscious of their interconnectedness with *systems thinking*, which involves the “whole” instead of just the parts. This is based on the idea that everything has an affect on everything else – for good or for evil – so our choices matter.

For example, there has been a growing awareness of how the pollution of the air, water and soil affects life on every continent of this planet. Every day, toxins from oil tankers, motor vehicles, fossil fuels, heavy metals, plastics and gases are released into the environment.

Since our environmental choices affects everyone on the earth, all of us are challenged to rethink how we can create solutions for this global problem. To do this, we must choose to move forward into becoming a self-learning society with more awareness for the self-organization and management of the web of life. This means becoming mindful of our connectedness to everything and everyone on our planet. In other words, something that even one person does affects everyone else and everything else.

When we do not think about how our behavior affects others, this tends to create a mindset of ignorance: doing what we have always done and getting the same results. One example of this would be the massive problem of our oceans’ pollution. For decades we have neglected the laws of nature’s self-organization process and have disregarded how the ocean cleans itself. The ocean could manage to take care of its own cleaning process without human interference if we didn’t pollute it with chemicals that

destroy its self-cleansing ability.

Another example is the self-management and self-sufficiency of our own body. If we exercise daily and eat “clean” (unprocessed, living plant-based foods), our body can easily self-organize to heal and replenish itself with a natural nourishing, balancing and cleansing process every day so that we have the energy and wellbeing that we need.

So the real question is: To what degree are we as humans blocking or capping the self-organizing, self-managing, self-sufficiency and overall self-learning potential power of the human spirit? Fortunately, there are already innovative people who have made breakthroughs, led the way, and made the impossible possible through their incredible contributions based on the self-learning tools that are highlighted in this book.

Just the fact that you are reading this book may already indicate that you have respect for this natural self-learning process. Since self-organization and self-management is a part of this innate process, the self-evaluation and reflection questions at the end of each chapter will help you facilitate this within yourself. I’d encourage you to answer these questions, so that you can manage what you’ve learned through building on what you already know.

➤ **Self-learning includes project-based or student-driven learning**

One way that some schools around the world are dealing with this question is through project-based or student-driven learning, which is another form of self-learning. In the field of education, project learning involves motivating students with personalized projects that they choose, organize, and manage for themselves in teams. Their teachers are merely the facilitators of the learning process.

In these self-learning projects, students take responsibility for completing the project on their own. They also have permission to risk, be different and innovative, often becoming their own teachers and teach others. With this, a whole new world of learning and new ideas can be born – and leaders too.

➤ **Self-learning evolves into leadership**

When someone is a master of knowledge in a subject area they become a prime candidate for leadership in their field. There is a saying in Japan about a *Sensei*, which is the Japanese name for teacher or master, and literally means, *one who has gone before*: In order to become a leader, you have to learn it yourself first, in a deep way. It is then that you can evolve into a leadership capacity.

In the self-learning schools around the world, students become natural leaders. They know that they know. And they show that they know, leading others to do the same.

➤ **Self-learning is holistic**

Perhaps the most important attribute of self-learning is that it is holistic in nature – it is *not* just mental learning and memorization. This is only one part of learning. Self-learning involves our *total* being, our complete self – physical, mental, emotional, social and spiritual.

When we learn holistically, we begin using our intuitive sense as well. And when we allow ourselves to experience our true self-learning capacity within all of our dimensions, we literally accelerate our self-learning ability. This enables us to start seeing and enjoying life in a whole new way.

Yes, you can accelerate your self-learning ability

Once we realize learning is not just a surface mental experience we can accelerate it. This does not just mean that we will learn faster. It actually means we will learn *deeper* with more *integration* into the real world, like a baby learns.

Once learning becomes *connected* to real *meaning* for us, and we start having a *relationship* with what we are learning, all of a sudden learning is no longer difficult, and we seem to be learning faster -- and we are! This is really the *natural* way that we were always intended to learn. It *accelerates* your innate self-learning ability. In essence, in this book, this kind of learning becomes **high-performance learning**.

How does the term *self-learning* differ from *self-education*?

The term *self-education* refers to “schooling” ourselves (either in a formal or informal setting) with the content that is needed for our education, whereas *self-learning* is the actual process.

We do not need a building to get “schooling.” The world can be our classroom. Both concepts are drivers for building knowledge and understanding through our own initiative in a self-directed way -- with or without the aid of teachers and coaches. We can now “school” ourselves by self-managing our blocks of time and making our own choices *about* the content we want to learn.

Today this can be done virtually online, with books, apprenticeships, and even learning on the job. Then we can use the process of self-learning with the tools that are needed to help us to learn, think, and co-create our own futures. Not only can the process make the content easier, but it can also create the love of true learning. This book focuses mainly on the *process* of self-learning which leads to lifelong self-education.

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What are the implications of self-learning for students as lifelong learners?

What if you could control your own learning? What if you could decide what you wanted to learn? What if you were empowered to take charge of your own learning?

This could mean finding new learning opportunities that inspire you and help you connect new information to what you already know. This could even include self-improvement topics that affect your learning and your livelihood in a big way. For instance, you might be interested in the topic of self-health. At a school I recently visited, a small group of children were sitting in a hallway chatting about their project. It was about cancer. They had *chosen* to do this because they had *permission* to do this. Again, the school* was a project learning, student-driven school. The “teachers” *facilitate* their students’ learning so that the students can actually become self-learners.

Sometimes self-learning also means that sometimes you are a teacher for others and sometimes you are a learner. Even if you are only a “student” of a certain subject, you can also become a “teacher” of others. Take gardening for example. One family member or neighbor may become a “teacher” for someone else simply because someone may have more knowledge in an area to teach someone else. In this way, teaching someone else can become the highest level of proof that you have learned something.

Yet, in this new age of self-learning, it is important to note that the process of self-learning doesn’t eliminate your need for a teacher or a coach. It just makes learning more meaningful and more relevant to your life.

If you happen to be a teacher, coach, or a manager, then you can provide the opportunity for people to become self-learners – to take charge of their own learning. What a joy to let go of the “control” and let people learn in their own way.

If you are a student, you can still choose to work with a teacher or coach *as needed* and engage in their own self-education, if that is your personal or professional goal.

Good teachers, coaches, managers know that it takes both a positive internal and external learning environment to begin the process of transformation – much like the metamorphosis of the caterpillar to a butterfly. In other words, you cannot “stuff” learning down someone’s throat with force. It has to be a gentle self-evolvement. The learner will naturally learn in her own way, if she is allowed to do this through her own challenging explorations and experiences but not highly stressful ones. Then she will have the “Aha! Now I understand!” moment.

Becoming an accelerated self-learner may take time, but the key is to START a process and then FINISH it. The famous quote by Goethe says it well: “What you can do, or dream you can do, begin it. Boldness has genius power and magic within it.”

Finishing something that you have started is also important. Beginning something initiates your power. But finishing it brings out the “fruit” from the seed that you have planted.

So I invite you to begin this book – and finish it – in your own time, in your own way, and let it bear fruit in your life, as you become part of the learning revolution around the world.

Jobs, Steve, Part 1, CBS News <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1jqSK8Qv4ZY>

Strauss, Valerie, (November 14, 2015). *How Twisted Early Childhood Education Has Become*, The Washington Post