

Preface

*The Wizard of Oz was right when he said to believe in ourselves. . . .
Like Dorothy, we must be true to ourselves and allow others to help us
reveal the answers that are already inside of us.*

Brian Koslow

There are many questions about the quality of education and, as is suggested by Koslow, the answers are already inside us. We are certain that we want children to learn to be independent and interdependent, self-initiating learners who strive for excellence and who continue to pursue learning as a lifelong endeavor.

While these educational goals are neither new nor astounding, we were challenged to translate this philosophical rhetoric into practical classroom applications when we developed a videotape course for Lee Canter Associates in 1997 (*Helping Students Become Self-Directed Learners*, 1997). Collaborating with our longtime friend and close associate, Marian Leibowitz, we began to describe the attributes of self-directed learners. We drew upon our previous work on the Habits of Mind (Costa & Kallick, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c, 2000d) and found them to overlap with the dispositions of self-managing, self-monitoring, and self-modifying human beings. What described self-directed learners was also found to be congruent with what we know about efficacious, flexible, interdependent, conscious, problem solvers.

More recently, we have become frustrated with the allure of high-stakes accountability and the emphasis on standardized test scores as the primary tool to assess quality schools, teacher effectiveness, and student achievement. While we value the proper use of data generated from testing, we feel that many politicians and educators have missed the point of what assessment is all about. We believe that the purpose of assessment should be to provide feedback to learners in a process of continual self-improvement. This book is dedicated to those ideals. The purpose is to assist educators in developing school and classroom conditions that support and further students' self-directed learning.

This book is intended to provide support to educators who embrace these ideals. It is intended to strengthen their resolve and to

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withstand well-intentioned but misguided “innovations” that may build learners who are dependent on others for solutions to problems, who rely on external sources for their motivations, and who turn to others for their goals and aspirations. The book is intended to serve as a practical resource to help educators initiate change, to validate the enhancement of self-directedness as a legitimate goal of education, and to invite critical assessment of emerging school practices for their contributions to the development of students’ inner potential. Yet another not-so-hidden agenda is to foster the expansion of this thinking throughout the curriculum, the school, the community, and ultimately the world.

We believe that one powerful contributor to students’ continuous learning as a lifelong disposition is energized by assessment. Individuals who are open to feedback from the environment, from themselves, and from others, employ and apply the results of assessment as a source for clarifying their own goals, for establishing their own personal learning, and for self-initiated change. A major purpose of this book, therefore, is to shift the paradigm of assessment from being punitive, summative, and irrelevant both to schools and to the students they serve and, instead, to have assessment as meaningful to learners in their efforts for continual self-enhancement.

School is like the launchpad for a spaceship. All the “life support” systems remain attached until that moment of liftoff when, while it is always in communication with the command center, the spaceship is “on its own.” So, too, must we prepare students to take command of themselves; to establish feedback systems for self-guidance; and constantly to monitor their own progress toward their destination, making small maneuvers and midcourse corrections along the way. Similarly, a student’s education must provide experiences by which students gradually learn to take charge of their own learning, to become increasingly more aware of their behaviors and their effects on others, and to strengthen their fortitude and resilience to self-correct and self-modify. Thus, the school becomes the launchpad for a life of self-directed learning.

In this volume we provide descriptions of what it looks like and sounds like when students are self-directed in school and classroom settings. We also identify fourteen intellectual dispositions that characterize self-directed learners. While we provide many suggestions for how to infuse self-directed learning throughout the school and classrooms, the information in this volume is not intended to be complete. It is NOT a recipe book, nor does it provide simple answers or immediate solutions to educational dilemmas. Its design is intentionally unfinished and is symbolic of the field of educational inquiry today—controversial, incomplete. Our hope is that it is sufficiently intriguing

to instructional leaders as they work with staff, students, and interested community members. Educators need to continue to dialogue, gather additional resources and data, clarify meaning, synthesize definitions, conduct action research, and search for better ways of learning to think through educational problems. Out of this confusion comes enlightenment. Thus the process of developing curriculum, improving instructional strategies, and assessing and reporting on students' growth in the intellectual dispositions of self-directedness is in itself a form of self-directed inquiry and should be an intellectually stimulating experience.

In Chapter 1, we establish the need for learners being self-directed as they face an increasingly complex future. We suggest that self-directedness is an innate force and that education should work to "liberate" that drive that is within every human being. This applies to students as well as teachers. In fact, a prime example of a self-directed learner is the teacher him- or herself. Alone in the classroom, teachers establish goals, draw upon past knowledge, monitor their own actions and those of the students, constantly make midcourse corrections, deal with the ambiguities and uncertainties of classroom life, and, when the lesson is complete, reflect on their behaviors and modify their plans accordingly.

A basic understanding of self-directed learning presented in Chapter 1 is the Feedback Spiral. It is an attempt to diagram how continuous learners set goals, plan for their achievement, execute those plans while gathering data about the achievement of those goals, then reflect on the data and modify their actions accordingly. This concept of Feedback Spirals provides a basic and core concept on which further chapters are built.

Drawing on our earlier works with the Habits of Mind, Chapter 2 includes descriptions of thirteen intellectual dispositions of self-directed learners. We place this in the context of Robert Marzano's helpful model of self-systems thinking and his theories of human motivation.

Chapter 3 focuses on developing students' intellectual capacity for self-assessment. Learning to be self-directed, like developing any other capacity, takes systematic planning, instructional strategies intended to enhance self-directedness, and assessment strategies to determine if students are getting better at it. A variety of assessment strategies and their contributions to self-directed learning are described.

Chapter 4 invites teachers and school staffs to assess themselves, their environment, and their efforts to build self-directedness in others. Is self-directed learning being signaled in the school environment: in our instructional strategies, in our curriculum and assessment practices, and in our reward systems and through our modeling?

Chapter 5 invites teachers to examine their own role and identity. (Nothing is more difficult than to stand back and look critically at our own assumptions, beliefs, and values.) This may require teachers to examine their own “identity” and resolve to modify themselves from “motivators of students” to becoming catalysts for unleashing the motivations with them; from solving others’ problems to facilitators of students’ learning how to solve problems for themselves, and from evaluators of others to assisting in establishing strategies for gaining feedback through self-evaluation.

Chapter 6 provides some practical suggestions about getting started on your journey toward establishing a school dedicated to self-directed learning. Several schools and teachers who are venturing on this educational pathway provide a wealth of examples from their living it. For their support and contributions we are grateful.

For most people, changing mental models implies the unknown: the psychologically unknown risks of a new venture, the physically unknown demands on time and energy, and the intellectually unknown requirement for new skills and knowledge. Adopting a new vision demands a shift away from our traditional and obsolescent thinking about learning, teaching, achievement, and talent. Changing our mental models will require patience, stamina, and courage.

Mind shifts do not come easily, as they require letting go of old habits, old beliefs, and old traditions. There is a necessary disruption when we shift mental models. If there is not, we are probably not shifting; we may be following new recipes, but we will end up with the same stew! Growth and change are found in “disequilibrium,” not balance. Out of chaos, order is built, learning takes place, understandings are built, and, gradually, organizations function more consistently as their vision is clarified, as their mission is forged and their goals operationalized.

In the words of Sylvia Robinson, “Some people think you are strong when you hold on. Others think it is when you let go.”