C H A P T E R   I

THE STUDY

What is Self-teaching?

When an individual decides that he wants to learn certain information, knowledge or skill, he often seeks a professional instructor to tell him how to proceed and to supervise his learning. However, instead of turning most of the responsibility over to a professional teacher, the individual may decide to act as his own teacher, and assume the primary responsibility for planning, initiating, and conducting the learning project. Such behavior can be called self-teaching and the person learning in this manner can be called a *self-teacher*.

Self-teaching has also been called self-instruction,[1] self-education,[2] independent study,[3] individual study,[4] and self-directed study.[5] The term *self-teacher*[6] has been used to refer to any person while he is engaged in self-teaching. Although individuals undoubtedly differ in the frequency with which they teach themselves, it does not seem appropriate to think of a self-teacher as a certain type of person who somehow differs from all others. Indeed, probably every adolescent and adult sometimes engages in self-teaching, though some do so only rarely and briefly. Self-teachers have also been called autonomous learners,[7] self-propelled learners,[8] and autodidacts.[9]

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[1]John W. C. Johnstone and Ramon J. Rivera, *Volunteers for Learning: A Study of the Educational Pursuits of American Adults* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1965), p. 9.

[2]Coolie Verner, "Definition of Terms," *Adult Education: Outlines of an Emerging Field of University Study*, ed. Gale Jensen, A. A. Liveright, and Wilbur Hallenbeck (Washington: Adult Education Association of the U.S.A., 1964), p. 31.

[3]Robert H. Bonthuis *et al.*, *The Independent Study Program in the United States: A Report on an Undergraduate Instructional Method* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), p. 8.

[4]Winslow R. Hatch and Ann Bennet, *Independent Study* ("New Dimensions in Higher Education No. 1"; Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1960), p. 1.

[5]*Ibid.*

[6]William A. Nielson, Thomas A. Knott, and Paul W. Carhart (eds.), *Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language* (2d ed.; Springfield, Massachusetts: G. & C. Merriam Company, 1934), p. 2270. This term is not included in the third edition of this dictionary.

[7]Harry L. Miller, *Teaching and Learning in Adult Education* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1964), p. 203.

[8]*Ibid.*

[9]Philip Babcock Grove (ed.), *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged* (Springfield, Massachusetts: G. & C. Merriam Company, 1961), p. 147.

If the learner had attended an organized course or paid for private lessons, the instructor or professional teacher would probably have performed several major tasks or functions for him, such as establishing specific goals, deciding how to achieve them, and obtaining the necessary resources. When the individual acts as his own teacher, he performs these teaching tasks himself, perhaps with assistance from acquaintances and relatives. He may occasionally make use of a professional teacher, but does not rely heavily on him nor feel compelled to follow the teacher's advice.

In this study, the term *self-teaching project* refers to a persons's deliberate attempt to learn some specific knowledge and skill if (a) he spent at least eight hours doing so during the year prior to the interview and (b) he himself, rather than any professional teacher or organized group, assumed the primary responsibility for planning, controlling, and supervising the entire project.

In each self-teaching project, the learner himself assumes most of the responsibility for planning his strategy, maintaining his motivation, and making certain throughout the learning process that everything necessary for success is done. The initiative, responsibility, and control reside in the learner, not in someone else.

The criterion of a minimum of eight hours during the preceding year was designed to eliminate those projects that were not very important to the learner or that he could not recall clearly.

The Major Questions

The study reported here was an attempt to increase knowledge of certain aspects of self-teaching and to identify areas for further research. The behavior of 40 adults while teaching themselves was studied through intensive interviews and questionnaires. Tentative answers were obtained to three groups of major questions.

First, what does an adult *do* during self-teaching? That is, which teaching tasks (and which particular aspects of those tasks) does he perform? How frequently? For how long? Which tasks seem central to self-teaching?

Second, which aspects of self-teaching cause difficulty and concern? In what ways?

Third, how much assistance do self-teachers obtain with each task? From how many people? From what types of people?

The framework used to study these questions consisted of twelve teaching tasks, each of which is a major decision or action that can be performed either by a professional teacher or by the learner himself. The twelve tasks can be summarized as follows: (1) choosing the goal; (2) deciding which activities are appropriate for achieving that goal; (3) obtaining the printed materials and other resources; (4) estimating the current level of the learner's knowledge and skill; (5) dealing with difficulty in grasping certain parts; (6) deciding when to learn; (7) deciding where to learn; (8) deciding how much money to spend; (9) dealing with lack of desire for achieving the goal; (10) dealing with dislike of the activities necessary for learning; (11) dealing with doubts about success;

4

and (12) deciding whether to continue. The procedure used for developing this list is described in Chapter III.

The present study was not concerned with either a laboratory or an ideal form of self-teaching. The study investigated self-teaching as it occurred naturally in daily life, without being influenced by the researcher. Also, the goal of the study was to investigate the actual ways, not necessarily the most effective ways, in which adults teach themselves.

No restrictions were imposed on the area of subject matter that could be included, nor on the complexity and difficulty of the subject matter. However, only established knowledge was included; that is, knowledge that the learner could obtain directly or indirectly (perhaps through books or television) from people who already knew the subject matter. A learner's attempts to discover knowledge for himself (perhaps by creative thought or experimental research) were not included because it was believed that such behavior might differ greatly from that of a person learning established knowledge.

A project was accepted regardless of *why* the person wanted to learn certain knowledge and skill, whether because of a desire to apply or use it, for instance, or because of strong curiosity. A project was accepted regardless of why the person taught himself instead of attending a course or taking private lessons, whether because no teacher was available, for example, or simply because he preferred to teach himself.

Summary of Procedure

During the preliminary stages of the study, four major steps were taken. First, the definition of self-teaching was developed. Second, as a framework for investigation, a set of twelve major teaching tasks was developed. These tasks were suggested by the literature dealing with the functions of classroom teachers and teaching machines, by an unpublished analysis of program planning steps in adult education, and by several exploratory interviews. Third, a classification scheme consisting of seven types of people was developed for classifying the individuals from whom self-teachers obtain assistance. Fourth, an interview schedule and three questionnaires were developed, refined, and tested in several initial interviews.

The writer then interviewed 40 adults who had conducted a self-teaching project lasting at least eight hours during the preceding year. These subjects included a diversity of occupations, but were all college graduates living in one metropolitan area. The subjects were obtained by the writer's acquaintances, who were requested to obtain college graduates who were willing to be interviewed.

At the beginning of each interview the subject read a definition of self-teaching and usually a list of common subject matter, and then mentioned some examples of his own self-teaching. Using the definition and criteria developed previously, the interviewer chose one example and recorded the goal, purposes, subject matter, methods, and times of beginning and ending of the project. The subject then listed all the individuals who assisted him, and helped the interviewer classify these individuals.

Each of the twelve tasks was then dealt with in turn. After reading a description of a task, the subject was asked to specify which aspects he had performed during his own self-teaching project. He then completed a questionnaire which asked how frequently he had performed this task, how much time he had spent doing so, whether the task had caused any difficulty or concern, the amount of assistance he had obtained, and whether he would have liked more assistance with it. On his list of individuals, the subject then marked the ones who had assisted with the task, and added to the list any other assistants. He was asked to describe in detail any of his difficulties and concerns with the task, and to tell exactly what sort of additional assistance (if any) he would have liked.

After this procedure had been repeated for each of the twelve tasks, the subject was asked to select the two most time-consuming tasks and then the two most troublesome tasks. Finally, he was encouraged to describe any other tasks, decisions, problems, and emotions that seemed important during his self-teaching.