

CHAPTER IV

ASSISTANCE OBTAINED DURING SELF-TEACHING

When one first thinks about self-teaching, it seems reasonable to assume that the self-teacher learns without much assistance from any other person. The present writer made this assumption during his early thinking about self-teaching, and believes that the assumption is quite common among educators. Such terms as *independent study* and *autonomous learner* certainly suggest that the learner does not rely much on others.

The Need for Assistance

After conducting several exploratory interviews and analyzing his own self-teaching, it became evident to the writer that some self-teachers obtained assistance with several major tasks from a fairly large number of persons and that some of this assistance clearly influenced the self-teacher's progress. Each assistant provided advice and information, renewed the learner's confidence and enthusiasm, or assisted in some other important way. Selecting and reaching an appropriate assistant was sometimes very difficult or time-consuming for the self-teacher, but failure to obtain the assistance could hinder or even halt his progress.

Four factors help to explain why the self-teacher may seek some assistance with his teaching tasks.

First, he is trying to master a skill or an area of knowledge that is new to him. Consequently, he may not know which books and individuals can provide information. Also, he may have difficulty in understanding certain terms, concepts, or other parts of the subject matter.

Second, because he is not a trained and experienced educator, the self-teacher may not know what activities are necessary for learning the new skill or knowledge. Also, he may not be able to estimate his current level of performance, or the required level.

Third, he may experience fairly strong doubts or fears during his efforts to learn, or may feel inferior because he is performing at a beginner's level. Consequently, he may need encouragement and emotional support. He may not begin or continue his learning if he lacks such support or if he meets opposition and scorn. Houle, in his study of adults engaged in learning to a remarkable extent, found that the marriage partner of almost every learner supported—or, at least, did not object to—his educational activities. "I believe that, no matter how intensely an individual may want to learn, he or she usually does not do so very actively if the marriage partner objects."¹

¹Cyril O. Houle, *The Inquiring Mind* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1961), pp. 42-43.

Fourth, the self-teacher probably has some contact with a large number of people during his daily life. From this variety of individuals he is able to select particular individuals from whom to obtain advice, information, or other specific assistance. Indeed, the self-teacher may receive some assistance without deliberately seeking it; people may encourage him to continue his efforts to learn, for example, or may praise his progress although he does not request encouragement or praise.

The individuals who provide assistance were felt to be sufficiently important to form a major aspect of the present study. There is at least one practical reason for the importance of this aspect: if adult educators are interested in training and assisting self-teachers, they must understand their need for assistance. Miller has pointed out that "if we are to become serious about developing the autonomous learner, the nature of the helping relationship required is an extremely important matter to investigate and should constitute a research objective of high priority in adult education."¹

Solomon, in his introduction to a book about continuing learners, declared that "it is important . . . to know of the kinds of behaviors and roles taken by them [self-learners] in relation to family, friends, associates, and the larger society."²

Research into the diffusion of innovations seems to support the possibility that assistance from others is important during self-teaching. It has been found that many persons rely heavily on peers for learning new practices. Everett Rogers has stated that *most* persons provide others with advice and information concerning new practices. He found that all but 43 of 148 farmers who were studied had been approached for information and advice about farm innovations by at least one other farmer.³ This finding suggests that seeking (as well as giving) advice and information is quite common.

No contradiction exists between the definition of self-teaching and the notion that the self-teacher may obtain assistance with several tasks from several individuals. The self-teacher can retain the major responsibility for planning, supervising, and controlling his learning and can simultaneously obtain advice, encouragement, and other assistance briefly from several individuals. If the self-teacher *seeks* most of the assistance and does not merely follow all the suggestions of certain individuals, it certainly is possible for him to retain the responsibility for making most of the important decisions.

Formulating a Classification Scheme

In order to study the types of individuals who provide assistance during self-teaching, it was necessary to develop a scheme for classifying them. Discussing

¹Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 225.

²Daniel Solomon (ed.), *The Continuing Learner* (Chicago: Center for the Study of Liberal Education for Adults, 1964), pp. v-vi.

³Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations* (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1962), pp. 226-227.

the adoption of new ideas and practices among farmers, Lionberger has suggested that different sources of information and influence play different roles in influencing adoption, and are important at different stages of the adoption process.¹ The present study was designed to demonstrate a similar principle: different types of people help self-teachers in different ways; that is, self-teachers tend to seek assistance with certain tasks from certain types of people. Consequently, a classification scheme that would be especially likely to support this hypothesis was sought.

The final scheme was based on the following sources: suggestions from two faculty members at the University of Chicago; the evidence from several exploratory interviews; certain literature regarding the people who influence adoption of new practices; and the writer's own insight and hypotheses. It was similar to those suggested by Lionberger and Rogers, but was more detailed. Lionberger's categories of sources of information and influence included other farmers (neighbors, friends, relatives); dealers and salesmen; and county agents and vocational agriculture instructors.² Rogers suggested a similar scheme for classifying the channels of communication by which new farm ideas are diffused from scientists to farm people: informal (friends and neighbors), commercial (salesmen and dealers), and extension personnel.³ In the present study, friends, neighbors, and relatives were divided into those who were especially close (intimates) and those who were not (acquaintances). Subject matter experts were divided into those who were approached primarily because of a personal relationship and those who were not. Two other categories, librarians and fellow learners, were added.

The Types of Persons who Provide Assistance

- The resulting classification scheme contained the following seven types:
1. intimates (the self-teacher's parents, siblings, spouse, children, and two or three closest friends);
 2. librarians who were not intimates;
 3. sales people (including sales clerks in bookstores and other stores) who did not fit into a previous classification.
 4. fellow learners (people whom the self-teacher knew primarily because they were trying to learn the same sort of knowledge and skills) who did not fit into a previous classification;
 5. acquaintances (friends, relatives, colleagues, and all other people who were not experts in the knowledge and skills being learned nor in teaching them) who did not fit into a previous classification;
 6. experts who were approached because of a personal relationship (friends, relatives, and colleagues who were experts) and who did not fit into a previous classification;

¹Herbert F. Lionberger, *Adoption of New Ideas and Practices* (Ames, Iowa: The Iowa State University Press, 1960), pp. 43-44.

²*Ibid.*, pp. 42, 44, 65.

³Everett M. Rogers, *Social Change in Rural Society: A Textbook in Rural Sociology* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1960), pp. 399, 405.

7. experts who were approached only on a business or professional relationship (experts who were not friends or relatives) and who did not fit into a previous classification.

The term *expert* was restricted to people who knew *very well* the knowledge or skill that the self-teacher wanted to learn.

Any person who definitely assisted the self-teacher through some sort of interaction could be included. For example, a person who assisted by telephone, by mail, or through a third person could be included. A person who was present in the self-teacher's memory during the project as a result of previous contact could also be included. An author of a book or article read by the self-teacher was included only if there was some interaction between the two people.