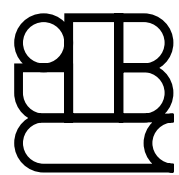


# **The Self-Directed Learning Handbook**

Challenging  
Adolescent Students  
to Excel

**Maurice Gibbons**







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**All that hinders the individual from expressing the full power of the infinite universe is his lack of faith, his inability to realize the stupendous truth that he himself is the very power which he seeks.**

**—The last entry in my father's journal**

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# Preface

**FEW PROFESSIONS** are as rewarding as teaching, and no other profession is as important, especially now that school is the single remaining stable influence in students' lives. This book is for teachers seeking new ways to engage adolescent students and to prepare them for a successful life of learning and achievement. It is for those who are ready to open a new range of learning opportunities to students and a new repertoire of skills that will both empower them and compel them to action. This book is about teaching middle and high school students to find their own direction in learning and to develop skilful ways of getting to the challenging goals they choose.

As a beginning elementary school teacher, I was struck by the difficulty of teaching one program to a class of very diverse students. How could I provide every student with a fair opportunity to learn and progress? I began to individualize, sending some students off to learn on their own and others to do basic work in the subject with a talented classmate while I taught the middle group. The class often operated as a one-room country school, with different groups doing different things and everyone helping everyone else. It looked and felt like a learning community.

When I moved to teaching high school, I carried the same concerns and found even greater diversity among students and a more intense focus on covering the program. As a beginning teacher, I was given a healthy sampling of the most difficult students to teach. Working with them, I soon discovered that the onset of adolescence raises many new issues. Students enter the hormonal storm, they begin to define their individual identities, they face value choices and develop character, they need

to belong, and they begin to anticipate the great transition from the nest-like security of school and home into the stormy challenge of the waiting world. I was passionate about teaching English, but the school focused so intensely on the program and test scores that it was difficult to diverge from coverage. I experimented with drama, group work, retreats, and excursions but was unsatisfied. Students were too often inert, isolated, and bored. Graduation was great theater, but seemed to be missing a great opportunity for educational meaning and lasting influence.

To search out responses to these and other issues about schooling that concerned me, I entered the doctoral program at Harvard to pursue studies and fieldwork in educational alternatives. My examination of individualized programs led me to write *Individualized Instruction: A Descriptive Analysis*, which demonstrated that most programs were only partially individualized for a few students for a short period of time. I was becoming interested in a fully developed alternative. That took shape when I met my new colleagues at Simon Fraser University and produced "Walkabout: Searching for the Right Passage from Childhood and School," which described a program for "challenging students to challenge themselves" and to earn their graduation by major projects in six areas: adventure, service, logical inquiry, creativity, careers, and practical applications. "Walkabout" became the most requested reprint in the history of the *Phi Delta Kappan*, Walkabout schools sprang up, and several have Internet Web pages on-line.

As a teacher of teachers at Simon Fraser, I specialized in the development of new educational programs. To model what I was teaching, I continued to explore the theory and practice of self-directed learning. I also shaped my courses around the principles of self-direction. Many students contributed to the development of the ideas and practices that became basic elements of my approach, especially those practicing teachers studying for their master's degrees at night. This did not happen without a struggle. After I outlined their first assignment to develop and implement a brief program based on their own ideas, there was a stir, and one student said indignantly, as if I had sinned against them, "What do you mean, our own ideas?" Since invention is the core of development, a long discussion followed as we all realized that thinking for oneself and acting on one's own ideas had been pushed aside in most classrooms by the pressure to cover content. That was the first of many concepts we developed together. The second was that students are wise and eager to become wiser.



During that time, I formed Challenge Education Associates with several colleagues to pursue the development of programs to teach self-directed learning and to provide teachers with our program, *The Self-Directing Professional*. Later, I founded Personal Power Press International, then wrote, published, and marketed several books about how to teach students to teach themselves. A group of us—teachers, parents, and professors—founded World Citizens for a Universal Curriculum and developed a world citizen passport that students earned by meeting a range of self-directed challenges in what we called the “Yes, I Can!” program. We thought it was promising but could not get it off the ground internationally. Sometimes the dragon wins.

This book is designed as a handbook for middle and high school teachers who want to help adolescents address the fundamental issues that they face. It is for teachers who want to empower students to manage their own learning. It is for those who want to prepare their students for the challenge of adulthood and to equip them with the tools and the passion for learning that will serve them throughout their lives.

Those who wish to pursue such a journey will find in the pages that follow an explanation of self-directed learning (SDL), a description of how to develop an SDL program, and a guide to the teaching techniques and tools required for helping students to become skilled in SDL. Such issues as assessment and motivation are dealt with fully, especially the motivation of exceptional and difficult students.

SDL is a challenge to teachers as well as students, but without challenge, there is little chance for reward. I hope that you will take this challenge and reap the wonderful rewards that the journey offers.

*July 2002*  
*Bowen Island, British Columbia*

Maurice Gibbons



# Acknowledgments

**ALL OF US** who create ideas and shape them into programs and then write papers and books stand on foundations built by those who have gone before us. We get our own work done only with the help of people around us who are guided by a vision similar to our own. My thanks especially to Stan Elam, former editor of the *Phi Delta Kappan*; adult educator Malcolm Knowles; and the late Bob Smith of Northern Illinois University for nurturing and contributing to new ideas about self-directed learning.

For years I worked so closely with a team of colleagues under the banner of Challenge Education Associates that some of the ideas in this book are as much theirs as mine. I am indebted to them for their partnership then and for their assistance with this book: Pat Holborn at Simon Fraser University; Peter Norman, educational consultant extraordinaire; and Gary Phillips, director of the National Schools Project based in Seattle. I am also indebted to my friend and colleague Milton McClaren: I asked for help, and he gave it. Thank you, also, to Matt Albee of Artmachine in Palo Alto for swift assistance in demanding times.

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I am also privileged to have the assistance of the founding administrators at three self-directed high schools: Wayne Jennings from St. Paul Open, Dave Estergaard from Thomas Haney, and Arnold Langberg from Jefferson County Open. They are pioneers who made important changes in traditional schooling, and made them last. Candice Spillsbury, a director in the Cowichan Valley School District in British Columbia, introduced me to Francis Kelsey Secondary School and reviewed the manuscript for this book.

I am indebted to my Jossey-Bass editor, Christie Hakim, for her patience, her whip, and her insistence on practicality. The editorial team that prepared the manuscript for publication—Carolyn Uno, Elizabeth Forsaith, and Beverly Miller—did an exceptional job. Thank you to them and to Rosemary Wall for her technical magic in preparing my drafts for submission. And I wish to say a much more than cursory thank you to my wife, Leslie, who took over the management of this manuscript and made it happen. I am deeply grateful for all of this extraordinary assistance. Any blemishes on the book that follows are mine.

M.G.

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